



Here you go ...

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# The David Foster Wallace Reader

Uncollected Works of David Foster Wallace  
December 2003



INTRODUCTION  
THE DAVID FOSTER WALLACE READER

The genesis of this Reader is fairly simple: for people like myself<sup>1</sup> who hunger for the lexical and cognitive prodigy that is David Foster Wallace,<sup>2</sup> some of his writing is downright hard to find. This Reader attempts a remedy: collected here are Wallace's writings, both fiction and non-, that haven't been anthologized<sup>3</sup> since their publication.

Having discovered Wallace back in 1996, by reading *Infinite Jest* over a long summer of working my first law-office job, and having collected all of his other books shortly thereafter,<sup>4</sup> it wasn't until 2003 that I discovered the crowd of Wallace fans that populate the world of wallace-1, the most interesting fan-list in the world, and through their generosity, managed to track down some of Wallace's uncollected writings. What a glorious surprise: Wallace has been unnecessarily choosy in picking his pieces to anthologize, and there's plenty of good, thoughtful writing that I hadn't ever read before.

And neither had many others. When I suggested circulating uncollected works to other Wallace fans, the response was quick and intense: "please, me, too." So, here's the Reader: three dozen Wallace pieces you probably haven't read before, and even if you've read some of them, you probably haven't kept them all, or put them all in one place. This book will simplify your Wallace life, especially because his work has been published so widely: other than a spate of book reviews in 1991-92, he's rarely published in the same publication more than once, and many of the publications are long out of print. Special thanks to all the folks who assisted in collecting these pieces: even after Inter-Library Loan, helpful newspaper-archive researchers, and corresponding with other fans, it still took several trips to university libraries all over the U.S. to compile this, and I'm grateful - you should be too.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>only in this respect, of course.

<sup>2</sup>or DFW to hipsters, if you don't already know (although "Dave" or "Dave-O" seem to be familiar names, and are making a comeback among fans, especially those that communicate verbally as opposed to email)

<sup>3</sup>a handful have been reprinted, but that doesn't make them much easier to find, as the sort of anthologies that reprint US short fiction are often just as obscure as journals that publish it, if not more so.

<sup>4</sup>Although it wasn't until my fandom really took off in 2003 that I actually read *Signifying Rappers*, his earliest nonfiction book. It sat on my bookshelf, wedged between other DFW books, waiting for a long plane ride.

<sup>5</sup>especially because most of the folks who helped locate obscure DFW pieces are terribly busy with other things, including graduate study in several fields, job interviews, and running their own businesses. Their generosity cannot be overstated.

Plus, there's a second treasure here: original writings about Wallace. First<sup>6</sup> is Martina Testa's thoughtful essay about "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way," the crowning masterpiece of Wallace's first short-story collection, which she wrote a while back for the Italian translation of the story, and agreed to reprint here. Next is Melpemone Whitehead's 1998 essay about her (imagined) romance with DFW, followed by Christina Wilson's gonzo journalism about meeting DFW in March 2003 and asking him for a very strange autograph. And then two postings to wallace-l that have recent significance: Jason Preston's "breakthrough" into the meta-purpose of *Infinite Jest*, and its relationship to DFW's personal beliefs about fiction, which (re-)started months of renewed discussion of that masterpiece on wallace-l, and Marc's declaration of love to wallace-l, after a brief hiatus.

And even more generous, there are several original essays for this volume: Jonathan May and Prabhakar Ragde describe their tortured relationships with wallace-l, Nick Maniatis shares memories of his DFW website,<sup>7</sup> Carol DeLucia details her (very) personal relationship with *Infinite Jest*, and Jesse Hilson and Pete LeBar write about the obsession and value of collecting obscure DFW works. Finally, SecondFate discusses DFW's influence on modern writing and Maria Bustillos gives long hard thought to DFW's relationship to film.<sup>8</sup> Thanks to these authors for their careful, and personal, observations. Once this Reader circulates, and jealousy sets in among those who didn't contribute, this volume may be only the first in a long line of Readers.<sup>9</sup>

And but so, here you are. Thanks for reading.

George Carr  
December 2003  
Cleveland, USA

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<sup>6</sup>I ordered these pieces by date of writing; this is my first project of this sort (or even in this sort's ballpark's area code, to coin a phrase), so I'm sure someone else has a better way of organizing things, but they'll have to publish their own Reader. So there.

<sup>7</sup>Nick's site is now the most comprehensive on the Internet, which is quite a feat; since he submitted his piece for the Reader, he's moved the whole thing to [www.thehowlingfantods.com](http://www.thehowlingfantods.com) and has continued to update it with materials for DFW's most recent book, *Everything and More: A Compact History of ∞*. No telling what sorts of revamping he'll have to do when DFW's next short-story collection is published in spring 2004.

<sup>8</sup>Considering that wallace-l contains (at least) two doctoral candidates whose projected dissertations include discussion of Wallace's recent work, and that Nick's site already hosts 6-8 theses on Wallace's work, <http://www.thehowlingfantods.com/theslink.htm>, the bibliography of academic work focusing on Wallace is growing steadily. I seriously considered including criticism and reviews of Wallace's work in this volume, but decided to leave it out, perhaps for the second Reader, if I get away with publishing this one.

<sup>9</sup>See, e.g., previous FN for one theme for the second Reader.

Foreword to the Italian edition of *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*  
by Martina Testa

David Foster Wallace is a difficult writer. And he is also a very good one, a great one indeed. The first thing does not always imply the latter. But in his case it is so. David Foster Wallace is somebody who writes in a very sophisticate, complex, at times even unpleasantly complicated manner, and who has written some exemplary works in contemporary American fiction in this manner; who has created, with his *Infinite Jest*, what is almost unanimously considered a *masterpiece* (how many other writers currently under-40 can be said to have written a *masterpiece*?). David Foster Wallace is, in my opinion, somebody who would deserve to be included, some decades from now, in literature textbooks and in high-school anthologies. If and when Wallace will end up in high-school anthologies, the pages containing excerpts from his works will be the kind with only a few lines of proper text and long long columns of explanatory notes. Sure enough, those will be awkward-looking pages, since Wallace's works *already come* with very long and elaborate footnotes – as a matter of fact, this is one of their most evident features and it is typically the one which gets mentioned by superficial readers when they want to name a specifically Wallacian stylistic device; nonetheless, those works will require many and long explanatory notes, if young readers in their teens are to appreciate them in spite of their *difficulty*.

But this is not a schoolbook. This is a fiction series. And you don't have to worry: you can read *Westward* while sitting on your toilet, riding the bus or laying in your bed before sleep with no help from "Companions" or commentaries, and still draw a healthy, immediate and long-lasting pleasure from it. It is only that, strange as it may seem, reading this book *philologically* is much more fun. Because *Westward* is not only a story, the story of six weird characters on their way to a place they will probably never get to; it is also a homage, a personal cover version, a subtle parody of one of the cornerstones of postmodern American fiction: John Barth's story "Lost in the Funhouse".

The trouble is that, when *Spaceballs* hit the theaters 99% of its audience knew *Star Wars* more or less by heart, whereas when *Westward* hits the Italian shelves only a very small number of its readers will probably be familiar with John Barth's story "Lost in the Funhouse": the same-title collection it belongs to was published in Italy by Rizzoli back in 1974 under the title *La casa dell'allegria*, and is long out of print. This foreword is thus born from a desire of sharing (at least a small) part of the pleasure deriving from a philological reading of *Westward* with those readers who are not familiar with the Barth antecedent. I know, it is like wanting to summarize *Star Wars* for somebody who is just going to see *Spaceballs*: some will consider it a doomed attempt from the start and will choose to set off on their own in search of the original Barth text; some will renounce to the philological-reading option altogether and will happily skip to the first page of the proper Wallace text. To the other readers, I would like to explain what "Lost in the Funhouse" is about, who Mr. Barth is and why David Foster Wallace took that

story and based a very sophisticated two-hundred-page long\* novella on it.

What "Lost in the Funhouse" is about. It's the story of a thirteen-year-old kid, Ambrose M----, daytripping with his parents, his uncle, his fifteen-year-old brother and his best female friend to a popular sea resort in Maryland. The substance of the story consists of: the delicate interplay of feelings (admiration, incomprehension, competition) linking Ambrose to the other male members of the family; the painful self-consciousness of an intellectually precocious kid who - in spite of himself - can't help filtering every emotion through rationality; the decadent atmosphere of a resort town in a time of war (the story, written in 1964, is set in the Forties); and (above all) the sexual tension among the three teenagers, in a very controlled crescendo which starts during the car ride and goes on through poolside games up to the moment when they enter the Funhouse itself, designated venue - courtesy of darkness, fear, and a sort of adrenalinic excitement - for physical approaches and erotic exchanges. It is inside the Funhouse that Ambrose misses his perfect chance to declare his love to Magda, and right after that he gets lost\*\* (or does he only imagine to get lost?) inside a labyrinth of mirrors and dark corridors, maybe forever.

This is the subject of "Lost in the Funhouse". But the subject is dealt with in the most bizarre, disconcerting, ingenious way. Not only are the different sections of the story chronologically disarranged and then rearranged as non-linearly as possible; not only are real events constantly mixed with memories and fantasies; what gets to alter the narrative rhythm the most is the fact that the author himself constantly intervenes and comments on his own act of narration. And they are not those traditional asides to the readers we are more than used to: they are interventions which, far from establishing a semi-confidential relationship between writer and reader, seem to abuse us, frustrate us, deprive us of the plain and simple pleasure of reading. I must give you some examples. Here is the beginning of the story:

For whom is the Funhouse fun? Perhaps for lovers. For Ambrose it is *a place of fear and confusion*. He has come to the seashore with his family for the holiday, *the occasion for their visit is Independence Day, the most important secular holiday of the United States of America*. A single straight underline is the manuscript mark for italic type, *which in turn* is the printed equivalent to oral emphasis of words and phrases as well as the customary type for titles of complete works, not to mention. Italics are also employed, in fiction stories especially, for "outside", intrusive, or artificial voices, such as radio announcements, the texts of telegrams and newspaper articles, et cetera. They should be used *sparingly*. If passages originally in roman type are italicized by someone repeating them, it's customary to acknowledge the fact. *Italics mine*.

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\* That's in the minimum fax edition, of course.

\*\* This sounds much better in Italian, since "to miss" and "to lose" are the same verb.

Ambrose was "at that awkward age." His voice came out high-pitched as a child's if he let himself get carried away; to be on the safe side, therefore, he moved and spoke with *deliberate calm* and *adult gravity*.

Further on:

Uncle Karl wondered if they were going to have fireworks that night, what with the shortages. It wasn't the shortages, Mr. M----- replied; Ocean City had fireworks from pre-war. But it was too risky on account of the enemy submarines, some people thought.

"Don't seem like Fourth of July without fireworks," said Uncle Karl. The inverted tag in dialogue writing is still considered permissible with proper names or epithets, but sounds old-fashioned with personal pronouns. "We'll have 'em again soon enough," predicted the boys' father. Their mother declared she could do without fireworks: they reminded her too much of the real thing. Their father said all the more reason to shoot off a few now and then. Uncle Karl asked *rhetorically* who needed reminding, just look at the people's hair and skin.

And you don't want to miss this one:

He stood quietly while the two young people giggled and thumped through the glittering maze, hurrah'd their discovery of the its exit, cried out in joyful alarm at what next beset them. Then he set his mouth and followed after, as he supposed, took a wrong turn, strayed into the pass *wherein he lingers yet*.

The action of conventional dramatic narrative may be represented by a diagram called Freitag's Triangle:

[Martina speaking here: *there is a picture here, which I won't try and reproduce using Microsoft Word... I am afraid it would make a mess if you changed the formatting of these pages even slightly.*

*Just imagine an isosceles triangle without a base, pointing up. The lower-left angle is called A, the upper angle is called B, the lower-right angle is called C.]*

or more accurately by a variant of that diagram:

*[another picture here, an horizontal segment called AB, then a longish oblique segment starting from B and going up to the right, ending in point C. From point C another line starts, going down to the right, but its descent is much more "ripid" than the BC segment is. It ends in point D, which is level with point A. The "triangle" BCD is not isosceles: BC is longer than CD]*

in which *AB* represents the exposition, *B* the introduction of conflict, *BC* the "rising

action", complication, or development of the conflict, *C* the climax, or turn of the action, *CD* the dénouement, or resolution of the conflict.

Barth is perfectly capable to describe the morbid curiosity which spreads in a thirteen-year-old kid's mind at the mere glimpse of a bra strap from under his playmate's sun dress, or when observing her shoulder's movements while she is laying in the sun; he is capable of making you smell the salty taste of the Atlantic ocean along the seafront boardwalk at twilight while the amusement park attractions dim their lights (German submarines lurk off the coast), he is a master of detail and sensation; you could love him. But then, right after "said Uncle Karl", without even bothering to start a new paragraph, he gives you: "The inverted tag in dialogue writing is still considered permissible": you want to hate him. But you can't: you realize he is not sadistically *denying* you the story; he is just telling it in a different way; a way maybe no one has ever told it before.

This kind of literature is called metafiction, and Barth is one of its masters. The purpose of a metafiction writer (Wallace explains this much better than me in *Westward*, as you will see) is never to allow his reader to forget that what he has under his eyes is an artifact, is something deliberately designed and built by someone else, is paper, ink, grammar rules, narrative techniques; he wants to remind us that classical fiction's "realism" is only supposedly "real", since a written page is necessarily, in its own nature, something *other* than reality. That the "window" through which the fascinated reader looks onto the fictional world of the story or the novel is not influential or insubstantial at all. A metafiction writer constantly *exposes* his own creative role and the techniques and instruments of his craft; in metafictional works the author very often turns *himself* into a character, and the story – with endless variations on the theme – is about a writer writing a story about a writer writing a story...

The starting assumption, the original notion, is a brilliant and revolutionary breakthrough: it takes the unwritten rules of traditional writing (and reading) off their hinges. But it is easy to see that it is a dangerous game to play. A metafiction writer, if he lacks John Barth's talent, risks getting stuck at sterile self-referentiality, working on surface only, building a series of funhouse mirrors that only reflect themselves (a metaphor Wallace uses much better than me in *Westward*, as you will see). A couple of generations of young American writers have fallen into this trap: not much differently from Raymond Carver's realistic "minimalism", John Barth's metafiction yielded legions of imitators who only reproduced its more exterior features. To quote Wallace himself:

"After the pioneers always come the crank turners, the little grey people who take the machines others have built and just turn the crank, and little pellets of metafiction come out the other hand."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Larry McCaffery, "An Interview with David Foster Wallace", «Review of Contemporary Fiction», 13.2, summer 1993.

But it is time to go back to the story you are about to read. Where you will meet Ambrose again, turned into a creative writing teacher (with the same port-wine birthmark Barth had painted on his cheek in another story of his collection, "Ambrose His Mark"), and Magda, still an object of desire (but more than thirty years older, and wearing a sober flight-assistant uniform); where once more you will see two males and a female sitting dangerously close to each other in the backseat of a car; where you will briefly visit Ocean City's amusement park once again - his conditions tragically changed; as well as the Funhouse itself, now reincarnated into a postmodern disco; where you will cross paths again - if you are careful enough - with professor Freitag, he of the narrative curve. Where *only a reader who is familiar with "Lost in the Funhouse"*, though, will be able to recognize - here is where the philological reading I was talking about gets fun - that behind the way advertising mogul J.D. Steelritter lights up his cigar there is the way Ambrose's dad used to light up his cigarettes; that behind the gleaming hair on an Avis employee's arm there is the hair on Ambrose's mom's arm draped on the car seat; that behind actor Tom Sternberg's gabardine pants there is the pair worn by Ambrose himself; that behind the cigar J.D. Steelritter would like to be awarded for being the first to spot two giant golden arches there is the banana Ambrose's mom used to offer as a prize for whoever was the first to spot the electrical towers of the power plant near Ocean City. Where, finally, even readers who *are* familiar with Barth's story must be endowed with a subtle Wallacesque maniacality in order to go past "simple" allusions and actually spot each one of the many *ad litteram quotations* (words, expressions, whole sentences) from "Lost in the Funhouse" (they are too many and too tiny to catalogue them in detail, here; you will have to wait for the annotated excerpt in the high-school anthology, for those.)<sup>2</sup>

Wallace's story borrows all these things from Barth (and it borrows Barth himself, very slightly disguising him behind professor Ambrose's character; and it even borrows "Lost in the Funhouse" itself, without even changing its title or its opening words, as you will see). But there is more. Wallace, the postmodern and cerebral writer *par excellence*, also elegantly borrows the very genre Barth is a master of. *Westward's* narrator is (Wallace drops hints to that effect, never explicitly declaring it) a young writer submitting his story to his creative-writing course classmates; Mark and Drew-Lynn, two of the main characters, are themselves in the same class as the narrator's, and so writers as well; the whole final section of the book is a sub-

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<sup>2</sup> As a matter of fact, beside allusions to and quotations from "Lost in the Funhouse", many more allusions to Barth's works are to be found in *Westward*. The recurring terms I have translated with *esaurimento e pienezza* (o *sazietà*) [i.e.: *exhaustion* and *replenishment*] refer to two of his most important critical essays: "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967) and "The Literature of Replenishment" (1979); the image of *passionate virtuosity* was used by Barth to describe quality fiction in the introduction to a series of "Lost in the Funhouse" readings (now in "The Friday Book", Putnam, 1984)... Wallace pays an homage to/re-uses/parodizes not only Barth-as-fiction-writer but also Barth-as-literary-critic; since, as most great American writers (Wallace included), John Barth *taught* literature for quite a long time, while also writing it, and in fact is at least as well known in the USA as a creative-writing teacher as he is as an author -and it is not a coincidence that one of *Westward's* many themes is how and why to teach writing.

story about *a story* written by Mark. Throw in a bunch of (consciously "annoying") interruptions where the narrator deconstructs its plot or comments on his own work: there is evidence enough for *Westward* to fully qualify as "metafiction".

But here is where – I beg your patience, I told you that Wallace is a difficult writer – here is where a brave and brilliant deviation takes place. *Westward* is a story that *utilizes* metafiction's techniques to *fiercely criticize* metafiction itself. Wallace's metafiction is a disguise: a perfect disguise, but no more than a disguise. It is the very author who reveals us the truth, speaking through the character who is his alter ego of sorts:

Mark Nechtr desires, some distant hard-earned day, to write something that stabs you in the heart. [...] The stuff would probably use metafiction as a bright smiling disguise, a harmless floppy-faced costume, because metafiction is safe to read, familiar as syndication; and no victim is as delicious as the one who smiles in relief at your familiar approach.

As it is wont to happen to every revolutionary movement over time, in Wallace's opinion metafiction has reached a reassuring, institutional status. Too many books are written about writers, too many movies are made about people making movies, too many television shows offer "behind the scenes" glimpses of television itself, too much advertisement takes advantage of its own obvious, self-conscious advertising quality for its advertising purposes. Most of our contemporary culture watches itself watching and withers under multiple layers of complacent "quotationism" and prettily ironic self-referentiality. (Please go and read how Wallace discusses all of this in "E pluribus unam", in the non-fiction collection *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*.) The Funhouse of metafiction, all mirror-play and clever mechanisms, ends up being a house where nobody *truly lives*.

What Wallace wants is something different. He wants to write about very serious things, substantial things (*nourishing* things,\*\*\* I would say, given the alimentary sub-theme that runs throughout *Westward*); he wants to go down to the heart of certain issues, and he wants to stab his readers in the heart (as a matter of fact, the archery metaphor is another of the story's recurrent themes). It's not that Wallace is not interested in sophisticated postmodern voyeurism: he's a master of voyeurism himself; it is not that he is not concerned with formal experimentation, with stylistic refinement: many, many notes in those annotated high-school books would be required to run down every single instance of subtle textual self-reference within these two hundred pages: there are countless lexical leit-motifs carefully and craftily woven into each other.<sup>3</sup> Wallace himself could be accused, and *is* in fact often accused, as

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\*\*\* This one sounds better in Italian, too, since for *substantial* and *nourishing* I was using very similar words ("sostanziale" and "sostanzioso").

<sup>3</sup> Only one of many possible examples is the brilliant polysemy of the hero's first name: in English, *mark* is also the word for the port-wine stain on Ambrose's cheek, the bull's eye of an archer's target, the brand name the adman has to make consumers loyal to...

Ambrose and Drew-Lynn are in his story, of a "look-Mom-no-hands" kind of writing. But what David Foster Wallace – like Mark Nechr – really wants, is to write something that stabs us in the heart.

And he succeeds.

Take *Infinite Jest*, his masterpiece: it is a fourteen-hundred-page long novel, with sentences as long as sixty lines and dozens of notes describing the chemical structure of one pharmaceutical product or another, or the complete filmography of non-existing director, and in spite of that *Infinite Jest* is a novel that deals with depression, loneliness, addiction, love, death, nationalism, mother-children incommunicability, and teenage competition on a sport field, and deals with its subjects in such an intense way that it makes you cry.

And *Westward*, even if it is a metafictional story built around another metafictional story, and containing one more story inside (just for fun, we could try and count, page after page, its degrees of separation from reality, being quite sure that Wallace was always keeping count of them, too), is above all a story whose author tackles some tragically *real* aspects of our civilization in a very serious and heartfelt way: i.e., people's relationship with their bodies, the illusion of solipsism and the dreading of loneliness, the proliferation of phobias and neuroses, the political weight of tv entertainment, the power of advertisement, the degeneration of consumerism and even – at the risk of sounding reactionary– the meaning of values such as *loyalty* and *honor*. Reactionary? Dealing with ethical and political issues in a work of fiction, questioning reality instead of just hyperrealistically describing it or playing with its representations given by literature, cinema, music and the press in these last decades, are attitudes so out of fashion today that they become truly *revolutionary*. In an age which seems to favor simplified procedures (think of computer interfaces getting more and more user-friendly, think of the over-abbreviated, ideographic language of internet chat-lines and sms messages ), quick communication (think of telematic information, whose depth is often sacrificed in the name of accessibility) and disengagement, David Foster Wallace is a *difficult* and *engagé* writer. He distrust cable tv and modems, uses a complex and vaguely *reader-unfriendly* syntax, forces you to go look up words in the dictionary or the encyclopedia.<sup>4</sup>

And yet, *Westward* does make for a pleasant reading in any moment of relax: David Foster Wallace – this is one of the gifts that make him a great writer – is always able to keep his marvellous density on this side of *heaviness*. In the story that you are soon (eventually) going to

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† Do you have those in the US, too? They are short text messages (150 characters or so) sent from a cellphone to another, they're almost more used than actual cellphone calls in Italy.

<sup>4</sup> The very *title* of this story is a fine treat, for readers with a curious mind. *Westward the course of the empire takes its way* is a verse written by philosopher George Berkeley and then used as a title for a number of nineteenth-century paintings – the most famous is a fresco on the west wall of the Capitol, in Washington – celebrating the advance of colonization toward the Pacific Coast. A sort of old triumphalistic motto for the "civilizing" America, which in his turn Wallace re-uses as a sarcastic counterpoint to his description of Western civilization's worst developments; the westward progress of his characters suffers from frequent setbacks, tends to stagnate in an obsessive way and its ideal destination is an apocalyptic event anyway (though, admittedly, also a cathartic one).

read there are myriads of more or less recognizable allusions to John Barth,<sup>5</sup> there is metafiction exposing metafiction's own sterility, there are ethical and political issues, but what is being told still remains the story of six weird characters on their way to a place they will probably never get to. There is a postmodern poet always dressed in lime green, a stoned Ronald Mc Donald, a would-be tv-commercial actor with an inward-facing eye, a Dough-nugget-munching Avis employee, a young Mormon giving money away in an airport terminal, a sadistic life convict and a mother who cooks fried roses for her family; a pear compote pierced by an arrow, a home-made malevolent-looking automobile, a straw man dressed as a Marine and the endless Illinois wheat fields whose eerie charm Wallace had already described in *A Supposedly Fun Thing...*; there are characters you will feel for and scenes you will not forget; those who scorn philology and basically feed on *stories* will not be disappointed.

The thing is, it is not easy to find a book you can love for so many *different* reasons: you can admire both its stylistic finesse and its brilliant narrative inventions, both its literary quality and its adherence to the real world, both its seriousness of purpose and its surreal verve. Feel free to choose your favourite way to savor *Westward*. But from the first to the last page, do not stop savoring it. It is what they call a small masterpiece.

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<sup>5</sup> *And not to Barth alone*, actually. Another explicitly mentioned source Wallace draws from, in *Westward*, is a story by Cynthia Ozick, an American writer quite famous in the US and unfortunately little-known-of in Italy; its title is "Usurpation (Other People's Stories)" and it is included in a collection called *Bloodshed and Three Novellas* (Knopf, 1976; unpublished in Italy). From Ozick's story Wallace borrows, for instance, the first, intense and evocative, seven lines (literally reproduced in the second paragraph of page 108 [I refer to the minimum fax edition]) and the threatening Yiddish word *asur*, meaning what is taboo, forbidden by God; but above all, on a less philological level, the idea of the writer as an *usurpator*, unwilling and passionate, shy and immoderately ambitious at the same time, of stories which do not belong to him but which he longs to make his own. Ozick's story is a perfect example of metafiction (the heroine is an established writer who is handed a story about teachers, disciples and usurpation by an amateur writer, and gets such a strong inspiration from that story that ends up usurping it herself...) which does *not* boil down to mere mirror-playing and, as with "Lost in the Funhouse", I can only recommend to the most curious readers of *Westward* to go and retrieve the American original.

The Age of Irony  
or *Deconstructing Fosty*

by *Melpomene Whitehead*

I was lucky enough that I found *Infinite Jest* at the library just when I was getting sick the second time.<sup>1</sup> Since I was essentially unable to go out, I spent all my free hours in David Foster Wallace-land, an ever so slightly futuristic world of private-school boys, mysterious female djs, AA meetings, tennis and a movie so engrossing you can never stop watching. I had only 3 weeks in which to read the book, which is somewhere over 1,000 pages, and I did so with hours to spare. Needless to say, I was in love by the end. This book was brilliant, funny, twisted.<sup>2</sup>

At first, I was strictly in limerence with the mind of DFW. Very similar to my love for Don DeLillo or Will Self, and not at all like my lust for, say, John Cusack, Keanu Reeves, Trent Reznor. But the more I started to see pictures of DFW, the more I forget about the way he constructs a sentence, the way he makes reference to the intangible. Suddenly, DFW became, not an author, but a body. A face. Now, I know that's shallow, but I'm shallow. I admit it. But, please, this combination of mind-numbing intellect, phenomenal artistic talent and stunning good looks, you know, it's too much for me. Babe-and-a half. Post-modern post-grad poster boy.<sup>3</sup> I

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<sup>1</sup>The now famous chronic inflammatory demyelinating polyneuropathy.

<sup>2</sup>by twisted I mean it curls back on itself like a sleeping dog, like an ornate wrought iron chair. DFW's writing often take this shape, sort of like the snake that swallows his tail, also known as the *millennium* symbol to you tv addicts.

<sup>3</sup>look at him! Goddamn! Luscious lips, glossy hair -- he's like a pantene ad!  
How can someone who looks that good write that good? Oh my god, stop me, I'm hyperventilating! DFW as my fantasy boyfriend would love my cats, bring me bags of **Reduced Fat Chips Ahoy** when I was having my period, come out with me to cheesy industrial dance clubs, tell me his dreams, let me read his stories. I'll leave out the sex parts because I don't want to embarrass anyone, especially myself. In return I wouldn't make him go on roller-coasters, and I'd always have a tin of Altoids<sup>a</sup> around.

<sup>a</sup>The urban legend states that Altoids make for fabulous oral sex-- peppermint oil I guess causing some sort of incredible penile sensations. Now, let me tell y'all what a good girlfriend I am. I'm such a good girlfriend that I purchased and ingested Altoids, despite the fact that they are a **non-vegetarian food** (they contain gelatin), and the report back was "...". Finally, I asked if anything was different and he said, "yeh, you just brushed your teeth or something..." and I was like "was it better?" and he was like "no," and I was like, "ach!" and stuck with a \$2 tin of peppermint-flavored meat. So I must be that good that there's no room for improvement.



could get with this guy and kick it, you know what I'm saying? Then I found out he was hanging with Elizabeth Wurtzel<sup>4</sup> and that was the end of that.

Recently, when *The Depressed Person*<sup>5</sup> appeared in the January 1998 *Harper's* my faith in the

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<sup>4</sup>For some reason, the whole alleged Wurtzel affair broke my little heart. I guess I thought he'd fall for more than a pretty, tragic face. I know she's supposed to be brilliant and all, but I think I read Prozac Nation, and I don't concur. It may have been just previous to my actual prozac experience,<sup>a</sup> or just after, but let me say I was not all that amused. Why waste my time with a self-absorbed autobiography when I have enough of the real thing in my life? You know, solipsistic friends. And while I never actually performed oral sex on any of the Butthole Surfers myself, I'm sure Gibby wouldn't have removed his dick from my mouth or anyone else's for that matter. But I'm not so waifoid like Wurtzel, especially now, not actually being on prozac and not having an eating disorder and being on prednisone, well, most of the time I feel like a fat angry dwarf. So what chance to I have with a tall luscious genius like Wallace? None, but that's what fantasies and dildoes are for. But I guess I would have rather seen him with someone I considered a genius, although I really can't think of any. Uhh, Kim Deal, maybe? Lydia Lunch? Janeane Garafalo?

<sup>a</sup>Here's a picture of me on prozac.



Kids, this is my driver's license photo! Who could be so happy at the DMV? Take 'zac and you'll find out. While I was on it, I dated! I had fun. My roommate said I was manic and intolerable. I felt like I was like me as on **Melrose Place**. I was definitely outgoing, vivacious and larger than life. Then I got excruciating headaches and had to come down. It was on zolofit that the first symptoms of my now famous chronic demyelinating polyneuropathy began to surface. Thus ended my psychopharmacological experimentations.

<sup>5</sup>I'm glad I did not actually see myself in *The Depressed Person*, because the piece is positively brutal. But I did spend more than half my life depressed, hence the flirtation with psychopharmacology. I *tried* the talking cure, but I'm not one to talk, so it didn't much work. Plus I resented having to pay to get someone's undivided attention for 45 minutes and not get any constructive feedback. Anyway, each day I used to see the faces of the people on the subway, off to their factory or counter jobs, dropping off their kids at pre-K and I used to think to myself, *why doesn't everyone want to kill themselves? What makes these people want to go on?* They seemed relatively happy and I, who was allegedly more intelligent and certainly more highly educated, could barely struggle through a day. I swear, it was a rare day when thought of suicide did not enter my head. I was able to hold down a job and occasionally there would be a burst of creativity, but most of the time I felt like a big black hole. I began to take St. John's wart since it was supposed to help depression, not expecting much since the serotonin uptake drugs didn't

universe was renewed for some reason for a short while.<sup>6</sup> Upon reading this, I remember how much I loved this guy, so I ran to the library to check out **A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again**, which I didn't get as soon as it came out because some asswipe reviewer claimed the whole thing was about tennis, and I just didn't feel like reading about tennis and I was still mad about the Wurtzel thing. Boy, am I stupid or what? (Or, just shallow. Come wade in me.)

ASFT does have two tennis essays, two essays that are so engrossing you forget that you're reading about a sport that is effectively in the domain (in America anyway) only of well-off white people. There's also an essay in the Illinois State Fair, the title essay, about "crusing," and essays about the media. In his 60 page essay *E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction* DFW

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much help. About 4 months into the experiment I felt a little better and decided to stop taking it to see what happened. What happened was this. One morning, I got up at 5:30 am to go to the gym. I walked into the living room where Henry was looking out the window and Mungo was asleep on the couch. It was still dark out, as it was winter. The weirdest thought popped in my head *I'm happy*. Just like that. Damnedest thing. It's been about 2 months now, and I'm still happy! I'm like, *wow, this is what life is really like!* I had no *idea*.

<sup>6</sup>Wallace teaches at Illinois State University. Can you imagine? Oh my god, I would never miss a class. I'd get to class early! I'd hang out after class and tell him I needed help, had a question, let's go out for some coffee! Oh please! It would be so funny, so obvious. Now, I was quite cute in college, so this might work. I never actually got to have an affair with a professor when I was in college. Looking back, I can see now that there were two that I might have been able to swing this with -- Dennis McCarthy my drawing teacher and Michael Taav my drama teacher. McCarthy was cute-- grey hair, blue eyes, very personable, and would sometimes would act nervous around me. That's always a turn-on. Taav was beautiful. Everyone in the class had a crush on him, boys and girls. On the last day of class we all dressed like him--raybans, black jeans, a big sweater with a button shirt under with the tail hanging out. He was touched and amused by this tribute. He wrote a play which had this line in it, this isn't a quote, sorry, but it's pretty close. A character was complaining about the sameness of his life, and he said, "It's like the Three Stooges cartoon. They run, and the background is the same three trees and a bush." Heav-y. He later went on to write for tv. He wrote that episode of *Tales from the Crypt* that Arnold Swartzenegger directed, where the old guy buys a new body. Taav would also sometimes act charmingly nervous around me, and although he only gave me a B on the scene I had to write for the final, he read my scene to the class. He assigned student to do the other scenes. One guy in the class, he was this big construction worker type, older guy, wrote a scene about a guy picking up a girl on the bus and she's a stripper! So Taav had this sexy lithe blondy "play" the stripper. After class, the construction worker came up to me and said he wrote the scene with me in mind! Yeesh!

addresses, among other things, the problems of the <sup>7</sup> fiction writer using television as a tool for observation. We all know by this point that the characters on tv are smaller than they appear. If Lucy Ball's consistent breaking of the tv wall wasn't enough for you, there's been a whole history of it since then. The thrust of the essay is the convoluted in-joke within an in-joke that tv, especially the tv sitcom, has become. The best shows on tv appeal to the viewers sense of wanting to be the type of person who is too intellectual to actually enjoy tv, and thus these shows act as if there is a big joke that the wheel-watchers are not in on, but we are. Here, in the very late 20th century, we no longer want to add our voice to the sound of the crowd, but instead celebrate this cult of individuality. And tv serves to further accentuate that separateness by literally separating us from people we share the room with. It goes on from there. He says it much better than I ever could. And this essay was written way before the ubiquitous (at least in NYC and LA) and hated ABC "We Love TV" campaign, which, it appears, was meant to insult not just the wheel-watchers, but the Jeopardy! viewers also.<sup>8</sup> So, as it turns out, the only true voyeuristic tv experience we can have is **The Real World**, or its predecessor, **An American Family**.<sup>9,10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>I hate the term post-modern. It's sort of as if we're somewhere in the future, ahead of ourselves. Modern's not current enough, we're *past* that. How ridiculous and bizarre. I mean, I know that with post-modern we're referring to an artistic movement, just as the term "modern" was. I get that. Still and all, it bugs me. But isn't it ironic that the song **Post-Post Modern Man** was done by **Shadowy Men on a Shadowy Planet**, the guys who did the **Kids in the Hall** theme? Bringing us right back to the referential, self-mockery, ironic nudge-nudge-wink-wink-say-no-more of tv-land.

Now, when some friends of mine want to say something is *ironic* they now say, in an extremely ironic way, "It's like rain on your wedding day," which is, of course, to any student passed the fifth grade, not an example of irony at all.

<sup>8</sup>This seems to be a new trend in advertising, the insulting commercial. It doesn't really work for me, but maybe I'm too old. There's the Prodigy commercial, where the indication is only dorks spend time online, and the really baffling Something Wicked This Way Comes Lexus spot, whose point is that this car is EVIL, man! Quesque d'illyo?

<sup>9</sup>I was in love with Lance Loud. He was so cool. I actually have a single by his band the Mumps, **I Like to be Clean b/w Crocodile Tears**.

<sup>10</sup>Well there's Public Access too. Being the sort of person who likes to *participate*, as opposed to just kicking back and observing, I have had my share of public access time.

And that's just the tv essay.<sup>11</sup> The first piece, *derivative sport in tornado alley*, ostensibly an

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<sup>11</sup>While reading the television essay, I began to feel nostalgic for early 90s tv. *Twin Peaks, Northern Exposure... Northern Exposure* especially evokes a very strong feel of nostalgia deep within me. I remember watching with my cat Ed<sup>a</sup> in the noisy 6th floor apartment at Ave C and Houston. Ed was always asleep during the show, but when the bumper (the ID teaser between commercials in a long break) with the eagle's cry would come on Ed would always spring into action. Some memory deep within him made him respond to the eagle's cry. Perhaps he was the wolf, and he was hungry. One particular episode I remember fondly was the one where Joel's mother, Nadine, visiting Cicely, Alaska from Flushing, Queens, sees the eagle, and something within her is awoken. Marilyn, the Inuit medical secretary, takes Nadine up to her special rock and tells her the story of the Eagle, how, before he was Eagle, he talked and talked and never heard the hungry wolf or the wind. It wasn't until he learned to listen that he discovered he could fly. Things that happen in this episode: Hollings and Joel both struggle with what it means to be a man, Joel waxes nostalgic for his Uncle Manny and the passage of time, Nadine tells Joel "shhh," Shelly gives a speech very similar to Blanche DuBois's "don't hang back with the beasts" speech, only Shelly's begins "You had one humongous set of peachpits to do what you did," and Nadine flies. This is one of three flying episodes, the one of them featured Bill Pullman, which brings us right back to David Lynch's *Lost Highway*.<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Ed could say several words in English, like *crown*, *t'pring*, (well, that's not English, that's from *Star Trek*), and *Proust*. Ed, being from another planet, would sometimes claim to be from France, and he'd say that he used to know Proust and they'd have long conversations, mostly about Ed and how stunning he was, and wasn't he so large, etc, etc. And grey. Ed was very grey, and that must have been a topic of conversation. Ed would tell people these things psychically, only knowing a few words in English. He had a much better command of German.

<sup>b</sup>RE: **A Supposedly Fun Thing...**, *David Lynch Keeps his Head* pp 146 ff. I have a particular problem concerning the footnote on page 165, especially the passage, "[Terry] Gilliam has taken to the limit Lynch's preoccupations with blatantly Freudian fantasies (*Brazil*), and interpenetrations of ancient myth and modern psychoses (*The Fisher King*)." Gilliam has been working as a director for a long time. Gilliam is a surrealist and an absurdist. DFW's implication is that because Gilliam is more successful (makes films that make more money and garner more critical acclaim), that he must be influenced by the less successful Lynch, who is more of an artist in spite of or because of his lack of success. This is as absurd as me claiming that because Nick Zedd is infinitely more unsuccessful than Lynch, then Lynch must be influenced by Zedd. I believe that people of similar intellect, disposition, schooling, etc, working with the same medium, have a propensity for producing works that bear some similarities. Dude, *Jabberwocky* (1977) is much closer to *Brazil* (1985) than *Eraserhead* (1978) ever was. Just because Gilliam can actually tell a visually compelling and intriguing story in a linear fashion doesn't mean he ain't as good as Mr. How-many-cups-of-Bob's-Big-Boy's-coffee-can-I

essay on DFW's experiences as a junior tennis player, contains the following: "It was months after I moved to western MA before I could really sleep in the pussified whisper of New England's wind-sound." My mouth drops up when I read things that beautiful.<sup>12</sup> And this is just a little throw-away sentence.

Most of what DFW writes about, however, ends up being about himself. Which is fine by me because I find him fascinating. I mean, how could I not find a beautiful intelligent man of a similar disposition to myself fascinating? The transcript of his appearance on The Charlie Rose Show really shows him at his charming-est (I think), stutters, overtalks, interrupts and all. Sweetly self-effacing, I think one would say. Oh baby. Just thinking about it makes me feel like one of those slow-mo (actually sped up, they only look slow) time elapsed flowers blooming on the discovery channel. I'm drooling from places a proper girl shouldn't drool from.<sup>13</sup>

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drink-in-one-sitting Lynch. I also realized while reading this that, except for the last two things (*Firewalk with Me* and *Lost Highway* and that failed 6 week tv show) I've actually seen everything Lynch has done. And it's ok (I mean, I couldn't do better. Oh, maybe I could if I tried, but I'm not that motivated. ) but he's really not something to get all that worked up about. I like Cronenburg much better, and if you want to talk about influences, let's talk about Cronenburg's influence on Lynch. I can actually visualize Lynch with 18 cups of Bob's Big Boy's java littered about a darkened living room, stained faux-oriental rug and milk crates filled with records by the Ventures and Yma Sumac, watching, over and over again, on a richer friend's borrowed betamax *They Came From Within* (1975), or *Rabid* (1977 starring the inimitable Marilyn Chambers).

<sup>12</sup>Or, like my brother used to say, "I was like...", and his mouth would open, soundlessly, and his hands would flail wildly. Once my mother asked me if I understood this particular communication, because she didn't. I explained it was sort of the non-verbal equivalent of being flabbergasted. She sort of gave me a *you kids today* kind of look, which was completely uncharacteristic for her.

<sup>13</sup>12. You know, I shouldn't and really can't speak for all women, but for me there is no bigger turn-on than a guy who is creative, mildly depressed and a little shy. The kind of guy who is constantly looking down, looking up, mussing his hair, going *um, um, umm*. I don't know why exactly this is so exciting to me. Is it the illusion of control that I might possibly exercise over this person at some point in the future? Is it the thought of leading him around on a leash? Literally?

KCRW Bookworm Live Taping with Michael Silverblatt, David Antin and David Foster Wallace on March 20, 2003

I got to the upstairs cafe in the Barnes and Noble at the Grove on Thursday well in advance of the start time and situated myself at a table that afforded me a view of anyone who came by. I wasn't sure I'd be able to spot Mark Brawner <<http://www.andbutso.com/~mark/>> or Amina or Duncan, but I somehow had this brazen suspicion that I'd be able to intuitively pick out Maria Bustillos <<http://www.andbutso.com/~maria/>> based on her aura or something (perhaps only Carole will sympathize with me in this). As it turned out, I did notice a woman who fit the description Maria gave of herself walk in (curly hair, high heels, sporting a copy of a book that looked like it might be *The Meme Machine*), but I wasn't convinced until I saw a hesitant scene of greeting going on between her and a tall, dark-haired man whom I suspected of being a list-member that I got up the nerve to approach the newly introduced duo and ask if they were indeed wallace-l'ers. The rest is , as they say, &c., &c. It was so satisfying to make contact with two people on the list and have them not only live up to but surpass the expectations you have of them from their writings to wallace-l. Mark and Maria, these are two remarkable individuals; I'm so glad you both came and that we all found each other!

David Antin began with his improvised performance essay – a genre totally new to me. Mark and I afterwards both confessed to each other that we had thought he would eventually move on from his 'impromptu remarks' with an "Ahem, so now let me read to you from. . ." and then turn to a place in *The Next American Essay*. But no, **this** was it. This beautiful web of personal history and classical allusions and social commentary was his 'essay' – his attempt, his try, his experiment. Doubtless you'll be able to hear this on KCRW (or [kcrw.com](http://kcrw.com)) when it airs, but he started out thinking back to his first memories of war: 1939. Being 7 years old and sitting on his "stoop" [he was adamant about this nomenclature] theorizing with his chums about the two-decade cyclical nature of war. He mentioned the "war cards" sold with chewing gum and traded like baseball cards but inscribed with the most gruesome atrocities and blood (e.g. the Japanese slaughter in Manchuria). He went on to tell us that war is a time when "discourse becomes stupefied." He expressed indignation over terms like "collateral damage" and "weapons of mass destruction" being chewed and mashed into a milky pap for consumption by the masses. Re: "collateral" damage, Antin asked when "putting your cow up for a loan" became tantamount to the "senseless annihilation of innocent victims of war." He reminded us that an old-fashioned bundle of TNT could wreak mass damage and that the US, so vigilant of other countries gaining access to nuclear/chemical weapons) had been one of the most aggressive users of weapons of mass destruction – twice over Japan. (He conceded he might be able to rationalize the dropping of the first bomb in Hiroshima, but he had never been able to satisfactorily comprehend the necessity of the second over Nagasaki.) "We [kids] were always ready for war. Only there wasn't a war. Until that Sunday afternoon – the attack on Pearl Harbor." This seems like it made an indelible imprint on him, as it did so many Americans who lived through it. He took us through the Korean War, Vietnam, recursively harking back to earlier periods in world history, recalling the attack of Napoleon on Vienna, and this image he has of Beethoven trying to compose music and going deaf in medias res as bombs are exploding in the background. The casualties of war that come when bright lights are extinguished in the face of it [I can't help but think of Walter Benjamin in conjunction, as Hannah Arendt I think remarked, the first casualty of WWII], like Archimedes in the futile 2nd Punic War, killed at the hands of imperial Romans. A brilliant man who just wanted to be able to contemplate his circles in peace, Antin concluded.

Throughout Antin's performance (I can't really call it a "reading"), I was conscious of looking over at

Dave and how he was reacting to his fellow panelist. At first he watched Antin directly, but then shifted to kind of flipping through his copy of the anthology – not distracted, just to have something else to look at, I think. Then he sort of contemplatively gazed at a point on the ground just a few feet in front of his right knee, occasionally breaking into a grin or knitting his brows together or sometimes nodding in agreement or appreciation (there was, as of yet, no spitting into a cup going on). A couple of times he caught my eye, watching him – and I can't say it wasn't somehow thrilling to gaze into Dave's eyes as Antin's lyrical essay poured forth from within his muse-gifted trance. But I demurred on each occasion, and turned my eyes away – back to the speaker or to my notes.

After an introduction of Horacean eloquence from Michael Silverblatt (who, as Maria mentioned, has read *Infinite Jest* 5 times, by his reckoning, and who counts his dearest teacher and mentor to have been the great modernist scholar, Hugh Kenner), David Foster Wallace (henceforth simply 'Dave' or DFW) took to the podium, almost reluctantly – in the posture of the best writer in jr. high who gets called up to the front of the class to read out his essay on "The Red Badge of Courage" or something. "I feel weird being here," were the first words he said. "But I also feel weird sitting in my hotel room obsessively watching retired military guys as paid media consultants [ . . . ] and I can't point to one thing that's wrong with that arrangement, except that it's all just swirling around in my head, and it's all – just – weird." Pensive pause. "And then David Antin gets up and gives this incredibly nuanced and subtle [performance] and explains why I'm feeling this way. And now I'm going to read this really light piece about the Illinois State Fair, and I just feel – weird."

"It's the Illinois State Jr. Baton-Twirling Finals," (laughter bursts from the audience) he launches right into the section from "Getting Away from Pretty Much Being Away from It All Already" in that deadpan kind of tone I have come to know as his from the *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* audio cassettes. People are into it, but I can't help maintaining a kind of Archimedean perspectival distance, triangulating between the story, Dave's preliminary remarks and our collective awareness of the war ensuing on the other side of the world. And neither, apparently, can Dave, because at the point where the batons of the 7- and 8- year- olds' division start flying off in all directions, wreaking all kinds of havoc ("errant batons start pinwheeling into the tent's ceiling, sides, and crowd with real force"), Dave looks up at us out of the diegetical frame and says, "Oh wait, maybe this is relevant." For the most part, he reads without looking up at the audience, focused only on the text before him (except, as I already mentioned in a previous post, to scold an over-zealous photographer in the front row). Oh, and he also looked up to tell us "None of this is made up," which was also pretty amusing. The selection he's chosen is short, leaving us all, as I think Amina and Mark both mentioned, wanting more.

Dave sat back down and the Q&A started. There was some confusion as both writers are named David, and Michael Silverblatt insisted on addressing them both as "David." (The obvious solution is "Dave" for DFW, since that's what he goes by, but anyway.) So when M.S. asked this really long, round-about question the thrust of which was, "What draws you to write essays, David?" there was silence, and then Dave looking up, startled, from that compelling point on the floor a few feet before him, "Oh, you mean, me?" Dave confessed he started writing essays because he needed money, but then, attuned to the sort of answer he felt M.S. was probably looking for, he relented and gave him something about the thrill of knowing there's a connection with a real person at the other end of the writing, "the presence of another person in intercourse [with the writer] – the uptown term [so Dave] would be 'persona' or 'character'. That's very jazzed up, but I also think it's sometimes true."

M.S. asked about what kinds of new experiments David Antin and DFW are encountering among the young writers. Dave spoke about 'this whole 4th Genre Movement' that is a blend of fiction and non-

fiction – creative non-fiction. Somehow (there's a lacuna in my notes here) this swerved into DFW talking about the publishing world's unfounded fears a few years back that the internet might wipe out standard publishing. But then, Dave speculated, the demand for filters on the overflow of content might produce gateways that were refereed by the likes of Michael Silverblatt, essentially siphoning off the wheat from the chaff and suggesting what to read. DFW explained how anthologies work similarly, and that the pieces gathered form a nice compendium, but more interestingly, they constellate to give an impression of the mind of the editor – in the case of *The Next American Essay* (Graywolf Press, 2003), John D'Agata. "I'm interested in John D'Agata - he wrote a book that's really cool, and I was interested to see what this guy would choose to put in an anthology [...] It's really a cross-section of the editor's mind." He pointed to *McSweeney's* being interesting for similar reasons – that Dave Eggers is interesting. DFW emphasized that small presses are important because they "bridle against the mainstream corporations" [like Barnes and Noble and its 100 Greatest Books of the Century, Dave?] and finally submitted Graywolf, et al. as a space for the likes of the absent (due to inclement Rocky Mountain weather) editor: "D'Agata's weird, and it [*The Next American Essay*] reeks of the human."

Maria scooped me on this, but I'll put in another plug for a new book review broadside being published by the fine people at *McSweeney's* called *The Believer*, which Eggers refers to as "\*our\* [yes, in that weird us v. them, cool kids v. mainstream way] NY Review of Books." Look for it everywhere – really, everywhere, not just "McSweeney's bookstores," apparently – in the next couple of weeks.

So the very authoritarian woman (who, for me, is calling up memories of the actress who played Al Pacino's secretary in *The Devil's Advocate* – the one that turns out to be some kind of demon from Hell), working for Barnes & Noble? KCRW? – it's not clear – gets up and tells us (again) how the book signing line \*is going to work\* [crack of whip]. And, for what it's worth, I guess this might have turned into a kind of unruly mob, but under her hawkish eye, we resembled nothing so much as a bunch of dyed-in-the-wool Catholics rising pew by pew to go up and receive Holy Communion. Which, if it weren't so damned sacrilegious, maybe isn't such a bad analogy after all. (OK, maybe a touch over the top). It's our (Mark and my) row's turn to get up, and we've got these yellow post-it notes with our names written in a round, school-marmish hand by the demon-lady which she's instructed us to put on the page where we'd like DFW to sign. So I'm clutching my well-thumbed copy of *Infinite Jest* and a notebook, and trying to look aloof and project all kinds of French *jeunesse & je ne sais quoi & sans souci* while balancing on 3.5 in. high-heel sandals (even though I'm normally adept at this – [NB, I'm not really as tall as Maria might have led you to believe]) and just palpably bristling with an energy like I haven't felt maybe since trying out for varsity volleyball in the 10th grade. Let it be noted, Dave was looking really hot that night (sorry, I know this is on the icky, school-girlish side, mais...). I buy the Jackson Brown comparison Maria put out there, but may I also submit the publicity photo on the paperback edition of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. As Essex girls say, "Fwah!" (All this 'let it be noted' stuff should really go in a footnote, but they're too annoying to do in this email interface that I'm using. So rather than being suppressed, this female fawning stuff is all embedded in the text – current international trauma and the possible erasure of distinction between these two modes – suppression v. embedding – notwithstanding.)

I was trying to watch how people interacted with Dave in order to get a sense of the protocol for these things (Mark suggests I chatted him up like a "pro" – which I'm not really sure I like the implications of). I mean, I knew it would be kind of smarmy to pass him my phone number (I don't think I was ever \*really\* going to do this. I don't think.), but was it OK to try to talk to him for longer than "I'm a really big fan. Thanks for signing my book"? And some people didn't even get this much out; they just

sort of handed their book over to Dave, and he'd sign. It all looked very clinical and impersonal (plus demon-lady was standing right beside the signing table kind of moving things along), and I wanted the opposite of that. In any event, I knew I had to act fast. There was going to be no time for a slow seduction (so to speak). So I walk up to the table (Mark, from his objective stance, tells me periodicity of tobacco expectoration went up even as I was approaching DFW, which, I take from Martina, to be a good sign?) smiling, and Dave smiles back at me and looks at the copy of \_IJ\_ I've set before him. "This old chestnut," he quips. I tell him I'm sorry to only have a well-loved paperback copy for him to sign, and he says, "No, it's nice to see a well-loved copy." (He's still smiling at me.) He turns to the title page and starts crossing out his name in print, and I tell him, "You know, I usually [and by usually I meant the one other time I was in a situation like this with Will Self] have writers sign my books on the first title page [the one with just the title], only I've already written my name there, since that's where I inscribe all my books." And Dave flips back to the first title page where it says 'Christina I. Wilson - October 1997 - Chicago' and he smiles up at me and says, "No, no, then I want to sign it here." He remarks on my handwriting, telling me he's got "penmanship envy" of me and proceeds to sign just below my name '& Her faithful companion, David Foster Wallace' (which, thank god, I didn't read right there, 'cause I think I would have just melted away into a little puddle of liquid right in front of him).

So now I shift gears and I'm like, you know there's actually one other thing I was hoping you might sign for me. I whip out my notebook on which I've boxed off a square of blank space and written above it: "A PERSONAL MESSAGE FROM DAVID FOSTER WALLACE TO wallace-l. <[</a>" I explain, "I belong to this listserv called wallace-l and I just thought it might be nice if maybe you could write a few words of greeting to them." Suddenly, all the chemistry between us starts redoxing off in the wrong direction. "Well, tell me a little more about this," he says, kind of distant now. "It's just this forum where people who enjoy your writing can talk to each other. It's not like we're even obsessively talking about you or even your writing all the time - most times it seems like we just talk about current events or culture." I wanted to tell him that we weren't some pack of crazed-stalkers, or DFW "Trekkies" or something. That it was more like DFW had brought us all together and that our appreciation of his work sort of indicated how all our souls are kind of set at the same angle of refraction in the light of culture. Of course, I didn't get anything nearly so eloquent out in the event. That's more like what I wished I would've said as I was rehearsing, post facto, the conversation the next morning in the shower \(am I the only one who talks to herself in the shower out there? - Too much information?\). Dave's looking kind of skeptical \(I'm down at eye-level now looking at him balanced on the balls of my feet with my forearms leaning horizontally along the edge of the table\), and I'm imploringly gazing into his big, velvety brown eyes that make you want to just go for a swim in them. He acquiesces, "All right." He pulls the notebook toward him, his mood is back to being receptive to me. "What should I write?" he asks. "Just a greeting. It doesn't have to be much," I offer. He pauses. "You know, for emotional reasons and sanity," he confides, "I have to pretend this \[wallace-l\] doesn't exist." I concur, "I know. I know. It must be really weird. But honestly, we're all pretty balanced people. I think you might know a couple of them. Martina and Marco? They wanted me to say hello to you from them." And then he chimed in with exactly what Martina predicted he would say, "Oh, those two. Tell them hello." He's still looking at me without having written anything yet. "OK, here wait," he verbally stalls. "Hang on a second, let me think." He closes his eyes for a few seconds and then he starts writing. He's kind of smiling now as he's putting down the words. He looks up at me to ask, "How do you spell 'Shangri-La'?" S-H-A-N-G-R-I-L-A. "I know, but with a hyphen or not?" "Oh with," I say with my usual confidence born out of who knows what. "Are you sure?" he asks. "Yeah, with. I would definitely spell it with the hyphen \[though now I'm starting to](http://www.andbutso.com/note/)

second guess myself]. Tell you what, in the email to the list I'll take the blame if it's wrong." But then he smiles and puts in a little parenthetical to the note '(Christina's spelling)' which just makes my day, and keeps writing. "There," he says handing my notebook back to me. "Thanks so much," I gush. "And thanks so much for coming out tonight. I know how it probably wasn't easy with everything that's going on and that it is kind of weird to be here." And he says thanks. And we said good-bye.

I had after-glow for about 36 hours.

All the best from your faithful proxy (who must go take a shower after all this kissing and telling -- this is why DFW pretends wallace-l doesn't exist, I'm sure),

Christina Wilson <<http://www.andbutso.com/~christina/>>

"breakthrough"

Jason Preston

posted to wallace-1 10/3/03

Seen the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly.... graveyard scene... the Good guy (Hal) knows the name on the grave. the Bad (John Wayne, Quebecois spy?) knows which cemetery (where the grave is) the Ugly guy digs (in life, some have guns, and some dig--references Gately's gunshot wound). all three want the treasure.

even as a wraith, JOI is an artist: he constructs the scene as sort of yet another apres-garde film/joke. whether there's really an antidote to the Samizdat inside, who knows... but if there were, JOI, the avenging father-ghost who wants revenge (or so goes Hamlet), would be interested in stopping the Samizdat--both because Avril's in on the terrorism related to it, and because JOI hates to entertain people. so JOI finds the nearest guy to his son ox-like enough to get to the grave/get the tape out. he teaches Gately the word "pirouette" so that Gately will pirouette and thus survive the gunshot later. This assured, JOI appears, introduces himself obliquely as "the ghost who saved your life," and then probably makes arrangements for the digup. Otherwise there would \*be\* no Year of Glad, no functioning university for Hal to interview at--the Samizdat would easily have won, especially since Orin's spineless and captured and in possession of useful info.

Three people know where the DMZ is stashed, and can reach it: Pemulis, Hal, and JOI's wraith. Hal has a dream his teeth are falling out, which makes him want to brush... Stice's bed is levitating, which means JOI is present on the night in question... and Hal's brush is out, even though he put it away. only one ceiling panel is disturbed. Hal has meta-fungal flora in his intestines from when he was wee and ate the stuff. Moms was so distraught she sought specialized help. enter medical attache with useful political connections and a skill for "intestinal flora and molds that grow on other molds." JOI might have known about this attache, and about the affair, partly from that Avril meets the attache in getting her son medically checked out, a parental issue JOI might have been informed of. Hal has not seen the Samizdat--Samizdat viewers don't flail, they're eloquent, they easily beg and perform physical tricks to get to watch it again. JOI feels hal is too locked up in himself. he once felt the same way about his filmic audience, and tried to shatter that with a film. The film turned out to backfire in its effect. The attempt with the DMZ, dosed on hal's toothbrush, backfires the same way. JOI plants the dream about the teeth--his calling card is exposed/exploding bone: knee-skinning incident, the skull-exploding exit... and he wants hal to want to use the toothbrush. we know it's JOI with the levitating bed because the day JOI learned not to underestimate objects, he was moving a mattress with his own dad. we know JOI still cares about this object issue b/c decades later he shares it with Lyle, who now repeats it as advice.

note the concavity. it's a dual surface, two interps, two aspects. consider how an empire collapses--internal corruption rots for years, then an outside attacker exploits the weakness like a kid kicking a moldering pumpkin in. the AFR's the Gauls, America's Rome, and Samizdat is the culmination of internal decay(dence). inside outside, same

rot. hal's a microcosm: for years his body produces/processes DMZ; then JOI comes and brings more from outside. Hal collapses, pushed further into himself by his dad's misguided love.

OR, equally well, and one of the multivalences maybe DFW means to imply: JOI has learned, from the Samizdat debacle. he wants to save his son from it. he decides that for hal to survive at all, i.e. to escape the death of the Samizdat, he has to push his son into a solipsism so deep that it's untouched, jaded, even by the Samizdat. double-bind. JOI loves loops, as does IJ/wallace--it's JOI's annular fusion reactor that's on one side of the concavity, turning ruins/waste/garbage into fuel/light/energy/usefulness again. on the other side of the concavity, it's JOI's Samizdat that stands to do the same thing to the part of the U.S. the U.S. hasn't yet decided to scrap.

i've only slept two hours.

forgive the ij-like structure to my eureka's and evidence.

more: of the three beings who could know precisely where the DMZ is, only one would plausibly want to use it prematurely--Pemulis and hal look forward to doing it on a later, special date. The DMZ's definitely used here--for it never shows up again.

other synergistic crap that might stimulate connections to make:

how ij's like:

hamlet: king queen uncle son son's-ineffectually-comic-relieving-best-bud, and polonius/lyle henry iv-v: hal, older falstaff-type (gately), hal subsuming self in various Roles, burying self under masks; young madwoman (gompert or joelle)

karamazov: dead dad, eldest bro a sensualist; other to bros a holy fool and an alienated intellectual.

ulysses: semi-dim, pragmatic middle-aged protag who gets ignored by readership even tho he's truly central to novel; promising young man too smart for his own health's good, with bad parental issues; a third protagonist, female, whose statement is key to the novel (only in ij, joelle's speech given in the Samizdat is never heard, only implied).

gravity's rainbow: young man mystically connected to a phallic, priapistic, unicornly-mythical new technological device that could kill him but it's his destiny to try to find or find a way to stop.

the only other for-sure wraith we know of (sorry maria, my good-bad-ugly thing makes me believe the digup is real, and gately's "death" a mere counterpoint to:) brother antitoi. antitoi screams an alarm upon his death... who's he flying off to warn? the other half of the archway: when does JOI's wraith show up? is it after antitoi dies? because if so, i

think i know whom antitoi's alarum rouses to action. hal flips out on DMZ. from inside or outside or both. if JOI's grave is empty, his head exploded and thus the grave absent any "anti-priapistic film cartridge" antidote-device, then the digup scene he recruits Good Bad and Ugly to dig up, is a red herring, a mcguffin--this, too, is JOI's type of thing. author as dead father, JOI and DFW-as-author both create IJs. the author/director's immune to his own creation in ways that other readers/viewers are not--because JOI and DFW cannot have virgin experiences of their work. they have an antidote built into their heads.

it's a non-transferrable antidote, and this sad fact is how DFW challenges or qualifies the idea of the death-of-the-author-upon-publication, and resurrects the author as in a unique and powerful and thus privileged position over the text/film. JOI, as wraith, leaves the game board, becomes a game-player. you see his hand here and there throughout the text. in the Text, words and objects are both mere words--Hal never underestimates words the way JOI never underestimates objects (except that one time with the Samizdat--oops). so the wraith can hold beds invisible up for what, for others, seems days on end--the author's outside the timeflow of the text--as well as he can insert words in (inevitably other's) narratives. the fact that antitoi, who lives among the Samizdat and a miniature clutter of junk not unlike that inside the concavity or that in the tunnels of ETA--antitoi the microcosm of the clueless novitiate(-reader) into the text--can, upon entering the text, also transcend the gameboard this way and affect the text with even the most primitive of comments (his alarum)--but only those whom the text in some way Kills, defeats, wins over--can have this enhanced power alongside the dead author. steeply and marathe discuss, basically, two types of life: those who sub-\*scribe\* themselves to something larger than themselves, and are willing to die for that larger, fascistic, faith-requiring thing--and those who remain self-focused, who are unwilling to die but who might die anyway, maybe even due to their self-focus and attendant shortsighted self-pleasuring. JOI, and by extension DFW, explodes this pro-fascist or pro-anarchist-solipsist double-bind, but the resulting reconfiguration isn't much prettier.

see, JOI exposes a third possibility, that of being so far indrawn that one immunizes oneself from either willingly or accidentally being killed and subsumed by a larger-than-you thing--Hal narrates the novel's opening from within a Samizdat-proof cocoon his father forces him into, where he will neither die nor suffer unwillingly nor sacrifice willingly, and thus where he will be alive only in the most nominal way, only as an artifact, only as text. and a fourth possibility, is JOI's position, supra-fascistic, inherently authorial, where he has poured so much of himself into, and has sacrificed so much for, his Samizdat, that he too becomes immune to it, but it psychologically requires his physical and willing (cf. hal's mental and unwilling, on DMZ) suicide.

the novel ends with donald gately, atone gladly, in the purgatory that lies between JOI's heaven and Hal's hell. (hal, the hero of inaction for most of the book, is neither author (60s copshows, hero of action, game referee) nor reader (70s copshows, hero of reaction, game player), nor even gamepiece (inactive), after his final plunge into DMZ--and remember that the two types marathe is constructing as the two possible ways to live,

are both types of the game-player, heroes of reaction --the middle of the five existential positions the novel presents:

game-inventor-now-umpire (as pemulis is w/Eschaton, and JOI w/both IJs),  
game-player-who-treats-game-as-life (marathe's fascistic),  
game-player-who-treats-game-as-game (marathe's stereotype of americans),  
game-piece (hero of inaction, object-ified person, Hal for most of text, when he's not a spectator), and  
game-spectator (hal in an ultimate way, after JOI's DMZ-"Cure" takes effect).

no i don't think it's that tidy, but i think the above rubric is damn illuminating and clarifying and internally unifying for the text. JOI's an anticonfluentalist--and yet his totally divergent interests have led or contributed to nothing but trouble (alcohol, marital estrangement, Samizdat, annular-fusion-used-as-justification-for-concavity-and-thus-as-instigator-of-AFR-type-hostilities that might use the Samizdat to kill the U.S.). whether his choice of action w/r/t hal is another fuckup or is a parentally understandable and intended choice, is up in the air (DFW, again addressing authorial intention, definitely wants to leave ambiguous what the JOI-wraith does and does not \*intend\*). even were hal, j(nr)wayne, and gately to dig up the antidote-implant, and it was somehow in the coffin, and functional after microwaving,\* they couldn't easily use it as an antidote for anyone else.

so i think the entire digup scene is king hamlet forcing hal along a path that leads him into a grave-while-alive, where/so-that he must confront death and certain irretrievable aspects of certain losses attendant to death... in this case, with the \*microwave, DFW's saying that, if the author/director dies upon publication/release, that thereafter, access to that sort of author/director's-immunity-to-the-work cannot be retrieved by any subsequent readers/viewers. DFW's saying this to us. JOI's saying it to Hal, with this skull-Hamlet-grave scene. and indeed Hal knows his dad well, now, knows he's a man of infinite jest, because in order to force Hal to even game-play enough to go to the digup, Hal being oblivious to any contact his dad might try to make with him (Hal already knows every word, Hal sees the bed levitating but doesn't consider the wraith causing it, notices the toothbrush but doesn't think thrice about it... the same Hal who saw through his Dad's ruse in the "psychologist's" office but didn't see through \*to\* his father's valid need to feel a connection...), JOI has had to get word, via a helplessly passive Gately, through to his son that he's extant and wants hal to dig up the coffin, imaginably in order to recover an antidote/mastercopy for a movie that until then, Hal doesn't truly know about--JOI, by the grave scene, must have done all this, and then hal participates in the digup, and that's when Hal's forced by his father to realize something to do with paternal/authorial helplessness and maybe is his way of apologizing in advance for what he feels he must do for hal to possibly help hal not die from the Samizdat.

does hal get the message? i don't know. continuing with my nonlinear exegesis: exegesis can be seen as a sort of dead-end approach to a novel's dilemmas. exegesis is like unearthing a grave: there's nothing there that will fix anything or retrieve anything

for those who've survived the deceased. and yet IJ, plotwise AND themewise, demands that we go through the exegesis anyway, so that we can realize this... we're asked to do this especially to fill in the gap between the last we see of YDAU and the glimpse we see of Year of Glad. and in so doing, we unearth precisely the emptiness that hal unearths, we get a good sight of the avenue of hopelessness which exegesis both is and leads to. only by "unearthing" this scene and countenance this can we fully appreciate the meaning of what follows, the opening chapter of the novel.

if JOI can see the future enough to prevent gately's NOT pirouetting and thus dying and thus not being around to aid in JOI's agenda, then he can see the future enough to know that the Samizdat will devastate, that there is no escape other than either to die, as he and antioi have done upon "taking in" all or part of the text (for antioi, the part's a broomhandle... an object which is, again, just part of the "text"), or to resist watching the tape even once. further clue that the Samizdat will, sometime after Hal goes insane, wreak havoc: "the year of glad was the very last year of subsidized time."

why does the novel end with gately in the purgatory between hal's hell and joi's costly heaven? because it's a scene where gately rides the exact middle of the existential-five-levels listed above--as such, he's right in between marathe's two types of gameplayer--his game isn't a matter of choosing or not-choosing, as marathe would have it... it's a matter of choosing-between. he's choosing to subsume his self to AA's faith-requiring, larger-than-self requirements, rather than choosing to subsume/lose himself to an equally powerful, other desired system, the partaking of even the tiniest part of, not IJ, but of the painkillers that he both wants and doesn't want. gately, humbled, strengthened, willingly sober, unwillingly in pain, wisened, demented, holding still AS a move chosen in his game/life, hovering between playing the game AS game and playing it AS life-itself, a life-and-death-matter... gately is the novel's hero in its closing pages. if the novel opens with Hal in deathless, disconnected-from-god-and-creation hell, and ends with Gately in purgatory (see more below), and if JOI's heaven extends throughout the text from that beginning to that ending, then JOI is the connection between the two protagonists--he connects the text from page 1 to page 900-whatever.

the brilliantest part of ij, maybe, is that in order to take this connected string of text and make a loop of it, we must as readers "lose ourselves"/"die into" the text enough to be able to construct, on our own, the gravedigging scene and the conclusion that AFR's last-seen advances imply their imminent and overwhelming success via the Samizdat (for either orin or the grave has the Samizdat--Orin sent the first copy out, from his arizona post office, to the attache--and if the grave is anything but empty, the only thing it has in it is the master Samizdat, not the antidote--the only thing retrievable from the author's grave is, then, the master-text, not the antidote--and either way, this gives reason to believe the AFR will get ahold of it... for subsidized time DOES end, a near-omniscient JOI-wraith DOES think it necessary to save his son by damning him, and the real-life IJ \*did\* get disseminated throughout the (real) U.S.--and the AFR does plan an "interview" with Hal as well as with his brother, make no mistake.)

...again, the brilliantest part of it, maybe, is that in order to take this connected string of text and make a loop of it, we must as readers "lose ourselves"/"die into" the text enough to be able to construct, on our own, the gravedigging scene and the conclusion that AFR's last-seen advances imply their imminent and overwhelming success via the Samizdat, and construct an understanding of what the hell's happening to hal and why, in the first scene, as well as the true value of why DFW felt it absolutely Right and Necessary to end the novel with the scene he did, frustrating as it initially seems to most readers. Between JOI and such adept-readers as ourselves, we close the text's loop--we finish making Infinite Jest--we finalize the film in the cutting room and then, installing the film into the cartridge of our heads, close the fatal loop ourselves.

Why I couldn't leave wallace-1  
posted to wallace-1 11/21/03  
by Marc (SecondFate)

Leaving was like being thrown out on my ass from some high society function. The days and nights afterwards were sleepless and interminable. I was a vagabond with nowhere to go and nothing to do.

I knew no one; all were strangers. I had been cut and released, discharged and dishonorable, a meaningless, excommunicated mercenary who now fended off nothing more than the rats. An arm that was once something, so adjoined with body, which could fight furiously and do and embrace and create, but thus severed, was but hapless limb that could do naught. I tried seeking other lists, grounds old and familiar, searching for some modicum of value, some scrap on which to survive, but this was the eating of so much carrion after I had sampled and esteemed the sustenance of royalty. I spit out the taste of the ashes and sobered myself on something clear likewater, but with bite, something I admit, like Absolut.

I then turned to literature to restore, and in a moment of wretched weakness distinctively chose Jonathan Livingston Seagull so as to remember what it was like to be part of a high-flying commonwealth, but soon threw the hellish narrative across the room and stomped up and down on it with great leaps of force and disgust as much for its prose as for the unbarring of an emotional fusillade against the foolhardy protagonist who had fed himself the poisoned rhetoric of the isolationist. Balderdash and tripe! Garbage and bad magic. All of it. Oh Wallace-1, how I love thee for true and how I have been yon to the other side and have seen dreary eye-fulls of it, and it is frightful and stygian, and I know now where the greenest pastures be and where the starry-eyed lords dwell. On the steps of the altar I claw.

Couldn't stay away.

## How I learned to stop worrying and love The List.

Jonathan May

This is a poorly structured and poorly designed treatise that may be of no importance or interest to any but its author, and then again not even that. But it is the truth and maybe real truth is more interesting than the most interesting lie. Or maybe not. I want to describe how I first found David Foster Wallace, and then how I found Wallace-I, and why I'm writing this essay.

An easy introduction to why I'm writing this essay: I should be writing grad school research statements, but I can only do something painful if I have something less painful to do. This essay is somewhat painful, but less painful than grad school research statements. More later on why I'm truly writing this essay.

My first true encounter with David Foster Wallace, by way of his works, was with the mighty *Infinite Jest*, softcover and damaged in a subtle and long-undetected way, picked up on a whim in the discount bin of my university bookstore, and practically accidental and quite possibly judged as adequate reading material by its cover. It was not my first overall encounter, though it was the first conscious encounter. I say this because seeing the book shortly before Thanksgiving of 1999 and shortly before the pending 6 hour Amtrak voyage from Philadelphia to Hartford, Conn., made me flash back to days past, in the 1996 of my high school's junior year (the actual scene in my mind even now is vivid though incorrect – all these events took place at a dining room table in a dining room we had not lived in since 1994 at the latest, but the scene nevertheless happened) when I saw mentions made of this gargantuan and intriguing New York and thought very briefly how wonderful it sounded and how my once-imagined career as a novelist was not likely, since I for the life of me couldn't even fathom writing something so incredibly huge. It even scared me to consider reading it, and, well, to be honest there were lots of things on my mind at that time like thinking ahead to college and being the best high school upperclassman I could be and all the reading and homework that in retrospect seems still like quite a lot of work, and well it never even crossed my mind that I would spend the considerable sum of \$25 or whatever it was for pleasure reading. I was brought up firmly in the habit of library reading and hadn't really started buying my own books and even public high school texts are loaned for free, so the notion of spending money for a book was a little strange. I even think I saw the *Entertainment Weekly* "it's too long" review, though I don't really know how that could have been since I don't think we got *Entertainment Weekly*. The important thing is I knew of some really long and impressive book back in 1996, but I didn't know much about it.

And then here in the waning days of 1999 is a very attractive book in the discount bin of the university's book store and only 15% off, but a deal is a deal and it's a long way home and I've got not that much time left before the train leaves and I need *something*, so what the hell, I buy it. And if I recall correctly I read maybe 15 pages or so but was more distracted by the prospects of thanksgiving and undoubtedly the overcrowded Amtrak train – it's not inconceivable that this was one of the times when it was actually too crowded on the train for the conductors to pass through and collect tickets and we were piled in the aisles and anybody who decided to tote out a 1000+ page book and try to read it was going to have to push a lot of elbows and get a lot of

stares. So it sat, and maybe got looked at a few times during the break, and on the train ride home, and in the remaining month of classes and tests and final projects.

But then finals were over and I hadn't yet gone back home for Winter Break and I started reading and after the somewhat normal frustration of those first pages the first time through it was like a switch had tripped. I was *hooked*. I was reading sometimes 100 pages a day, and not bothering so much to hang out with friends, go to blockbuster movies, or pretty much anything else that I normally would do. You know how when you like someone in that certain special way you tend to find similarities between the two of you? "Oh, wow, you like pepperoni pizza? Me too! That's so cool!" We had that going on between us, IJ and I. And truth be told there isn't a whole lot we have in common – I don't play tennis, I didn't live in Boston, I'm not famous, I'm not addicted to much of anything, at the time I didn't use footnotes much, etc. But I knew that we were meant for each other.

The proselytism nature of me w/r/t IJ was only in its infancy, and hadn't yet become the serious problem that it is today, where I somehow cannot bear to know somebody for more than 3 hours before bringing it up. But I felt the need to tell my good friend Marco about this wonderful book I was reading. He was semi-scornful outwardly, but I think he found it intriguing nonetheless. And he wasted no time in making fun of me when we ventured to a book store in those post-Christmas days and lo and behold there was a remaindered hard copy version of IJ for only \$3, which put my lousy 15% discount to shame. He of course made fun of me again. I don't know how long it took Marco to get going, but we'll leave him for now, though with the express intent of returning, since the real glory of IJ – the leading of me to Wallace-I, is entirely due to Marco's influence.

Instead I should note that it was during this mad read that I somewhat sheepishly discovered the fatal flaw in my copy of IJ and the curious mystery regarding it. So we're all on the same page about how on the initial read through of IJ the opening scenes can seem fractured and maybe a little all over the place, randomly changing perspective, venue, storyline, etc., right? In retrospect that doesn't seem to be the case – everything makes more or less perfect sense. But on the first read through, without the benefit of perfect knowledge, it can be a little crazy. Okay, I just want to establish this is the truth. Because my discovery of the fatal flaw is rather embarrassing unless you're behind me on the convolutedness and why maybe if something doesn't make sense the erstwhile reader will just stick through it. Because here's the thing. At about maybe page 500 or so I went online to see what people had been writing about this fantastic thing and lo and behold came across the IJ scene index. I don't think it was Steve Russillo's, which is at <http://members.aol.com/russillosm/ij.html>. The one I remember was in table form. It was this one: <http://www04.sunydotchess.edu/english/oneill/Infinite.htm>.

Interesting side note before I continue, and I'm putting it in the main text instead of footnote form to both delay the inevitable embarrassment forthcoming and well, let's say to honor DFW's changing style, which has moved on from footnotes, though I still love footnotes. That being that ever since that fateful day that I'm describing above, which was the first time I searched for "Infinite Jest" in a search engine (pre-google, I believe) all searches for that phrase, usually without quotes (and at a certain point always google, natch) return IJ-related pages up front, with

Nick Maniatis' Howling Fantods page at numero uno. That, as of 12/2/03, is no longer the case. Part of this is that Nick went and got himself a domain name, and links have probably not been updated enough to point to him again – even "howling fantods" doesn't get him at 1. But another part is related to The War, deliberate capital T and capital W. Recall that the original name for military action (bestowed in that hurricane sort of way) was "Infinite Justice" which we at Wallace-I jumped on at the time as being too funny. This was quickly changed but some of course remembered and Lo! a satire web site critical of the war and Bush &c. called infinitejest.org was created. It now commands the top and fifth spots in google's list. While I'm all for satire, here's hoping IJ doesn't fall out of the public psyche completely.

Back to me at the computer. I found the grid of scenes to be welcome, because I of course had trouble parsing the first 200 or so pages or at least had trouble placing them into context I hadn't yet read, and was happy to do so now. Some scenes had been forgotten by me, since I didn't consider their relative importance at the time. For example, the progression of Joelle down Boston streets and passing by a cardboard cutout with the tape in its maw was most likely completely overlooked by me at the time. Anyway, what really caught my eye, though, was the scene taking place in 1960, and described as "James Incandenza's father narrates, addressing 10 yr old Jim. Discusses Marlon Brando, tennis, and his own father's reaction when he blew out his knee at a match." I couldn't remember that at all. Not a whit of it. How was this possible? Did I sleep-read through a section? Did my bookmark fall out and get replaced in the wrong area?

I whipped out my copy of IJ and thumbed to page 157 and found something quite curious: *Page 157 did not exist!* Nor, for that matter, did a chunk of 30-50 pages. Odder still, the gap was between *two back-to-back pages!* As in, the pages that surrounded the gap were printed on a single sheet of paper, and the missing section would have to be forced in between the pulp in order to be restored. I no longer have the copy to detail specifically what pages were missing, is the reason for my inexact knowledge of the chunk size. But it was certainly sizeable. And I think the sections interrupted were not related, adding to my further sense of shame. I could tell you that I figured the page numbering jump was intentional, or the scene shift was right in line with all the other rapid scene shifts, or maybe that the jump was between two ETA scenes or something. Nah, no such dice. I didn't notice the page numbering, the scene jumps aren't *that* erratic, and for all I know the jump was mid-sentence. I just plain washed over it, cause I likely wasn't paying attention all that much until the book warmed up. That's what embarrasses me.

That bit of head-hiding over, I found an email address for Back Bay Books and sent them a nice letter asking if we could perhaps do an even swap. Several weeks (maybe not that many weeks) later they sent a very nice response and a new book and I didn't even have to get rid of the old one. Of course, knowing that I had skipped text did bother me in the meantime, and while I don't have perfect memory here, my thinking is that I read Marco's copy to catch up on the sections that I had missed so I didn't have to stop IJ altogether. I'm fairly certain that I was done with it before I went back to school. A few things more to say about the mysterious page-missing copy of the book – despite being 30-50 pages shorter than the full version, *the two books were of negligible difference in width.* I stacked them side by side. The covers are the same, after all, and if one was shorter than the other the cover would have to be mangled. So what gives? There were no extra pages in the mangled copy. Nor was the pagination (except for the aforementioned

omission) any different. To this day I have never solved the mystery, and I doubt I ever will. For as I mentioned, I no longer have my original copy of IJ. I lent it to a guy I didn't particularly like – he was dating a girl I liked – and I distinctly remember moving him out of his dorm room (long uninteresting story, but note the self-torture I put myself through!) and it being left behind and it was undoubtedly tossed unceremoniously into some school dumpster by cleaning staff. So the mystery copy is gone, and I don't know what pages specifically were missing or if the paper was a different weight (my only explanation) or what caused this IJ-from-another-dimension to exist. But it did, and if not for it, well, none of this.

Thus was I initiated into the world of Wallace, and thus had I initiated one other. Of course, my immediate desire was to read the thing again, but the rational mind told me that was ridiculous – who reads a book twice in a row? Actually, I had done such things before. Growing up my favorite book was *The Trouble With Jenny's Ear* by Oliver Butterworth (who I always imagined as looking like Mr. Weatherbee, the principal of Archie's Riverdale High), author of *The Enormous Egg* and other children's favorites. I may have read that book close to 100 times and I'm certain that at least two of those times were in a row. But that was a long time ago, and that was a much shorter book (which, I'm sad to report, is out of print now). Plus school was back in session, and I never have time for fiction in school. So IJ went on the shelf, and over time I would start recommending it to people here and there. And I would take it down and read a passage whenever I wanted to distract myself from studies. I usually used the complete copy, naturally. The incomplete copy didn't get much use until it was abandoned. Eventually I gave in and read the thing again. And by now I'm on my third read – the ultra slow Wallace-I group reread. By now my copy is very dog-eared. The lamination on the cover has started to peel (and I'm a picker, so it's more peeled than it should be). Notes, mostly from the second read, are in the margins, making the text rather unloanable. I've as such bought copies for others a few times. And most notably, IJ sits in the reference section of my bookshelves, nearest my computer, alongside the dictionary and whatever computer science text is useful at the time. Such is its position in my life.

Other Wallace has been acquired and read as it was encountered in book stores. Mostly all good, though none of the same life-changing level as IJ (though the essay on prescriptivism/descriptivism in Harper's is a close second). But more influential than IJ (or maybe as influential) is Wallace-I. How did the list come to me?

That summer Marco mentioned he had joined an email discussion group. I was skeptical – that seemed excessive for me. But he persuaded, and I joined. Briefly. Probably for only a couple of months. I posted exactly twice under my school's email address – most likely I gave up shortly thereafter because I was away for the summer and only checking my email remotely, and these inboxes have a way of filling up quickly. I liked Wallace and all, but I didn't need swarms of email discussion to further clutter an already cluttered inbox. I tried again that fall – I lasted another month, never posted, and had to sign off when the burden became too great. There were lots of Janice Miller/Jeff Boscole wars then, and I was aghast that someone could be so verbose and so meaningless. The individual words made sense, but I was in a dense forest. This scared me and I couldn't continue to bear the horrors.

But Marco continued on, and would occasionally mention new music or a new author he had learned about through Wallace-I. And I was interested, though still was reluctant to join. Even after Marco convinced me to come to New York to hear this new Icelandic band called Sigur Ros. Even after I was regaled with the joys of the Wesleyan University stage production of IJ. No, I only heard about the list second hand.

Until I graduated, later that June. By then the list was in a stabler state and being out of college, I needed a connection to cultural awareness. I've finally gotten that a community can be built through digital correspondence. It's a nice little break from the daily grind, and when there are flame wars or just too many posts, and the list becomes a burden, I can skim. Honest, I can.

I have a confession to make.

I don't actually like the writing of David Foster Wallace.

In fact, I loathe it. I only got through *Infinite Jest* by the expedient of literally tearing each page out of the book as I finished it, wadding it up and sending it sailing across the room. At the end, I had the world's biggest pile of packing material, and I was seething. You may ask why I continued. It was a little like watching a slow-motion train wreck that I couldn't tear my eyes from. I also confess to maintaining a foolish hope that it might actually get better. About the best thing that happened is that it ended prematurely, no doubt when the author worked his few ideas completely into the ground and couldn't think of any more.

He turned out to be too technologically illiterate to have his own e-mail address (doubtless to avoid reactions like mine), so I searched the Web for someone at whom to vent, and discovered a mailing list actually devoted to discussion of his work. Fools. I signed up prepared to lay the list bare with blistering sheets of flame.

But it never happened. Because after only a few days, I came to a startling realization: no one else on wallace-l likes the writing of David Foster Wallace either.

Oh, sure, they occasionally rouse themselves to feeble discussion of his latest bandanna, or whether he's still a virgin. But of all the newsgroups, mailing lists, and Web boards in which I have participated, this one is the least likely to stay on its ostensible topic. Other boards inevitably drift off topic. But people are apologetic when it happens, and quick to insist that any digression of more than a couple of messages be taken off-list. On wallace-l, people actually apologize when they mention DFW.

That's what kept me on the list for six years. wallace-l is my link to the zeitgeist, at least as represented by young (or young at heart), literate, culturally eclectic types. We sigh over music, fight like rabid dogs over movies, get way too passionate over trivial television shows. I have learned about other authors (ones who can actually write), obscure bands, twisted visual artists. I've amassed a large collection of seriously weird-ass URLs.

The list evolves. New personalities blaze like supernovas and burn out. There seem to be only about thirty people who post at any given time, with hundreds lurking in the background, perhaps amused, perhaps appalled. For a couple of years, I couldn't post, due to some glitch in the configuration of the list. It didn't matter. I read each day's installment faithfully. It sure beat working, or beating the bushes around my office for someone to talk to.

The only reason I've signed up for this reader is to get a nicely-typeset and bound collection of thoughts from list members. The juvenilia and justifiably obscure material from Wallace at the back of the reader will join my collection of packing material.

In fact, I think that if Wallace didn't exist, we would have had to invent him, to give us an excuse to talk to each other.

It's a good thing he does exist, though. I never thought I'd say that. But it did save us some work.

Prabhakar Ragde  
14 November 2003

## THE HOWLING FANTODS

by Nick Maniatis.

The Howling Fantods began after I'd read Infinite Jest as a simple links page in March of 1997. Initially most of it was thrown together in a hurry in various computer labs at the Australian National University.

I decided to name it something unusual (and something at the time I thought was unique to David Foster Wallace, silly me.) so 'The Screaming Fantods' was born. I was emailed with the correction a few days later.

Being quite competitive, I wanted it to be more comprehensive than the other David Foster Wallace sites around at the time, Andrew Sandley's and Bob Wake's. Turns out that Bob's 'Reviews, Articles, & Miscellany' became a great link resource for The Howling Fantods, and Andrew's site slowly died away. I guess the initial competition kept the news flowing in though.

There have been a few highlights and one big lowlight running the site:

### Highlights:

- The first time I was asked if I'd like to include a postgraduate thesis. This section has now expanded considerably.
- The brief article and interview that mentioned The Howling Fantods in some Chicago newspapers in June 1999. It resulted in heaps of new visits and some real publicity for a small Australian run website.
- Direct email contact from (different) people, who will continue to remain unnamed, confirming that 'Neither Adult Nor Entertainment' and 'Mr Squishy' were in fact by David Foster Wallace. I was requested not to confirm that they were by David Foster Wallace and encouraged to suggest that they were very, very, similar in style. Hopefully there'll be more tip-offs in the future, as long as they aren't like the 'Oblivion' one that came from a reliable source, but just never got published in 'Esquire'
- The excellent 'Infinite Jest first draft' comparison essay by Steven Moore. It was wonderful being able to share it with the Wallace community.

### Lowligh:

- This news item on September 12, 1997. "Open City: The Age of Anxiety is Vol. 6 of a suspect a series published by Distributed Art Publishing. It is listed as having the authors DFW and Mary Gaitskill. It is NOT YET published... more info soon."

This was interpreted by some people as a combined work of David Foster Wallace and Mary Gaitskill. The problem was that this got back to David Foster Wallace, and he mentioned how unreliable and dodgy the internet is (my words) and quoted the the Mary Gaitskill thing. Ouch.

Umm, so that's it. It isn't terribly easy to make a website sound interesting.

<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Acropolis/8175/dfw.htm>

# It's No Jest. My Love for You is Infinite

Carol DeLucia

## The Book

It was Mother's Day 1996 and my husband had given me INFINITE JEST as a gift. Our daughter Lilly was 8 years old. On the inside flap he had written, "its no jest, my love for you is infinite. Happy Mother's Day Honey." I had been reading previews and reviews of it for weeks. It was hailed as the literary event of the decade if not the millennia. I couldn't wait to get my hot little hands all over it. I was not prepared. In college I had been in a James Joyce honors seminar. Reading ULYSSES had been very hard but, ultimately rewarding work. This was not college and this book was hard work. And it was structured weirdly with 3 interweaving story threads. I kept wanting a plot and more tidiness. I put it down after the first couple chapters.

A few weeks later I picked it up again and began following just the halfway house thread. His understanding of addiction was truly astounding. I have treated a lot of addicts and once worked in a rehab for 10 months. Amazing reading. And I loved the footnotes and all the science and drug notes. Then I read the tennis academy and Incandenza thread. More addiction, more neurotics and psychotics. Filled with unforgettable characters and stories --my own private Daddy -- Shiny Prize Kentucky..All the word games...Madame Psychosis metempsychosis..incandenza..hal. Halo..the inflatable lungs at the academy.. Ortho-the darkness-Stice... Avril..the grammarian..the green babies. It was all a wonderland bursting with life and poignancy. An imagination that so enthralled me.

Finally, the Canadian Wheelchair Assassin thread..Now, I was ready and it became my favorite part. When I couldn't sleep I would review the rules and protocol for "The next Train." Sets of certain numbers of boys all over the province who were selected and when a train came..who jumped first..the glory of surviving "as a paraplegic" in a wheelchair ready to be a commando for your country. Priceless stuff.

## TheWallace-l List

Later that year I joined the Wallace-l list. Probably the brainiest, most-well read group of people in the US. My biggest fear was that they would discover I was a dummy. The list was funny, enlightening and mostly always engaging. I got to know listers from Scotland, England, Finland, Australia and all over the USA. I love the Wallace women just love them. I've become friends with Amina and Maria both from LA. We have met in NY and talked face-to-face. Wallace-l women are very smart and sexy. I am still forming my theories about Wallace-l men.

## The Husband.

My husband never liked DFW. He'd refer to him as 'the wise guy.' Said he was a 'big pain in the ass showoff.' But he was very curious about the list. If he came home and I was watching say, DRACULA 2000, he'd say something like'ya think your Wallace friends watch that stuff?' If

something in the news or media really grabbed him he's ask me to find out what the Wallace list'gang' had to say about it. I often read IJ to him during long drives. He had a love/hate relation to the book. He got used to me calling him into the bedroom to hear 'just one more great bit' in IJ. In early 2001 when he was getting sicker I often read him to sleep with IJ. When his breathing was hard I sat with him and told him little stories from IJ...The architecture of the Academy or the FM station where Madame did her show...Orin flying into the football stadium as a ? bird.. Lyle...anything that popped into my head. He died 2 years ago Dec. 19. INFINITE JEST has a special place in my heart.

### The Kid.

Lilly practically grew up with IJ in the background. Sometimes I'd just pick the book up and read where ever I landed "Are you ever going to be finished with that thing?' she'd ask. She read ASFT and loved it. She got it. And she went on the list. I was so proud. It lasted until she got to college and then she said,"mommy my mail box is full of these people who write nonstop about everything." So she jumped off the list. She said she couldn't take it plus, she said, they (the list folks) were a little too arrogant and pretentious for their own good. Her daddy's child.

### Legacy

I have persuaded exactly no one to read IJ. And I have tried. When someone asks about my favorite book and I say IJ they cock their heads and say "what, I've never heard of that." Hopeless. I have read it 3 times cover to cover. DFW's picture is in my office mostly as a reminder. Do good work every day. Be disciplined. Use your brain. It's there a little bit because it is a very cute picture. Depending on my mood I tell who ever asks that he is my son, my boyfriend, or, my brother. He certainly seems like family.

**OUT OF, OR FURTHER INTO?:  
ON BEING A RABID COLLECTOR  
OF RARE WALLACE SPOOR**

Jesse Hilson

Perhaps the only thing related to this phenomenon (i.e., rabid collection of rare Wallace) that is worth documenting for you is the nagging sinking feeling that it would probably be so much better and healthier to just wait until Wallace's next collection legitimately comes out, that it would be better to let the anticipation build in a natural, normal way, than it would be to do as I do. Which is to say, to cut off all anticipation at the pass and hunt down the little snippets and nodules of Wallace's oeuvre that appear in various little journals and things all over the country.

Would it be better to wait until the next honest-to-goodness Wallace collection from Little, Brown comes out than to shamelessly enlist a phalanx of middle-aged ILL ladies in the basement of the local university library in the obsessive search for the latest bit of Wallace spoor? Can we agree that it would be better if we did not hunt down complete strangers on the World Wide Web and yank them aside into cyber-alleys like some kind of junkie, hitting them up for Xeroxes of the latest Wallace aperçu?

Until scattered pieces such as the ones eventually to be printed and bound in the present (quasi-legal?) volume are formally collected with Wallace's stamp of approval, I will always feel a little uneasy and guilty about impulsively tracking them down and gathering them into the scary little tan binders in my attic. What does it say about me that I have never once read any issues of the *Colorado Review*, *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*, *Western Humanities Review*, etc., other than the ones wherein Wallace's stories and things were published? In some ways, the surgical precision of search capabilities offered by LEXIS/NEXIS and the like might be seen as doing damage to the vitality and circulation of small literary magazines, since those rabid fans of Writer X can, instead of sending away for and buying the backlog issues of *Obscure, Struggling Magazine* and offering some financial support to it, merely run a search for everything by X, swoop down like a voracious seabird and take what they want from pp. 20-42 of *Obscure, Struggling Magazine*, and leave the rest unread. A simplistic view of things? Perhaps. But if those of us who collect Wallace want to avoid being vile, careless dilettantes, it might be good to examine the possible net results of our actions.

Re: the subject of obsessive-compulsive collection, on the bright side, and in my defense, at least I can say that I'm not one of those individuals who travel from city to city, stalking the back rooms of sci-fi conventions, compulsively collecting those wrinkled Klingon forehead-prostheses from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, the ones that are fiercely bid over at auction and sometimes go for over \$1,000 a piece.\*

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\* I have always wondered: how would a person display those foreheads, without it looking just like a bunch of hardened puddles of dogshit?

It is hard to predict how I will feel when, for instance, *Oblivion: Stories* is published next spring and I inevitably turn to the contents page to discover that I have already read everything featured in the book, several times over. But I wanted this pre-emptiveness, didn't I, when I raced forward ahead of the rest of the pack and gave the sad-eyed women in the basement of Milne Library the go-ahead to contact Cornell U.'s ILL people and have "The Flexicon" or "Another Pioneer" or "Peoria {4}" faxed to me immediately. Wasn't this what I wanted? How dare a collector complain of their own collection's completeness once they have finally obtained the final piece in it, and placed it lovingly in its rightful position within the whole? Isn't this the resolution of all our readerly desires: a neat, bound collection of everything by Wallace that has always remained messily out of reach? So are we now currently headed out of — or further into — the crater of our obsessive compulsion to collect everything having to do with DFW?

Having touched on the obligatory moral quandaries of being a collector (quandaries that a mini-essay such as this one demands), let me shift gears and say that I'm looking forward to finally reading Wallace's book reviews of Acker, Arenas, Austin, Fiederspiel, and Martone, as well as the pieces of fiction "Solomon Silverfish" and "Crash of '69" (if they can ever be located and retrieved from the murky depths of the world's library's periodical sections). But then let me shift gears back again, and say that perhaps at least one Wallace story should be intentionally left there, in the shadowy obscurity of the library stacks, the same way the Ark of the Covenant was purposefully left boxed up, for whatever foolish bureaucratic reason, in that top secret warehouse at the end of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*: out of reach, mysterious, suspended in tantalizing ambiguity, its mere presence driving all nearby rodents insane. Incompleteness is not such a bad place to be.

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\*+ Of course, in lieu of the pleasure of reading Wallace for the first time in collected form, there will always be the endlessly persnickety and much-looked-forward-to diversionary matter of establishing exact textual differences between how stories/articles appeared in magazines or periodicals and how they appear in collected form (for example, "Mr. Squishy" as it appeared in *McSweeney's* #5, and how "Mr. Squishy" is going to appear in April 2004 [specifically what will happen to Terry Schmidt's ricin-making instructions, passages which are somewhat crucial to the story's plot, IMHO — will Little, Brown publish a book containing ricin recipes in today's counter-terrorism security climate? And if they edit the ricin business out, how will this impact the suspenseful atmosphere of the story as a whole?]); on the textual difference note, cf. "Brief Interview #20" (the interview about the Granola Cruncher's confrontation with the serial killer that DFW said was one of his favorites) as it appeared in the collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, with the substantially different and more formally convoluted version of the story which appeared in *The Paris Review*, Fall, 1997, #144. Exactly how substantially different the two versions are, I leave to my fellow rabid spoor-gatherers to determine.

## **Collecting David Foster Wallace In The New World**

Hi, Everybody! I'm a bookseller by trade and a collector at heart, but certainly not an expert on this topic – any estimates here are strictly my opinion and could be totally bogus. That said, let me note right up front that I bought the signed 'Special Advance Copy' of *IJ* in 1997 for \$125 and don't regret a penny of it, even though I could certainly get one for less than that right now. Sometimes it's not so much about what you paid or could sell it for as how cool you think it is to just have *that* piece on *your* shelf.

So I want to talk about relative value and rarity of DFW books, but first some notes on book collecting in general. I called it 'The New World' in my title because the last 10 years have just completely transmuted how second-hand, out-of-print, and rare books are bought and sold. What used to be a relatively cozy world of dealer catalogs and book shows is now a 24/7 virtual marketplace, etc. etc. Example: say it's 1994 and I'm a collector of modern first editions, looking for a copy of *Girl With Curious Hair*. I probably know a few dealers, one of whom might have a copy priced at \$25-100 depending on their personal evaluation of DFW's current and future collectibility. (At this time, \$25 is the generally accepted low end price for collector copies of not-yet-famous-but-might-be-someday authors.) If not, my only real resource is a specialist periodical called *AB Bookman's Weekly* (now, sadly, defunct), in which – if I'm a subscriber – I have the privilege of placing a classified ad in the *Books Wanted* section advertising my desire for this fine volume. I wait 4-6 weeks for publication of same and then hope/trust/pray that a dealer who has a copy will spend the HOURS each week that it takes to go through the fine print ads AND notice my want AND be sufficiently moved to send me a response. Oy.

Now it's November 15, 2003 - I hop on abebooks.com, check out ebay and maybe half.com or amazon and I get my choice of dozens of copies under \$15, including at least three in the \$10 range that look to be cloth firsts with mint dust jackets. Better, yes? I take the primary lesson to be one of market efficiency – access to information via the web revealed a surplus of supply (copies of GWCH) previously hidden from buyers, thus reducing the price. (For more on this topic from an authority in the field check out <http://www.lopezbooks.com/articles/fabs.html> -- Ken Lopez is one of the top rare book dealers in the U.S., and his web site has lots of great nuggets for collectors.)

Not surprisingly, the rarest DFW book is his first, *The Broom Of The System*. Sister companies Viking and Penguin published simultaneously (1987) in runs of, respectively, 1300 for the cloth hardcover edition in dust jacket, and 25,000 in trade paperback. (This is actually a pretty respectable number – lots of first time authors would love to have a print run of 25,000+.) How many of either edition actually survive in collectible condition is an open question; neither is particularly hard to find IF you're willing to fork over the relatively big bucks. \$100-300 will get you a very nice signed copy of the paperback, and \$1500 or so the cloth equivalent. Sidenote: unsigned, fine copies of the cloth are going for \$500-1000. Given the plethora of signed DFW books in general, he doesn't seem to be that hard an autograph to get – save yourself a few hundred bucks and get it signed yourself. Sidenote 2: what is the most 'desirable' signature? To

me it would be a copy personally inscribed to me and dated (the closer to publication date the better) by the author adjacent to signature. Some collectors prefer what's called a "flat-sign", i.e. just the author's signature, the theory being that resale value will be diminished if the inscription is to one other than the potential buyer.

Also for sale in multiple listings are paperback Advance Reading Copies, of *TBOTS*, in fine condition for \$300-500. So here's another interesting sidenote digression: what are the most desirable states for collectors? If it's the earliest state possible, then ARCs – which are issued prior to official publication, although still run from the same print proofs, albeit with slightly altered cover copy – should be more desirable than the so-called first edition. I'd be surprised if Penguin printed more than 1300, although I really don't know. I think the reason collectors price the cloth first higher than the ARC is simply that cloth is a) still considered the more 'prestigious' format; b) considerably more durable in a purely physical way that matters to collectors.

The true rarities are the states that precede ARC and official publication, i.e. manuscript (the Holy Grail) and the in-house copies that editors, marketing people and others might circulate, usually labeled uncorrected proofs, followed by galley proofs (last chance for corrections before printing). So-called review copies are generally either ARCs or standard first editions with cover letter from publisher laid in. So if there are any uncorrected proofs still around of *Broom* I didn't see them for sale. If one did come on the market and was still in any kind of condition I wouldn't be surprised to see it at \$1000-1500; I'd expect it to be considerably more than that if signed by DFW or – best case – annotated with corrections in the author's hand. In this case it really becomes a quasi-manuscript and the sky's the limit. Personally, I think it's somewhat remarkable that I could go out right now and buy a fine first AND a nice ARC of this major author's legitimately scarce first book for about a grand. If DFW comes out with another novel that rocks like *IJ*, look for these prices to double or even triple up in a hurry.

One final note on *Broom*: I don't see any evidence that Penguin ever went to a second printing of the paperback. Probably around 1990 or so the 25,000 copies they initially printed were all sold and somebody made the calculation – based strictly on sales data – that a second printing was unwarranted, and thus let the book go out of print. The title has been reprinted twice since then (both times by HarperCollins; 1993 and 1999) but is now out of print again and tough to find anywhere under \$15. Which I think is a shame – these \$15-and-up prices for paperback reprints aren't because they're collectible, it's because people want to read the book and can't find a copy to buy. With modern publishing the way it is, this isn't an uncommon situation. Reprint decisions are based strictly on whether the publisher thinks you can sell at least a few thousand copies a year, and if you don't make the quota year in and year out you are **history**, pal. Reminds me of the situation with another of my favorite authors, Harry Crews – it's just an ass-rankling sin that fine novels such as *All We Need Of Hell* and *Karate Is A Thing Of The Spirit* are out of print. Some of Crews' work has laudably been kept in print by some southern university presses, and I think that (or a smaller, non-commercial press) might be the only way many worthy contemporary novels survive in the near future. In DFW's case, I'm guessing that there are probably contractual or copyright issues that prevent this from happening with *Broom*.

*Infinite Jest* is, IMO, the other truly collectible DFW title. In this case I think a collector wants the work not so much for its inherent rarity but because of its preeminent place in literature. Ok – because it’s fucking brilliant, all right? And what you want to do (goes the theory most dealers use as a basis for pricing) is get as close to the original manuscript as possible. States of desirability again. So a first edition, first printing is worth more than subsequent printings. The signed advance copy I mentioned earlier was issued before the standard first edition trade publication, and in much smaller numbers (500 vs. probably 15-20,000), so it should fetch a higher price. And in fact I just saw one go on eBay for \$81, which is 2 or 3 times what you’d pay for the ‘regular’ first edition. But just for comparison, check out Steven Moore’s fine article on the first draft version of IJ at [http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Acropolis/8175/ij\\_first.htm](http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Acropolis/8175/ij_first.htm) Moore describes being handed a Xerox of the first draft in late 1993 – apparently the third (and last?) such copy DFW gave out for editing suggestions. Any one of these three copies would, I suspect, fetch in the low four figures or higher were they to come up for auction. Much higher if they were annotated or personally inscribed by Wallace. Moore then notes that (after DFW added several hundred pages over 2 years) Little Brown issued a first state galley in two volumes, followed by the signed advance copies in the fall of ’95 and then publication in Jan. ’96. I would estimate the 2-volume galley at \$1,000-1,500 if you could ever find a set. Aside: when buying first editions of IJ, check the back flap of the dust jacket and make sure that William Vollmann’s name is misspelled Vollman – subsequent printings of the dust jacket corrected this mistake.

The rest of DFW’s books, at least in late 2003, are fairly easy to find, in collectible condition, at very reasonable prices. Are they still collectible? You bet – just because they’re cheap doesn’t mean they’re not a fine addition to *your* collection. In the end, I think collecting is totally personal – if you feel good about the book and the price, then that’s what it’s all about. A word on condition, though – I’ve always found that it pays to buy the best physical copy you can afford. The book as physical object has rewarding characteristics that are amplified if the book is still in pristine condition. So when you look at dealer catalogs, be aware that for most book dealers the term ‘good’ really means anywhere from totally beat to maybe only semi-ratty. Books described as ‘very good’ are generally in OK but not great shape – this is usually the grade applied to copies that show average wear and have some minor but no major flaws. Look for grading of ‘near fine’ or better to get a book that’s been truly cared for and retains at least some of its original gloss and crispness.

Well, I guess that’s about it. Feel free to email [plebar@allegheny.edu](mailto:plebar@allegheny.edu) with questions, comments, etc. I had fun writing this; hope you all enjoyed reading it.

## David Foster Wallace Murmurs in His Sleep: “I Have Reached the Mountaintop”

The sun rises and the light makes a difference to us human beings. Gives life. Makes things grow. Chases away clouds. It pours in through the window, is warm, and implies that while sleeping is something you've been doing, it's time to wake. Likewise, somewhere along the way, David Foster Wallace became my jarring literary wake up call — Infinite Jest, the sunniest of alarms.

There is little refuting that Wallace has amassed highly improbable levels of linguistic skill and lives an omnipresent existence within the realms of his own creative constructs. While many other writers have attained an uncommon level of proficiency, not many, or perhaps none, can match the *number* and *variety* of proficiencies Wallace has brought to bear as a writer. Along with that special grouping of talents, Wallace's writing carries an unwavering energy and consistency.

When I read *Infinite Jest* and think of its author, I envision a man sprinting the whole way through a 26-mile marathon, bandana blowing in the wind, arms and legs pumping, exhibiting the sprinter's lean forward to break the tape first, for from all angles, it seems that no effort had been spared, that his powers are limitless. It is this vibrancy of heart, this deluge purpose that fills every page. As a writer, I hold a deep appreciation and gratitude for Foster Wallace, having broadened the scope of my vision. I understand in new and dearer ways the power and beauty of the written word, and throughout all of my searching and experience, I have yet to find a book on par with *Infinite Jest*'s many virtues. Lines in the sand have been redrawn, old maps, discarded.

Writing exceptionally well is incredibly difficult: I know this because even writing poorly is not easy. There is phenomenal resistance at every juncture, and total capitulation at any point along the way seems reasonable enough. But a writer lays his self-actualizing cards on the table and struggles to prevail over a series of demanding and sometimes even agonizing trials. The biggest potential hurdle is also the most daunting: the possibility of readerly estrangement from a writer's work.<sup>1</sup> There are any number of ways to gaffe or fail, and every writer worth her salt has faced the challenges countless times. But of the writers who aim higher, of those who aspire to become the very best, there is an abiding search for excellence and singularity. There are those golden souls who consider even high levels of talent a form of mediocrity. Writers who esteem such high standards as true to the exclusion of all else, are the writers who become legendary.

“I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age... The gods had given me almost everything. I had genius, a distinguished name, high social position, brilliancy, intellectual daring; I made art a philosophy, and philosophy an art: I altered the minds of men and the colour of things: there was nothing I said or did that did not make people wonder... I treated Art as the supreme reality, and life as a mere mode of fiction: I awoke the imagination of my century so that it created myth and legend around me: I summed up all systems in a phrase, and all existence in an epigram.”

- Oscar Wilde

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<sup>1</sup> And then something powerful, mysterious and unfortunate happens: the writer's heart breaks a little though she's got no recognition of that hurt.

And so it is — that Foster Wallace is as good a writer as anyone who's ever picked up a pen. It wouldn't be, I don't think, a form of hero-worship to say that he occupies the same hallowed ground as men whose very lives represent ambition and mastery: Michael Angelo, Stephen Hawking, Dali, Seinfeld<sup>2</sup>, Mozart, Einstein and other constituents of this group's tiny, rarefied minority. In his own right, I like to think of Wallace as an embracer of paradigm-level thinking. I may run the risk of sounding like a "Wallace-head,"<sup>3</sup> and while there are worse invectives, my respect for him is neither that simple nor that tainted. When I say "paradigm-level thinking," I'm referring to a process that is rudimentarily deep, exactingly careful and internally profound, all of which are themselves a result of wanting, very much, to lay bare life's aspects and discover and rediscover, and then process anew — result-becomes-cause thinking. There are processes of celebration that are casual and typical, effortless and laconic. On the other end of the spectrum, however, there is a Zen (or Zen-like) application of self to purpose, which at some level resembles something of a spiritual experience. I use the word 'spiritual,' because to be spiritual is to be concerned with sacred matters, and the paradigm-level thinking I'm describing sees the world, sees events, sees writing, sees people, sees examination, sees purpose, as sacred, sacred in that it is worthy of genuine, toilsome, expansive contemplation. This ideological paradigm supercedes (it is both higher and broader than) standard and habituated modes of thinking, which accomplish the low aspirations of convenience, comfort and brevity. Because Wallace takes the exploratory, investigative high-ground in his affairs, both psychological and lingual, it is no wonder that the accolades faithfully follow or that his name is synonymous with excellence and distinction.

"I don't want to just mess with your head. I want to mess with your life.... I want you to miss appointments, burn dinner, skip your homework. I want you to tell your wife to take that moonlight stroll on the beach in Waikiki with the resort tennis pro while you read a few more chapters."

This spiritual-level cerebral activity is rich and eminent in Foster Wallace's collection of essays and arguments, "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again." This absorbing book is an anthology of several different kinds of writing and thinking, all of which are unified by the same process responsible for the numerous triumphs of Wallace's literary career. The book is in turns, funny, mentally stimulating, a breakthrough in artistic voyeurism, briefly autobiographical, academic and scholarly, written to be purely entertaining, a linguistic picture-book, an excursion into Wallace's own psyche, a social commentary, and the list goes on (Wallace's incomparable, sterling account of a week-long cruise is possibly *thee* best expository piece of its kind). But through every detour and at the epicenter of each foray is Wallace's powerful and unmistakable voice, parsing and culling the sights, sounds and subtexts of every place he'd seen or every person he'd met.<sup>4</sup> These brief histories of time are chronicled in ways that feels comprehensive, fully-formed and perfect. The book's unspoken suggestion declared with steroidal vigor is: "Wake up. Examine and observe as much and as often as possible. Zoom in. X10. X100. X1000 — until you find what's hiding deep within life's situations." Because of Wallace's power to scrutinize honestly and openly, and his

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<sup>2</sup> Humor me.

<sup>3</sup> My appreciation is relatively kosher — there are no shrines, tattoos, etc.

<sup>4</sup> No points to be deducted for his failure to solve the mystery of how his bedding was mysteriously changed/redone whilst aboard the Nadir.

desire to deliver, part and parcel, another world to his readers, the resultant work is one that far outstrips every other instance of journalism I've ever seen.

Likewise, it should come as no surprise that his fiction evinces a nature all its own. It incorporates the best elements of his non-fiction and builds them to higher stratum. Wallace paints such a superior, advanced and exacting portrait of the world he's created that *Infinite Jest* begins to feel like a truly alternate reality. Every page is part of a new, powerful rendering of a "fictional legitimacy."<sup>5</sup> When I put the book down, I know that Hal still exists somewhere in a parallel universe killing forehands down the line, or flipping through the pages of his much-loved dictionary trying to commit yet another phrase to memory; and I know that Orin is unwinding in his hot tub drinking champagne and flirting with some gorgeous cheerleader, and that Don Gately is telling Lenz what time it is yet *again* — it's all a majestic world, imaginary, complete, vivid, 360°, 3D, 4D. The world of the novel gives our capacity to dream and invent a powerfully expressive medium and in the hands of an exceptional writer, its power grows to engender a feeling that is beyond describing.

"The most original of authors are not so because they advance what is new, but more because they know how to say something, as if it had never been said before."

-Goethe

But what is most thrilling — how Foster Wallace's engine *really* roars is via his trademark: beatific literary / lyrical virtuosity paired with a vocabulary that's massive and otherworldly. Wallace's command of the language is so complete and nimble that the perfect sentence never seems to escape his grasp, and there's the haunting feeling that much of what he expresses couldn't be expressed better *by anyone*, and is a flawless and faithful representation of his exact linguistic intention. The results are gorgeous, powerful and gifted. With such low degradation of idea to articulation, he's able to surgically interleave aspects of his personality<sup>6</sup> into the text. After all, the more precise writing is, the more reflective it will be of a writer's tastes and preferences, and the purer the distillation. But for all of Wallace's genius, he still retains a friendly, non-patronizing, fresh and animated air about himself and his work — you wouldn't mind having the guy as a neighbor or comrade. Thankfully, high-minded doesn't have to mean "high society."

However, not everyone sees Wallace's work in quite so rosy a fashion. Detractors will long and loud crow that he's exhaustive, that he overwrites, over-details, elaborates too much and too often. However, perhaps because Foster Wallace's hyper-real approach to prose attempts to construct an entire universe, there is the accompanying requirement of abounding, adjoining elements.

"The universe is made of stories, not atoms."

-Muriel Rukeyser

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<sup>5</sup> To coin a phrase, fiction that seems vastly more real than contrived

<sup>6</sup> Perhaps as much as any other writer ever has. Wallace has created his own distinct style (without offering up readability as a sacrificial lamb). Certainly, one of Wallace's triumphs is that he, himself, is so inextricably on the page, and that his *personality*, dictates not only word choice, but vantage point as well (far too often writers allow convention to dictate their ways and means).

Some writers lose their fire and vigor over time or they've gone lifetimes without it, but Wallace keeps the primal scream alive in his writing, and is an effective social critic (in ordinary life and in the lives of his characters), who, with a scalpel's precision, examines life subcutaneously. This striving to reveal and unearth seems to originate and renew from a source that can't be satisfied by conventional narrative techniques or even regular, human levels of narrative effort. No one besides Wallace himself can know whether it was fanaticism or greed or love that rendered his talents, but whatever the source, it is good fortune that the drive and ambition were there and in healthy reserve.

"The most durable thing in writing is style, and style is the most valuable investment a writer can make with his time. It pays off slowly, your agent will sneer at it, your publisher will misunderstand it, and it will take people you have never heard of to convince them by slow degrees that the writer who puts his individual mark on the way he writes will always pay off."

-Raymond Chandler

It's incredible, but it actually means something to be David Foster Wallace. He's managed to become vital and relevant having introduced the world to a bold new literary style. It is also likely that he is the catalyst behind urging the savvy and willing to reevaluate what writing, reading and thinking really are. As is common knowledge among his devotees, Wallace is now sowing tomorrow's crop of young writers at California's Pomona College where there is a groundswell of glowing praise and positive reception for his professorship. But whether or not David Foster Wallace, as a person, as a writer, has an essential function depends on one's view of literature. Erasmus remarked "When I get a little money I buy books; and if any is left I buy food and clothes." Emerson also underlines literature's importance: "Our high respect for a well-read man is praise enough of literature." Like Erasmus and Emerson, we, fellow Wallace-Listers, hold that good books are of paramount importance. We retrospectively realize that life without them would be a kind of empty. On the other hand though, Jean-Jacques Rousseau spat "I hate books; they only teach us to talk about things we know nothing about." So it's a mixed bag, isn't it?

A writer's proved a special kind of magic when you simply must put the book down and reflect "Is it possible that this guy is *this* brilliant?" You start to think about the man behind the words. You begin to realize in a vivid way that writers are not commonplace people: what goes on in the world within them is unusual, beautifully surreal, apart from the whole. But within the world of writers themselves, Foster Wallace is unusual, and puts that same force-field of distance between himself and the somewhat unlucky typicality of writers who define and create the mean value. He wants to progress the progressive, he works much harder than hard, he is atypical of the atypical. And therein lies his appeal. Therein lies his Greatness. Through his travails he has not only brought forth parallel worlds, he has helped to raze and rebuild this one, yours and mine.

Friends, enjoy the reader.

## Après-garde: mass media in the works of David Foster Wallace

by Maria Bustillos

One of the most interesting avenues of inquiry opened by the novel *Infinite Jest* and by David Foster Wallace's works in general is the subject of movies and mass media, and their true role in American history. Mr. Wallace does not attack this question *de haut en bas*, in the self-congratulatory manner of a Sontag or a Paglia; quite the contrary. In an essay on David Lynch, he reveals himself to be an unabashed and sophisticated movie lover, giddy with excitement when invited onto the *Lost Highway* set ("I'm a fanatical Lynch fan from way back"). In the essay *E Unibus Pluram*, Wallace unblushingly describes why fiction writers love television:

American human beings are a slippery and protean bunch in real life, hard as hell to get any kind of universal handle on. But television comes equipped with just such a handle. It's an incredible gauge of the generic. If we want to know what American normality is - i.e. what Americans want to regard as normal - we can trust television. For television's whole raison is reflecting what people want to see. It's a mirror [...] This kind of window on nervous American self-perception is simply invaluable in terms of writing fiction.

Wallace paints himself as a fellow member of the audience, and so renders his observations as immediate and forceful as if he were in the theatre seat beside you.

Within the context of Wallace's novel, *Infinite Jest* is itself the title of a film so perfect that it is instantaneously and fatally addictive—the 'entertainment' that will kill you like a lab rat on cocaine. The fate of this dangerous film, its role as a terrorist weapon and the strange, tender story it tells form the central motif around which the novel is built. There's a lot to talk about here, but I'm going to focus on a single theme: Wallace's presentation of the pursuit of pleasure/entertainment as harmful has a strong Puritanical edge that illustrates really well the current position of American intellectuals *vis à vis* mass media. The paradox of being caught between love and loathing of the media provides a valuable insight into the nature of Wallace's art.

Nothing could be a more obvious target than the empty-headed commercialism of Hollywood. Yet those who make movies—art directors, screenwriters, actors, and cinematographers, as well as directors—are among the most highly respected and highly paid artists among us, and it is rare to come across an educated American who hasn't seen *Rashomon*, *The Seventh Seal* and the films of Almodóvar—and, often as not, the latest big-studio blockbuster. Whence this disconnect, and why is it important?

Let us go back to the 1960s, when David Foster Wallace was growing up, and America was in love with France. French films, cuisine, wine, philosophy and fashion were enjoying enormous, awestruck popularity. *Film Comment* buzzed with the achievements of Truffaut and Godard. Women rushed to get themselves thrown out of restaurants for wearing Yves Saint Laurent's racy trouser suits. By the mid-70s, pretentious American teenagers were not only watching *À bout de souffle* at the local art theatre, we were also smoking Gitanes, ordering omelettes for dinner and idolizing

Sartre, Gide and Céline. American intellectuals looked to Europe and particularly to France as the source of all elegance and enlightenment.

Much of this was due in particular to *la nouvelle vague*, a French film movement of the 1960s that produced the dirty, sexy love children of existentialist philosophy and American *films noir*. These brutally candid films suddenly made American confections like *The Sound of Music* look completely demented, and the French influence spread rapidly among younger Hollywood filmmakers. Coppola and Scorsese would soon turn the stark realism and intensity of the French New Wave right back into the gangster films it came from. By 1969 America was well and truly lying back and thinking of France, and the X-rated *Midnight Cowboy* won the Oscar for Best Picture.

These developments aside, however, the effects of existentialist philosophy and by extension, the French New Wave largely took the form of cultural criticism, without reference to the more hopeful and transcendent elements of self-determination and the effective exercise of free will. Its nihilistic aspects struck a chord with young American intellectuals depressed by Vietnam and by Nixon's downfall. The word "decadence" came into vogue, and the decline of civilization was both decried and embraced as brassieres and draft cards went up in flames. In this if-it-ain't-broke-break-it atmosphere, pleasure seeking via drugs, orgiastic promiscuity and quack schools of enlightenment such as EST flourished. The phrase "The Me Generation" was coined.

Many who grew up in the 1970s thus experienced some form of what the English used to call 'too many cakes': a repletion of pleasure, with pain in the form of addiction, depression or disease as the eventual result. Thoughtful observers had begun to condemn this generational hedonism right around the time that David Foster Wallace came of age. Too much pleasure is bad, it was said. Too much pleasure makes you sick, eventually—the essential mindlessness, the passivity of "turn on, tune in, drop out"—the lying back and taking pleasure of the 1970s was like eating a whole bag of potato chips. Afterwards, you realize that maybe it wasn't such a good idea.

This conclusion resonated down to the roots of American Puritanism hidden deep within even the wildest and most permissive of American societies, a rock-solid substrate of self-denial which holds that *any* pleasure is bad, that pleasure *itself* is bad. (The true philosophical and religious underpinnings of Puritanism are more complex than the basic repressive-Roundhead image we are conjuring here, but there is no doubt that the latter is a real and intractable element of American life, and one that can be traced all the way up through 17th-century Salem, the 1918-30 Prohibition and the 1950s HUAC, and straight into the Patriot Act.)

This paradox of hedonism/guilt formed a significant kink in the *Weltanschauung* of the post-boomer generation of Americans, the one to which Wallace belongs, the one which doesn't appear to have been assigned a letter: Gen W, I guess you might call it. *Infinite Jest*, a homegrown product if there ever was one, fairly percolates with these themes:

This is a U.S.A. production, this Entertainment cartridge. Made by an American man in the U.S.A. The appetite for the appeal of it: this also is U.S.A. The U.S.A. drive for spectation, which your culture teaches [...] A U.S.A. that would die - and let its children

die, each one - for the so-called perfect Entertainment, this film. Who would die for this chance to be fed this death of pleasure with spoons, in their warm homes, alone, unmoving [...]

The danger of 'spoon-fed' passivity to entertainment-addicted Americans recurs throughout *Infinite Jest*; and yet Wallace, a child of the 70s, doesn't just love movies, he clearly believes they have something valuable to teach us:

The sitting in the dark, the looking up, the tranced distance from the screen, the being able to see the people on the screen without being seen by the people on the screen, the people on the screen being so much bigger than you, prettier than you, more compelling than you, etc. Film's overwhelming power isn't news. But different kinds of movies use this power in different ways. Art film is essentially teleological; it tries in various ways to 'wake the audience up' or render us more 'conscious.' (This kind of agenda can easily degenerate into pretentiousness and self-righteousness and condescending horsetwaddle, but the agenda itself is large-hearted and fine.)

(from the essay *David Lynch Keeps his Head*)

In this way, the puritanical guilt that comes of seeking pleasure through mindless entertainment is countered by the equally 70s-derived American concept of 'art films', and particularly 'foreign films' (but not 'movies') as High Art, and therefore worthy and improving. One sees the kink in action when American intellectuals of our generation struggle, in a way that their European and Asian counterparts do not, with the question of what constitutes suitably eleemosynary fare. Given the puritanical basis of the conflict, it's no surprise that they can still be seen flocking dutifully to all the most painful and boring 'foreign films', e.g. Tarkovsky's *Nostalgia*, which is about as entertaining and pleasurable as a root canal, and which is therefore guaranteed to be as good for you as a fat-free potato chip.

The big shock, though, is that despite Wallace's own dyed-in-the-wool American ambivalence regarding entertainment and the pursuit of pleasure, the distinction between 'high' and 'low' art, between 'serious' and 'fun', has been steadily eroding—and thanks in certain ways to his own spectacular influence. For Wallace can write with ease and brilliance about anything at all, including rap music, *Twin Peaks* and the ickiness of luxury cruises. *Infinite Jest* teems with the stuff of pop culture: twelve-step programs, *Hill Street Blues*, 'adult undergarments'. But if nothing is beneath Wallace, nothing is above him either; he subjects the heroes of calculus and of poststructuralist theory to the same meticulous analysis with which he examines the baton twirlers at a state fair. American culture *toute entiere* provides the torrent of grist for his mighty mill.

Wallace's concern with the whole of the motley apparatus of our shared reality represents a clean and delightful break from the neurasthenic aloofness generally characteristic of 'serious' literature in our time. Wallace is himself not the most approachable of writers; he can be hard to read, with his stubborn insistence on honoring pretty much all forms of discourse, and all at the same time—whether hey-man jocularity, excruciating pedantry or the patois of drug culture, he brings it all on in an ungodly pile. Nevertheless, he and certain of his contemporaries have succeeded

in undermining the foundations of the ivory tower of American letters, flooding the intellectual landscape with the brilliant light of an unbridled curiosity. It's all good, he seems to be saying: and it really is. Those of us who were feeling weak and consumptive on a steady diet of the limp, cool, insubstantial delicacies once uniformly supplied by the literary establishment now feel themselves revived, and equal to anything—even going to the movies (any movies!) free of guilt, with minds open, ready and willing to gain in understanding. The populist, for too long dismissed with a superior shudder, has come into his own.

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# Other Math

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1.
  - —Grampa?
    - Joseph? Come in.
    - Can I come in?
    - Come in. Sit down.
    - How are you feeling?
    - Fine, fine. Fine.
    - I'm in love with you.
    - How'd you get in here, son? Isn't there school today? What day is this?
      - I'm in love with you, Grampa.
      - In love with me?
      - Yes.
      - What do you mean?
      - I mean I'm in love with you, Grampa. I want only to be with you.
  - With only you.
    - What the heck do you mean, you're in love with me?
    - I. . . .
    - Is this a kind of joke? What day is this?
    - No, Grampa.
    - Why, then, I love you too, Joe. You're a good boy. You always make your Gramma and I proud. We want to be with you, too. Why, soon as I get out of here. . . .
    - That's not what I'm talking about, Grampa. I'm in love with you. You're all I think about. Your image lives and moves inside me. I value

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David Foster Wallace's first novel, *The Broom of the System*, was published simultaneously in 1987 by Viking and by Penguin Contemporary American Fiction. His collection of stories and novellas, *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*, will appear from Viking in 1988. Wallace is currently a visiting writer at Amherst College.

your interests above my own. Your presence affects my nervous system. I live for your touch. I want to be with you. Always.

—I'm married. I'm married to your own Gramma.

—Yes.

—We're both the same sexual gender.

—Granted.

—What day is this, Joe? How'd you get up here?

— . . . .

—I'm old, boy. I'm sick. I've only got half a colon. My face hangs off my skull. I can tell from the way my mouth tastes that my breath smells like rotten egg salad.

—Side issues. It's you I love.

—You discussed this with your Dad?

—I haven't told anyone, sir. I've carried it inside me. Alone. I felt I should talk to you first.

—I see.

—Right.

— . . . .

— . . . .

—What grade are you in, over at school, Joseph? Are you in the fifth grade?

—Sixth grade, sir.

—Sixth grade.

—Yes.

—And you're in love with me.

—Yes.

—I think I just don't know what to say. I don't even know the day of the week. How should I know what to say?

—Don't say anything, Grampa. Just sit. Just like that. That's perfect.

2.

—So wait, Gramma. Let me get this straight. Two girls and a man are walking, and one of the girls is holding hands with the man, and that means she's involved with the man, and likes him a lot, and the other one isn't, but is just along?

—Yes.

—And if they changed, and the man started holding hands with the other girl, that would mean that now the man and the other girl are involved? And the first girl is now just along?

—Yes.

— . . . .

—Let me fix your necktie, Joseph. The knot is off to the side.

—And do they hold hands just to show who's involved with who? To show it in public? Or do they feel something, when they do it?

—It's unclear. It's unclear whether things are felt, or whether it's just a demonstration.

—You don't know?

—No.

—You've never been in a hand-holding situation?

—No.

—What about you and Grampa?

—Your Grampa's hand wasn't a hand. Your Grampa's hand was a dead thing, attached to his wrist by the same force that flung everything toward him, dead and brown, a flat, square conveyor of chill, an extension I never recognized and certainly never held.

—I see.

—There. Learn to keep the knot in the middle, Joseph.

—Do you think maybe that's why we didn't cry? I saw everyone else crying.

— . . . .

— . . . .

—Life-Saver?

—Thanks.

3.

—Did your Dad ever tell you how, when he was back in medical school, one of the fellows in his class fell in love with a cadaver?

—No, sir.

—This fellow, to hear your Dad tell it, fell head over heels in love with a cadaver. He stole it out of the medical school's cadaver department. He took the thing with him everywhere he went. Even out in public, to the theater.

—This is nothing like that, Grampa.

—Your Dad says this fellow would talk to him about how he was head over heels in love with this cadaver. He told your Dad he could live with the cadaver's being so quiet and passive all the time, because the cadaver was gentle, and portable, and it was always there for him.

—Nothing like that here, Grampa. Totally different type of thing.

—I'm thinking your Dad says they had to put that fellow away somewhere. Said he just couldn't live without his cadaver.

— . . . .

—Do an old man a favor and don't stare like that, son.

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**HEADLINE:** Matters of Sense and Opacity

**BODY:**

To the Editor:

I enjoyed Jacques Barzun's essay "A Little Matter of Sense" (June 21). Doubtless the inflated jargon of some contemporary criticism perpetrates a kind of double fraud: a critic trying to sound smarter than he is; a critical piece whose demands on readers' patience and dictionaries are out of all proportion to reward. But there are serious problems in Mr. Barzun's position -one whose common-sense surface barely covers a reactionary and kind of reductive approach to the issue of "sense" in technical esthetics.

Literary criticism is itself an artistic endeavor, and will naturally sometimes sacrifice transparency for creative richness; literary theory, on the other hand, is a branch of esthetics, which is essentially philosophy, and is often engaged in honest efforts at such rarefied heights that things are going to get unavoidably abstract and technical; literary criticism and theory, by their natures, operate in dialogue with art, with each other, and with themselves; such a tangle of reference and referents cannot but lead to some occlusion and prolixity. It's the price of admission.

That there are serious opacity problems in criticism is clear. What ought to be done about them, and to what degree, is less so. "A Little Matter of Sense" was not rife with corrective options. We may indeed erect a primer-ish set of "sensible" critical terms and insist that good critics adhere to standard usage. Or we may, as readers and critics and writers, work to expand the semantic and esthetic horizons of the terms we now possess - as the late (and surely offensively oblique) Paul de Man did when he revolutionized theoretical discussions about metaphor and allegory by pointing to deep contexts of their use that no simple field guide to criticism could countenance.

Mr. Barzun's essay was funny, erudite and level-headed. Exaggerate his stance just a bit, though, and you risk getting a dull Ockham's razor. Not all theorists are trying to erect walls of impenetrability around the very stuff they're trying to penetrate. Some might just be trying to come to grips with what they love. With all his rhetorical power, Mr. Barzun might do well to write another essay, one for us young readers and readees, one about the value of cool-headed restraint in critical housecleaning. There's babies in that bathwater, dude.

DAVID FOSTER WALLACE  
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## /Solomon Silverfish/

/Solomon/

At 2:30, in the morning, in bed, Solomon Silverfish, secret Saxon, closet Celt, had for Ira Schoenweiss on the telephone two pieces of information. The first was that from the sound of tonight's matters the too-stupid-and-fat-even-to-start-on-how-stupid-and-fat-it-was ass of Ira Schoenweiss was still the ass of Ira Schoenweiss only because of being connected to his body by the very serious legal sling it was in. The second was that this sounded to Silverfish like Ira's third and worst DWI arrest in two years, and that what was Silverfish supposed to be, a superman? a legal performer of miracles? A bonus piece of information for Ira was that if Ira did not keep his mouth shut and that meant closed, especially to Zero Kretzman, until Silverfish could get there, then with his own two hands Silverfish would puncture Ira's body and solve everybody's troubles. Solomon said Ira knew him too well not to know that this was seriousness being spoken to him here about puncturing. Ira Schoenweiss said he was close to physical tears, was how mortified he was about the whole incident he was involving Silverfish in. Silverfish told him to stay put, that he'd be right over in such a hurry he probably would not even have time to dress or eat a little something. Schoenweiss said he was going to begin weeping any second. Silverfish said neither worry nor weep, that it was no real bother, then he cradled his bedside phone.

Silverfish sat up in his bed and slashed at the air several times with open hands, began bouncing up and down on his bottom on his mattress with anger, irritation, and general bother. The bouncing was also by the way sliding his pajama bottoms down to his ankles, which God forbid he should go to the 40th Precinct Police Station and confront Kretzman on such a matter in pajama bottoms.

And through filmy white Silverfish bedroom curtains, in the pumpkin-colored wash of a sodium lamp in the street outside, could be made out the perfectly straight line of Sophie Schoenweiss Silverfish, on her side, silent and slightly bouncing also, from Solomon's bouncing. Here was an IV needle secured in her wrist, a tube leading up to a stand beside her side of the bed, a Pyrex jar of glucose and Darvon and antimetabolites, all a clear consommé that now glowed dirty-orange in the jar and the tube in the light through the filmy bedroom curtains of the sodium lamp on the very quiet and just as respectable street the Silverfishes lived on in Skokie, a certain

part of Chicago. Silverfish sat still with his pajama bottoms at his feet and looked for a moment, maybe two moments, at the muted orange light that pumped down slowly into Sophie. From the end of her line of a profile, from her pillow, where more light lay, came Sophie's voice.

'So then it's Ira who's calling at such an hour?' Silverfish was out of bed in only the shirt of his pajamas. You could tell from Sophie's voice that she had not slept. Silverfish shook through a pile of clothes on a chair and found his yesterday pants from heaviness in pockets. Shorts luckily were still inside the pants. He smelled at his shorts and his voice came through them. 'So then it was Ira-the-I'm-too-important-and-sensitive-an-artist-not-to-mention-intellectual-to-obey-the-basic-laws-and-rules-of-life-we-are-all-expected-to-respect-and-instead-go-drinking-to-drive-around-the-city-so-drunk-I'm-legless-and-somehow-God-knows-how-it-could-only-happen-to-Ira-cracked-up-against-Kretzman's-car-right-in-front-of-the-Dempster-precinct-house Schoenweiss, may his large ass hang from the ceiling by the man's kishkas while Kretzman jabs at it with anything sharp he can find, the sharper the better, until I get there.' Silverfish found his shoes and two socks which who knew if they matched.

Sophie turned herself carefully on her back to look at the outline of Silverfish, who was tying shoes against the edge of the bed. 'Zero Kretzman's car? As in Mr. D.A. the prosecutor Kretzman?'

'As in Ira-I'm-constantly-in-middle-of-the-night-trouble Schoenweiss who my wife had to be his *sister!*' roared Silverfish. He leaped on the bed with the agility of such a younger person and straddled Sophie. He bit her on her shoulder. He snatched her wig from her night-stand and flipped it with ease of practice up onto the Pyrex IV jar, which tinkled and rocked on its stand. Silverfish kissed Sophie's sternum. He flicked at her stomach. 'Fat!' he hissed. 'Whose fat pink obscene wife of mine is the sister of a klotz, also by the way fat.'

Sophie was laughing as loud as she might. The sound echoed in her chest as in a system of wire. With her unconnected arm she felt at the buttons on Silverfish's top. 'You still have on a pajama shirt, Mr. fat-wife-klotz-relative-lawyer-on-a-mission-of-mercy Silverfish.'

'For Ira and Kretzman I should wear a tuxedo? Maybe also with tails? I should pretend this isn't a bother?' Silverfish felt Sophie struggling quietly to breathe under his weight and gently rose up off her, walked across the mattress with grace in shoes and went to his dresser for his keys. He found a tie by the keys and threw it around his neck. Sophie breathed and watched him in the dirty light.

Silverfish took his brush and turned to the outline of his wife's skeleton under the blankets. 'Listen, you're feeling of sound body? I can leave for a few hours?'

'Leave forever,' Sophie said. 'Save a plump painter from a life of crime in the penitentiary. The hospice person comes at ten to be at beck and calls all day.'

'I'm not back long before ten, there will be such trouble your Ira will be going through life with punctures!' Silverfish slashed at the air.

'Drive like your mind's on it, Solomon.'

Silverfish opened the bedroom door. 'The light on, maybe? A book to read? Television?'

Sophie smiled and passed her hand over her scalp. 'No lights. I was doing such sleeping tonight. A log.'

'A log?'

'A piece of inanimate wood I was like,' Sophie said. 'I was sleeping like a dead thing.'

'So be an inanimate log again,' Silverfish whispered.

Sophie smiled. 'Some practice for the real thing maybe?'

Silverfish narrowed his eyes at her in the half-light. Sophie looked at him. She began to apologize in whispers only he could hear. Out in his car in the street down the block in the dark between lamps, Alan Schoenweiss cleaned under his thumbnail with his tie pin.

'Hush and sleep in that order,' Silverfish said to his wife. He went away downstairs to the kitchen to eat a little something. Sophie stared into the space of the half-open bedroom door and now at a faint glow of warm white from downstairs light that mixed the sodium from the window into a minty orange. She breathed.

/Alan/

INSTRUCTIONS TO A PERSON WHO ASSUMING IT'S ON LEGITIMATE BUSINESS LIKE I ONLY WISH MINE WASN'T SO LEGITIMATE MIGHT WANT TO IDENTIFY MR. SOLOMON SILVERFISH, THE LAWYER, AND MAYBE EVEN FOLLOW HIM TO THE 40TH PRECINCT STATION OF THE CHICAGO POLICE DEPARTMENT, CORNER DEMPSTER AND PROSPECT STREETS, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS, AT 3:00 IN THE MORNING THIS MORNING.

Keep eyes peeled for mint-condition\*and God knows very expensive to maintain red 1961 Thunderbird, from Ford, convertible, with snow tires still on, even on May the thirteenth, due to the fact that owner of car is deathly afraid of driving on snow in winter but does not care enough about the noise, not even to mention tread-wear, as against the bother of removing the tires just on account of a little good weather, since who knows even in May about snow, here in Chicago. This Thunderbird at night will often not have its headlights lit due to the fact that subject who is owner of car is *absent-minded*, and anyway could drive to the 40th in his sleep, which by the way before following too close take my advice that's probably close to what he's doing. Under same category of *absent-minded* see fact that subject in 1961 red Thunderbird from Ford is wearing the slacks to a very expensive and I have to admit very sharp suit, Marshall Field's department store's finest, on sale every Spring but better to get there early, and then but on top of this subject in such slacks is an old pajama shirt of yellow flannel

with a blue stain like from Dr. Rorschach on the front pocket, due to one time subject had pen in pocket at night which leaked in sleep. A tie is tied around the flannel neck of subject, tied the way subject often may tie a tie when he is sleepy and has tied his shoelaces with half-Windsors: yes, this tie is tied like a shoelace would be tied. Watch for dangerous swervings of red Thunderbird as subject tries to fix tie in rear-view mirror. Subject will whip at air like a disturbed individual with open karate hands when angry, as you can see he's doing now on account of previously-mentioned tie, and will be known to carry on with such threats as the threat to 'puncture' a person, and the threat that his hands as weapons are lethal things. Such threats as these will often be lost in rush of wind when convertible top is down, see for instance now. Also when top is down can be seen fact that this subject, who has the sort of male pattern hair-loss problem which your worst enemy doesn't get wished on him, grows his gray hair long and prodigiously on one side of the head and then combs it over to hide the baldness of a spot which that Kojak person on television would be proud to have for himself, except that in strong wind, like in a convertible, the hair gets blown back off spot and flies in directions, often straight out to the side and back of the person like half a halo, as if it wasn't a laughable thing to mention haloes w/r/t this subject this night may he burn forever in such a hell. But see that after wind or nervous gesturing has nullified careful combing job, subject's long hair will hang at one side of subject's face like a veil of some sort for the rest of the day, or night, obscuring subject's peripheral side-vision and forcing him often to hold his head at angles when he talks to you which these angles are so strange so often you'll want to say stop with the contorting and comb it over already!

But subject Silverfish with his eccentricities of behavior and dress and his loud voice like a train is, I'm told by people who know the difference, a man distinguished-looking for sixty, never mind the hair-trouble they say, who escapes every different kind of trouble in his life, Silverfish with a plumpness in his body made up for by a distinguished six-foot tallness and a bearing when walking which Mrs. Nussbaum his partner's wife says over vermouthe is 'princely,' and intense eyes that my lovely wife Orly says who knows what color they are on account of all you notice is that they are *penetrating*, and a forehead and cheeks and a nose like any person's got, and a chin that so what if it isn't the strongest chin ever attached to a person, it's covered up in a tasteful manner by a distinguished little beard, colored salt and pepper, connected around the mouth to a mustache of the same color, a facial-hair system which just covers the upper lip and then the weak chin, very distinguished, and little, like what you see intellectuals from Eastern Europe in black turtleneck shirts and brown sportcoats wear, on public television, except what would Barbara Nussbaum say if she was told that some fellows back in law school at the University of Chicago, which don't even bother asking if there is a better law school in the whole country be-

cause no, that some fellow-students and future attorneys of this nation claimed that Silverfish's little set of beard and mustache, which he had even then in law school, though less distinguished, but with the same chin trouble, that his little mustache and little beard and mouth all put together looked like a certain feminine part of the female anatomy, which if you take my meaning such a laugh from these fellows the drunk and maybe even back then unstable Silverfish would get when he held his head to the side and maybe even pursed his lips after wetting them, such a laugh at a 'resemblance' which, in fact of the matter take my word for it I was there, wasn't anything but the dirty products of young minds so dirty and filthy they should be ashamed and if I told you who some of them are and where they are now in important offices you'd strain ligaments running to the post office to write your Congressman!

But so a person following subject Silverfish at a careful but observational distance should watch for him to make his radical gestures with his arms like certain types of karate as he passes on his left the offices of the firm of attorneys Baum, Nussbaum, Schneewind and Silverfish, on Clark and Vine, a corner, where Silverfish is a senior partner, like I am too personally at my own firm of Alan Schoenweiss and Associates. 'So then where's Mr. Associates?' the hilarious Solomon Silverfish asks me every time he has had a cocktail in my presence. 'When do I get to meet Mr. Associates?' Subject Silverfish can be a boor, and though I have tolerated him for my sister's sake I have to say forgive me God I am not overly shocked at how things were exposed to turn out like my brother Ira was shocked. I have never trusted Silverfish like other Schoenweisses to their present and now future sorrow have trusted him, but to be fair like I wish to be fair in this matter I need to say that this Silverfish of a person does have good points to him, assuming of course they are genuine points and not theater acts like it turns out so much of him is. An example maybe of a good point is that as excessively much as Silverfish pretends to find his job as a lawyer at BNSS a bother, in actual point of fact he loves this job with all the heart in his body, you can even tell by the way his head with his flying hair whips here and there as he chops at the offices passing, because, and here I say with an old pride and affection so mixed now you have no idea, that Solomon Silverfish has deep respect for the laws of the United States of America and has also what has always seemed to be genuinely a desire to help people who are in a position of needing help. Solomon likes to help a person, it's true, any person at all, even such a person as the loathsome and very low-life Londell 'Too Pretty' Tyson, a young shvartzer of the pimping profession who Solomon has gotten out of the hot water with legal skill and maneuverings on so many occasions don't even ask me to count, and who has done Silverfish a favor or two himself over the last month though thank God not what I can imagine you're imagining, how much worse that would be even than what Silverfish has done to our Sophie and our family that

took him in on pretenses that now we know very well thanks to a certain cobbler were not true pretenses, that nestled him under the wing of our family like a trusted family member, and what he's now doing to the possibly final dignity of our Sophie, may she get better soon all on her own despite the fact that her husband is a fraudulent goy who now cannot even wait for certain people to God forbid maybe die even before he is flinging himself into the arms of a younger woman, younger enough even to be a daughter to all of us. But he likes, I admit it, to help most persons, and even now as we in the Schoenweiss family disown him forever and blacken our hearts toward even the sound of even the letters in his name, I admit he has what can be seen as a generous soul, to be getting up in the middle of the night to the prospect of not a dirndl skirt waiting but instead Zero Kretzman and my brother Ira, a fair dramatic actor in a pinch Ira turns out to be but I'd like to know what kind of artist? Of a person who sells paintings that a monkey could throw paint at a canvas for the same effect, who sells these paintings for good money to respectable people, some with degrees even, what is to be said?

But there are things very definitely to be said to my former in-law Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, I now will not even say his name, and Kretzman, who owes me such favors on his divorce don't even ask me to start on the favor-list, is ready to play his part like Ira and get \_\_\_\_\_ into a confined place that \_\_\_\_\_ knows means justice, not to mention truth for once, where he cannot but be confronted by his brothers-in-law which God help me lethal hands or no lethal hands warm words will be exchanged, believe this, and even one attempt to chop or puncture, don't even mention deny, will result in such trouble I don't even want to say. So let him pull up at the 40th, it's 3:15 in the morning and it will be 3:25 by the time \_\_\_\_\_ finishes his legendary \_\_\_\_\_ parallel parking procedure which has put an army of insurance men's children all the way through college, let him pull right up to the 40th with his hair and tie and shirt flapping, for it is time for a certain bearded dancer to pay a certain fiddler before a certain girl with a heart so pure and good I have no words for Sophie's heart goes possibly to God forbid to her grave with a troubled and deceived soul and a long life of unknown lies to press on top of her in the cold earth, which even thinking about makes a person want to murder the guilty and sob for the wronged, such is the goodness of this sister. For this sister there is nothing that Alan Schoenweiss would not do. Even cause pain. A brand new sun will come up, maybe yes on a scene of pain, of which I don't feel I am personally the cause so much as maybe the fulfillment. Who was it who said that the longer pieces take to come together the tighter they fit? Hopefully not the \_\_\_\_\_ person. It is time to face music and pay fiddlers.

/Sophie/

Sophie Silverfish finished being sick and got off her knees over the lazily flushing toilet. Before she changed her nightie she looked in the mirror at

where her breasts used to be, above the butterfly spread of her ribcage, which lately she'd realized how wise was the person who named it a cage. So she looked at where she wasn't. Two broad saucers of divot and, underneath, a mottled red activity as of rosy wire behind dull scar tissue and the spread, synthetic foundation for prostheses she would not use now even if Solomon had not forbade it. Sophie weighed ninety pounds, an x-ray image of a Sophie. The lumps at her armpits and groin and the points of her pelvis and elbows and knuckles and spine strained at the tight envelope of her sick skin like the buds of the horns of a deer. She could feel that what was her was shrinking smaller and smaller inside a body the more distant regions of which were becoming remote, spent, unconnected, finally jettisonable like the stages of a rocket. Often now her limbs seemed no more connected to her own person than the fluttering autonomous heads of a hydra, willful and recalcitrant and out of sync. Her beautiful head was a bright skull, a spatter of kelp for hair over just the ears and a smooth melon scalp stretched taut across like shiny wrap, then down into a washboard of lines on a forehead over lovely green Sophie eyes framed by rings of a black so rich and complete it seemed to have sunk into the sockets' bone. Sophie pressed a white finger to a black ring under her eye and tilted her head and smiled at herself.

A melting. A distillation into precipitate and dross. She was sinking into herself. Even more than the hurt, or the nausea, this was the feeling that was her cancer for her: the sensation of settling into the hard brittle inner frame of herself, a central frame that was nothing but black smoky bone held and connected by a gossamer constellation of white nerves and nodes, burning sick-bright with the heat of poisons she could not pronounce. Falling bit by bit into a dark still point that grew to be all there was.

Sophie could remember people with TB she had seen as a child. Theirs seemed now an elegant death. They thinned and coughed bright colors into delicate silks, paled and paled, became quartz and translucent, as if fading before the averted eyes of their world, transferring what they were to a somewhere else high and cool and delicate. Like angels they'd seemed, and the sheets of a distant cousin's sickbed boiled white, clean like wings should be clean. But if TB had been delicate, ethereal, otherworldly, cancer was dark and squat. Moist, hot and centripetal.

And technical! Who couldn't hate that you seemed to need in this day and age a Ph.D. even to die? That now the approach of the thing that wasn't life was something a person had to see and hear as well as feel. Enough was enough. How long she and her Solomon-who-she-loved had knelt with their ears to a frightful train-track of antiseptic steel, listening to a distant medical rumble that became a roar: cyst, neoplasm, suspicious neoplasm, lymphoma, malignancy, modified mastectomy, radiation, remission, recurrence, suspicious neoplasm, lymphoma with Hodgkins implications, radical mastectomy, lower lymphectomy, metastasis, radiation,

Methotrexate, Cytoxan, Failure To Respond As Hoped. The train was called Dying, it was the Dying Person Express, was what everybody but the smooth pink healthy doctors seemed to know. Solomon also knew, though he did not believe. The train was called Dying and the louder it got also the smaller in your field of true vision. It did not run you over like a penny on a track but shrank as it grew to be nothing but a roar that came from deep inside you, where there was only the growing heat of a boiling fight between polysyllables. Here was a train you didn't know was on you until it was too late to get free of the bright knife of the track, a knife that cuts you to show that the ear has been hearing itself, a knife whose thin side is also a mirror in which you see what you hear while it cuts what you are. While you sink and burn. A sickness not at all delicate was what she had.

And hurting. Sophie often hurt so bad, if Solomon knew who knew what he'd do. And sickness of the stomach! Her new out-patient medicine, overseen by the very kind hospice people, this medicine was not as bad as the old drugs, don't even talk about the drugs in the hospital, but Sophie was still sick with nausea almost all the time every day. Her muscles of her stomach were like an athlete's, like a rock, from the frequency of workouts over a toilet whose every curve, spot and stain she knew like an old friend; even the rhythm of the barely visible pulse of water in the bowl she felt like the spasms of her own heart and gut. The sickness was a horror. Solomon had even gone out and put himself at legal risk and gotten some marijuana for her, was how bad it got, the being sick. He got it from a young client, a Londell Tyson, who called himself also Too Pretty, such a nice and deep-down polite young man, you could tell, even if he did wear a purple hat with a pink feather from an ostrich and use language who a mother of a son who talked that way would cut her heart out from her body. And for the first few weeks back at home the smoking of the marijuana helped, there was something about it that killed the sickness, it even sometimes made her hungry and Solomon would straddle her chest and feed her sweets while she laughed. And it even, God knows why after so long like a dead thing downstairs, made her feel sexy, and the last sex of her life, she knew, would be those afternoons when Solomon helped her with a gentle finger, his other hand cupping his hairy chin while he smiled into her red eyes and she stroked his loose veil of uncombed hair with a trembling skeleton hand. But now the marijuana lowers Sophie's blood sugar way down and she gets almost a coma when she tries to smoke it. Sophie would rather be sick with stomach trouble than asleep in a coma all the time. Time asleep is time without Solomon. And time for Sophie with Solomon and for Solomon with Sophie is why they brought her home this last month. Time with Sophie is why Solomon neglects at the office practically everything but emergencies. Sophie is Solomon's life and vice-versa, is the way it is. Thirty-two years of such luck and happiness she did not even know how to begin thanking God on her knees. Time sick with Solomon is such better time

than time normal anywhere else, and for Solomon it's a vice-versa with a sick Sophie. This is all true even if Solomon won't really admit that Sophie is sick; or rather, that is, sick enough so that a sick Sophie Silverfish wasn't more than a match for anything the world could throw at a well person, including in such thrown things Mr. Solomon Silverfish the crazy attorney husband. Solomon played with the sickness of his wife in the frantic way he played with everything that affected him inside. He teased and tortured. Accused an x-ray Sophie of a violent fatness. Pinched her ear while he held her head over the toilet. Complained loudly of the salty wetness in his mouth when he kissed the silent tears of her silent pain at night. Did things to her wigs. Once drew a face with a smile and crossed eyes on her scalp with her lipstick while she slept. Sometimes used a place where a breast wasn't to hold his half a melon for breakfast in bed in the morning. To the outside party Sophie knows this seems unkind. What she also knows as his wife of years is that Solomon reserves kindness for people who he feels like need kindness because they are badly off. He is kind to people who he feels sorry for. And to Sophie Solomon would never do her the disservice of feeling sorry. Sophie knows that Solomon alone knows that a sick Sophie is still in every important way a Sophie, not a collection of sticks and tubes to be stroked and cooed at. And this, Sophie thought as she lowered herself to the bed in a fresh nightie and reached for two Saltines to eat because a person who throws up has to keep something in her stomach or she throws up acid, which try it sometime if you think it's fun, and reinserted the IV needle in the bruised yellow cribbage board of her wrist, applying tape back over with much skill and practice, looking up at the bottle of sugar and medicine with its crazy tilted wig of black hair in the burnt-orange sodium light, this, Sophie thought, was why her Solomon was a magic person now more so than ever, and why there was such a love for him in her soul that it was saving her even in very mortal sickness.

It is a hard thing to understand, the how of a thing. Solomon through this whole bad time has made Sophie come to feel and see that she is sick, instead of sickness. That what she is is not just what is in her. Sophie breathes so much easier to feel that for Solomon she will never die, and to this she adds an even better vice-versa where Solomon's life is concerned for her.

This is why Sophie will no longer take any more of the pain drugs than she needs to keep from carrying on and making things unpleasant for everybody. She wants to be with her husband and with herself. Solomon Silverfish, besides the not small favor of for thirty-two years loving her and making her the happiest woman on earth, has in her sickness helped Sophie to begin to see what she is and what she is not. He does not know he has done this thing, since since when does even the best magician know it's magic he's using on people and not the skill of just a person with quick hands and a clever tongue? Sophie thinks she knows now in her old age that

all magic is is a simple kind of relationship between a person and other persons around him.

She was in bed, in orange, two crackers eaten and washed down with warm flat water from her bedside glass. She breathed and closed her eyes against kinds of light, felt better. Her arm warmed again from what was being pumped into it from overhead. She waited for sunrise and Solomon, and she did what people do all the time while they wait. She remembered.

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Here's Sophie Schoenweiss meeting Solomon Silverfish in 1953 at a University of Chicago Law School benefit dance for the B'nai B'rith hospital of Berwyn, where Sophie is a student in nursing. Here is her slender and with-hair-like-wire brother Alan Schoenweiss, introducing Sophie to a quiet boy from Vienna, Virginia who lives in Alan's residence hall at law school at the University of Chicago. A boy who the humorous thing about him is that he just got out of the University infirmary the week before, he broke his jaw, also two arms and two shoulders, trying to win a bet with Alan and some other fellows that he could steer a car through the center of the campus using only his bottom. The boy who had crouched under him and worked the pedals was still in traction. Silverfish's arms in white plaster at this dance splayed wide out to the side like he's a psychotic hugger, or like Jesus on the cross in the New Testament; and eyes over the little goatee beard and glitter of wired jaw and sparse mustache and nose, eyes made of light, that saw something in Sophie Schoenweiss that she saw back. Sophie became socially connected to a temporarily disabled person. Interestingness? For interestingness sometime try dancing at a dance with a person with two arms broken and a lower back that no one says is in perfect health. Like carrying a store mannequin around a store, Alan and Ira say. Sophie laughs through a blush. But try to date a person who can't talk except for a mumble here and there through clenched teeth for six weeks! Try trying to find out about a person who your brother Allie says is an unknown quantity, a nice boy from the Tidewater part of the South, though with no accent like a Southerner, a serious boy and God knows bright and with a future but Alan warns her in all earnest caution maybe sometimes unstable or insane, sometimes roaring for reasons obscure, steering with bottoms and slashing at air and chopping at walls and rubbing his eyes with the frantic knuckles of a kind of squirrel over breakfast every morning of every day. Who knows Alan says about his orthodoxy, even orientation; Alan's never seen a yarmulke on the Silverfish person but in these days of confusion and Korea who can tell. Try being confused. Try falling in love with a damaged person who you don't even know what he's like when undamaged. But things working out for the best means maybe trying is the next person's problem.

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Sophie, in bed, drowsed, and bits of memory came at her in the flashing strobes of predreams. Here's a shiny ice storm, two newlyweds in a new

## Wallace

tract house in Cicero. Ice glittering gray in a crunchy March lawn, more wet ice falling out of a sky without color. Solomon watching it out a window, Sophie behind him with her arms around his thick waist, her hair a black waterfall down his arm, her chin on his shoulder, also watching. Pellets of dirty Cicero crystal hitting the hard lawn, beads bouncing and jumping hopping lively skittering ice. Solomon's voice, quiet, full of Silverfish dreams, his breath fogs a rainbow circle on the window as he stares at the jumping beads, whispers to himself grasshoppers grasshoppers grasshoppers. A young man she loves dreams life into ice while she plays with his ear.

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Here are Solomon and Sophie and Tata Dr. Otto Schoenweiss and Mama Mrs. Otto Schoenweiss at a cabin, in Wisconsin, by a lake, for a vacation. Sophie and Mama in the kitchen of the cabin. Mrs. Schoenweiss makes Sophie wear an apron but insists on being herself the roller of the dough. Hot lunchtime light through the window. Also through the window is the lake, and on the beach of the lake Solomon and Tata, finishing the long and serious walk they take every day of the vacation. Tata's hands behind his back, Solomon's waving in the air, turning in the sound of his voice Sophie can just barely hear. Behind the two walkers a persistent breeze turning the surface of the lake into elephant skin. The smell of her mother and dough.

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Here is pain. Physical and emotional hurting and distress. Here is Sophie, sick, minus a just removed malignancy and also by the way a breast. She is sick, drugged, white as a root, racoon-eyed, dreaming awake. Here is a wild thing raging around her hospital bed. Through a dullness of hurt and anesthetic Sophie sees Solomon Silverfish a mad thing, circling the room, slashing at walls and fixtures, spiralling in, chopping at the metal crib-bars of her bed, then standing over Sophie, screaming, carrying on, moisture from out of his mouth a colored mist in the bright white light. Slashing and tearing at his spot and loose hair twirling and roaring down at the figure of a sick Sophie over and over again the word *Remit!* *Remit Remit!* screams Silverfish. His half head of hair swinging wild as he does a ballet of rage, jumping to slash at a ceiling too high for lethal hands, hissing at tight-lipped nurses, shrieks at Sophie the word again *Remit!* Sophie's tongue is a dead drugged thing, a log of inanimate wood, she tries to call out to Silverfish *Remit what? What do I owe that I'll remit it immediately just tell but nothing comes out.* She is panicked beneath the medicine that flutters her lids and flavors the air she breathes. She is grieving, stricken, sick. She feels a heat of rage like never before coming off Solomon as if she has betrayed him with sickness and mutilation. But she does not feel her tears until they begin to boil. They begin to boil when Sophie through the haze realizes that her Silverfish is slashing and screaming at the cancer, not at her, that his anger and general fury are directed not at a breastless white-as-a-root Sophie but at the squat dark moist centripetal thing that took away part of her

body, that what the wild thing is screaming about is he's warning what is inside Sophie to go into remission already and leave her alone or there will be such ruckuses! Silverfish in his suit from Field's and slippers and gray veil is finally taken away by orderlies in quiet white, three men too large to be threatened by threats of punctures. Sophie lies here and her cheeks make hot lines of tears out of a thing neither joy nor sorrow, plus a swirl of drugs. This, the only time a Solomon Silverfish yelled at a Sophie Silverfish, the Solomon was not yelling with an anger at the Sophie at all; the yelling was at a thing in her, the train the knife the ear the track the shrinking and melting, the thing that was in her body with no invitation at all and no purpose even save an intent to harm. From this day in a metal crib with sheets boiled white and her other breast a ticking bomb and poison in many lymph nodes of her body Sophie knows and here she means really knows that for the Solomon-who-she-loves she is not just her body or what is inside her body. That sickness is a thing to have and not to be. A person on the street who Sophie said this thing to out loud might laugh at the silliness of this extremely simple thing's importance to this thin root-white woman. Simple maybe, but this is a thing that has saved Sophie's life when it most needs the saving. Here's Sophie hearing from down the long corridor fading calls of Remit! and feeling almost as though she and Solomon, or rather she-and-Solomon, will never really and truthfully die, no matter where or what they are. She feels through the promise of new pain and sickness of the stomach a brand-new sensation of cleanness and security, like a cold chill warmed, wrapped in a hot quilt on the lap of a mother who radiates a soft flame in gentle tones and tiny gestures of arrangement.

A thing that for her was magic Sophie was remembering as she drowsed in the orange light through the filmy window and her arm warmed with medicine. She felt the crackers in her stomach. It was 3:30 in the morning. Through a dream soaked the sound of the doorbell to the Silverfish home being rung by someone who came right in after, with a key. Mary the hospice person did not come early ever and did not ring bells at doors. Sophie heard real voices on the stairs.

*/Everyone Except Too Pretty/*

The first several minutes after sleepy Solomon Silverfish arrived in an interview room of the 40th precinct of the Police Department where Ira Schoenweiss was supposed to be being held and interrogated and browbeaten and prodded with sharp objects and weeping for need of Silverfish's help and skill, these minutes were full of such confusion! Alan Schoenweiss, brother of Ira and Sophie, a divorce attorney and also a scratch golfer, in just his socks on his feet, came silently sliding down the hall of the Police Station after Silverfish, and was still silently right behind him when Silverfish opened the door to the interview room and went in the way every attorney goes into a room as an attorney—looking at his watch. Silverfish expected to find an alone brother-in-law and client in a lit room and was

planning to devote at least several minutes to the giving of a good what for to Ira. Instead Silverfish found the room he stepped into a darkened room, with two faint shapes of persons at the interview table and a chair in a corner with a strange, predatory contraption curving over it, all dimly and also by the way eerily illuminated by the faint yellow brown of an old streetlamp outside, the light straining through what was on the window and iron screen. As Silverfish felt for the switch to the lights to the room, thinking he had maybe interrupted something by a mistake in directions from the desk sergeant, Alan Schoenweiss came suddenly through the door behind him, purposefully, even in socks, and shouted in Silverfish's ear: 'It's fiddler-paying time for you Solomon Silverfish!' which Zero Kretzman spoiled the drama of by jumping up from his place at the table and shouting at the same moment:

'The jig is up!'

so that Solomon heard nothing but a jumble of shouted nonsense about music and dancing. But the surprising shouting, on top of the surprising darkness, on top of the previous sleepiness and general bother, was enough to send Silverfish jumping and slashing at the new purposeful figure of Alan, who in the moderate darkness Silverfish didn't know from Adam, and Alan was forced frantically to skate to safety across the tiled floor of the room in his socks, and while Silverfish stood for a moment, puzzled about what was going on here in general, Zero Kretzman flew and switched on the switch of the lights and revealed himself and Alan and also the figure of Ira, and then Zero locked the lock of the door of the room with a key, which he put in his mouth and pretended to swallow, for the effect of symbolism. Silverfish looked at him, then at Alan, who was tying his shoes back on against the edge of the table, then at Ira, who was blinking often and rapidly behind his thick glasses and working his mouth with a thick pale freckled hand. Kretzman pretended to cough and put the not-really-swallowed key to the door in the watchpocket of his vest of his houndstooth suit. There was some silence after the cough while Silverfish looked around himself.

'An explanation, Ira?' Silverfish said, cocking his head to look through his veil of 1961-Thunderbird-loosened hair at Kretzman, who was leaning back against the locked door of the room with his arms crossed and his eyes narrowed to beady slits for eyes. 'Something about fiddles and jigs? You hit Zero's car so bad you need me and Allie both, and yet here's a squinting Kretzman locking doors and pretending to cough?'

'Sham,' Alan Schoenweiss said from his place at the table. He stood. 'Fraud. Charlatan. Pretender. Faker. Poseur. Blasphemer. Violator of trust and sisters.'

'Fiend we could say even?' Kretzman asked Alan.

'We could say fiend without hesitation,' Alan said.

'Fiend,' Kretzman said to Silverfish.

Solomon Silverfish, surprised Saxon, confused Celt, fingered his still-in-a-state-of-chaos tie and looked at Ira Schoenweiss. Ira was cleaning his glasses on a sleeve of his shirt. Alan had begun the angry Schoenweiss workings of cheeks and lips that were to be the physical overture to an exchange of warm words. Zero Kretzman went to the already-mentioned chair in the corner of the room, the curving predator thing over it now revealed to be a huge lamp of industrial strength borrowed from the Department of Mug-Shots. Kretzman turned on the lamp and the chair underneath became blindingly and whitely lit. Kretzman solemnly motioned Silverfish to this chair while Alan looked on expectantly and Ira played with his lip.

'Light?' Silverfish said. 'You call me from the middle-of-the-night bed of my wife to sit in light?'

'Do not dare to utter that word,' Alan Schoenweiss said.

'Light?'

'Wife.'

'Let him still say wife until we've heard him out,' Ira whispered. Silverfish fingered his little beard and looked at Ira. 'So it's my feeling that I get that no cars got hit by any brother-in-laws at all.' Ira looked down at his thumbs. Silverfish gave the air a slight slash. 'Such punctures are on the horizon for you Mr. fat faker Ira Schoenweiss,' he said.

'And do not speak in that manner,' Alan said quietly.

'I'm speaking in a manner I shouldn't speak in?'

The way a person speaks when he tries to imitate a Jewish person,' Kretzman said from the chair and lamp. He looked at Alan. 'It's okay to say imitate?'

'Imitate will be screamed so loud get your ears ready,' Alan said. He stared at Silverfish and motioned to the already-several-times-mentioned chair in its cylinder of light.

Silverfish stood and let the Schoenweisses watch his face go from confusion and slight bother to dangerous anger and a hint of maybe even rage on the way. Alan stayed awkwardly in mid-motion at the chair.

'In all pairs of your ears,' Silverfish said. He put some hair back over his head with a hand. 'I am a man sixty years old with a legal practice and a Thunderbird from Ford in mint condition. I sit in light for no man, is who I sit in light for.'

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The man has lived a lie with you for thirty-two years and seven or so months,' Mrs. Schoenweiss said, seated on the edge of the Silverfishes' bed, touching Sophie's cheek. 'The man has pretended to be a part of our heritage and history and religion and faith from the first time he set eyes on our Sophie. He has assumed and violated the trust of a family.'

'Worse,' said Dr. Schoenweiss, shaking his head at the bedroom window, from which he'd drawn back the white curtains. 'Worse,' he said. 'A culture. A people.'

'Worse still,' Mrs. Schoenweiss said. She leaned in and rested her other hand on Sophie's stick of a blanketed knee. 'A wife,' she stage-whispered.

The man turns out, according to Allie who who's known him to ever be wrong in important matters, to be really nothing at all,' Dr. Schoenweiss said. 'A Chaim Yankel. A mask. A set of proper behaviors at temple. Every Friday a cheerful face in our home. But behind that face of a mask, what?'

'A nothing,' said Mrs. Schoenweiss. 'A demon even maybe. You know "A goy bleibt a goy?" No longer even a goy. A who-knows-what. A young shaygets once who's now for who knows how long a non-existent thing, just a lie with arms and legs and eyes like animals and a quick tongue that who knows how many other lies he's told and lived and may God spare our Sophie the pain of ever finding out. Just the idea gives shudders.'

'You understand why we understood you had to know once we knew, Dr. Schoenweiss said, his face in dirty flushed color from the sodium through the window. 'For you to live an ethnic not to mention emotional falseness for thirty years. To be married and joined to a thing the only thing has is to be pretending it's a thing it isn't.' He turned to look at Sophie, sighed and felt at his thick white hair. 'It's been your lie too the demon of a goy has made you live. How lucky thanks to your brother Allie that you have a chance to renounce it all.' He looked at Mrs. Schoenweiss, who was nodding at Sophie. The Dr. cleared his throat. 'We come with the only too natural hesitation of parents. . .'

'Of concerned and loving parents,' Mrs. Schoenweiss said.

'. . . parents whose concern and love is strong enough so they are willing to cause maybe some grief here and some pain there to save a daughter from an unrenounced life of lies and pretending. Such agonizing we've been through over this you have no idea.'

Mrs. Schoenweiss was looking up with distaste at the IV stand's bottle of medicine with its head of lopsided hair. She removed the wig and arranged it gently on Sophie's head.

Sophie just as gently removed the wig and put it next to herself on the bed. She was staring at her parents. 'You're here before dawn in the morning to say my husband is a non-Jewish non-goyish demon of a Chaim Yankel?'

'Husband is now an improper word,' Dr. Schoenweiss said, turning back to the window. 'Let's instead generously just say person. And let's also say we're here at just the right time. Alan and Ira are talking to the person now at the Police Station with Mr. Kretzman's help.' He paused. 'They are going to make the person agree to an annulment.'

'Annulment?'

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Much of the confusion and trouble came from how Silverfish refused to sit in the white gush of light in the already-mentioned chair, and instead paced around the perimeter of the interview room of the Police Station like

a dangerous caged animal in a zoo, and from how Zero Kretzman—who was, if the truth gets told all the way, zero on brains as well as on charm and even legal skill, and who had never won a case to his own satisfaction against Silverfish, and who had also by the way gotten such a good divorce settlement via the extreme skill of Alan Schoenweiss you wouldn't believe it, and who was thus in a combined state of eagerness both to embarrass Silverfish and to help Alan Schoenweiss, Alan who was so angry his blood pressure was right now a dangerous thing—from how Kretzman kept following the pacing Silverfish around the room with a little pen flashlight from his pocket of his houndstooth pants, trying to continually shine it in Silverfish's continually averted face, for the effect of a partial third-degree; and this sort of square-dance of light and avoidance continued until Silverfish, who had to tell the truth never actually used the violence of his body on anyone, became so filled with extreme bother by the assorted questions and accusations and warm words, and by the Kretzman and light in his face, that he finally snatched the little flashlight from out of Kretzman's hand and tried to shove the thing up Kretzman's nose, succeeding however only in almost putting out Kretzman's eye for him, which made Kretzman yelp and sink to his knees on the floor in his suit with his hands on his face. Such a development as this took the wind out of Silverfish's surprisingly sensitive sails, and after spending some moments standing over the figure of Zero, who seemed on his knees to be at quiet prayer for his life and his eye, after some of these moments Silverfish found himself at the interview table across from Alan and Ira Schoenweiss at the border of the hot wash of light from the special chair. Momentarily they were joined also by Kretzman, with a red weal on his cheek and a trembling lower lip. Silverfish looked at Ira, who was staring blankly with eyes that were like an ant's eyes, magnified and non-human, his glasses were so thick.

Alan was all this time staring with iciness into the penetrating eyes of Solomon Silverfish. 'Of the explanations for your life of behavior I can think of two,' he said quietly, making under his chin the steeple of a church with his fingers. 'One. You coveted and lusted after our Sophie so badly that 1953 day at the dance that you were somehow willing to pretend to be Jewish for a lifetime of deceit and pretense.'

'Pretend?'

'Or two, and somehow even more sinister and disturbing, you were then and are now so. . . .' Alan broke the steeple and waved a hand in the air, as if the right word might maybe alight.

'Identity-less,' Ira whispered, looking at the ink-stain on Silverfish's pajama pocket.

Alan nodded. 'So identity-less in your life that you made up an identity for yourself even before you arrived in school at Chicago and insinuated your false person into our friendship and Sophie's affections.'

'Identity-lessness? Insinuation?'

'They know the facts of how you are not and never have been a Jewish person,' Kretzman said, smiling as much as his cheek would allow him. He cleared his throat. 'You were aware how Alan and Orly were in the South for golf for vacation before Pesach. Included in where they were was Tidewater County in Virginia. Alan was reading the phone book in the bathroom. Solomon Silverfish, Senior, he comes across. Cobbler. Maker of shoes.'

'Now semi-retired,' Silverfish smiled, nodding.

'But also not even semi-Jewish,' Alan said, making the steeple again and jacking his chin with it. 'Because a visit was paid by me to a certain shoemaker, as if private parties still make shoes these days.'

'But you should see his shoes, as I remember,' Silverfish said. 'Specialty shoes. No job or foot too large or small. Such shoes!' 'But not Jewish, and also by the way not deceased, and also of a religiousness too vapid and shallow to be seriously believed by me,' Alan said.

'Did you tell him about me? Did you tell him where Sophie and I are?' Silverfish leaned forward.

'Too much shock was in my body to say anything to this person I found before me,' said Alan. 'One of these so-called reborn Christians unquote in the South who get their religion from television and cassette tapes through the mail. He had a plastic cross that glowed in the dark on his lapel. Also a wife who sold cosmetics at the doors of strangers for decades and now drives a pink Cadillac.'

'A Lincoln,' Silverfish said. 'From Mercury. I keep a little track of Mom and Pop.'

'You led the family to believe these were dead parents you had.'

'We had a falling out as a young man. We rarely if ever speak. I never mentioned parents to you. Not mentioning is leading to believe in death?'

'Not mentioning that you were raised a non-ethnic goy with no meaningful religious face, that you came to our Sophie with a cultural identity roughly as interesting as a processed cheese product to give her for the years of her life?' Alan hissed, red in his face. He paused and calmed. 'You spoke as we do. This misled, this speaking.'

'Speaking? I read the wrong Constitution of America? This isn't a free country in terms of speaking?'

'Intent, Solomon,' Kretzman interjected, smiling a little with one side of his face. He ignored the glare of Alan. 'You spoke so as to imitate and mislead.'

'I spoke as friends of mine spoke. I was in Rome. I spoke as the woman-who-I-love-and-who-has-made-me-for-thirty-years spoke. I spoke like my wife.'

'You appeared at temple,' Ira Schoenweiss whispered. 'You responded to invitations to prayer. You performed mitzvahs, recited the Mairev. You danced the horah. You shared our seder table. You drank Mogen David and ate unleavened.'

'I was the companion and guest of my wife. Never once did I say anything about born Jewishness.'

'Did you convert?' Kretzman said. 'Did you go off by yourself to somewhere to convert? Is this what happened?'

'We all know that could not happen,' Alan sighed. 'Since convert from what? From pretending to being? He made his choice, no?' looking at Silverfish. 'He was choosing to mislead and pretend from the first. He was careful and crafty. We hardly heard him speak before he came out of his auto-accident casts and wires and our Sophie was already under his spell.'

'Fiend,' Kretzman said.

Alan did more sighing, rubbing of his temples. 'You even used your own name to deceive,' he said. 'You rode on the coattails of your name.' He glanced down at a notebook and file folder on the table before him. 'After slight research is done I find out easily that the name Silverfish comes actually from the idiomatic Old Saxon "seolfor-fisc," meaning roughly "Shepherd who has more affection for certain of his sheep than is in entirely good taste."' Kretzman snickered. Alan shook his head at Silverfish. 'So not only not Jewish, this name, but unsavory also. And "Solomon" according to the maker of shoes is not from the texts but from a certain Arnette Solomon, Civil-War assistant to General Robert Lee, crushed by his horse at the Battle of Antietam. Everything a falseness.'

'I named myself? All of a sudden I am responsible for names?' Silverfish chopped slightly at the interview table. 'What is this, Allie? Just what are we talking about here?'

Alan Schoenweiss leaned forward in his chair. 'Here in seriousness and earnest we are talking annulment of a marriage.'

Silverfish looked at Alan the way a person looks at a crazy person.

'The annulment of a marriage that was never truly conjugated because conjugation took place under false pretenses,' Zero Kretzman said.

'Consummation, Zero,' Ira murmured.

You could suddenly tell everyone was tired. Silverfish looked at his accusers-for-in-laws. He rubbed his eye. He shook his head, agitating hair. 'I say that you are assuming a basic and also mistaken thing in what you say to me,' he said. 'You are assuming that between me and Sophie it's like between me and anybody else, namely you. You are assuming Sophie's got no more on the ball than you. Between Sophie and me there's as many secrets as between Ira and his stomach. Meaning exactly none.'

'Our sister would not sham and lie as you have done.'

'What shamming for God's sake Alan?' Silverfish rose with his own voice and stood over the others, his face the very faintest of checkerboards from the streetlight through the thick iron screen of the Police Station window. 'And why do this in the middle of the freaking night can I ask? Tell me why now, Allie. Why now in general and now in particular?'

'Now in general because my sister is not going to get pressed on in the

cold earth by years of violation of her trust and the trust of her family,' Alan said quietly. 'Now in particular because we wanted now in particular. We want to see a whole new kind of day dawn on Solomon Silverfish. We want to watch you watch the sun come up on yourself.'

'And because also let's not forget we know you'll in probability want to get to the graveyard by early in the morning,' Kretzman said. 'Far be it from us to keep you.'

'Zero, please,' Ira said.

Alan leaned even more forward. 'We're talking annulment on the grounds of false pretenses,' he said, 'or else divorce on the grounds of morbid adultery.' He shook his head down at the file he had. 'And I think you get my meaning.'

'Adultery? Morbidity?'

'Fooling around in the cemetery of the family of your own wife,' swollen-cheeked Kretzman said, shaking his head. 'Covert shtupping on the graves of your in-laws with a feminine person so young she could be a child to all of us.'

Solomon looked around him. 'You know from lost? You've lost me. I'm now accused of what?'

Alan pressed his lips together and hefted the file. 'A person was hired by me to do some following of a certain Solomon Silverfish.'

Silverfish stared. 'I've been being followed? What for?'

'My investigation person who I hired claims and swears to on occasions seeing you at Sinai, the cemetery of the Schoenweisses for generations of them. He sees you there in mornings. In the toupee of the hair of a young person. Claims further to have witnessed you in the arms of a still younger person. Sometimes dancing on graves he says. Schoenweiss graves. Carrying on. Implications of assorted kinds of shtupping. With a young woman, while our sister lies ill and trusting.'

'You believe this thing?' Silverfish said. 'This follower of a person has evidence for what he says? He's convinced you with the testimonies of witnesses? He's got pictures? I'd like to see such pictures.'

'He admits to having camera-trouble,' Alan said. 'He claims to be able to have the pictures needed for a trial of any kind after just a few more of your morning romps through disrespect and betrayal. But Ira and me, we couldn't and wouldn't stand it. We wanted to face you and hear what you have to say, face to face.'

'After thirty years of pretending and lies they should trust you over a disinterested person?' Kretzman said.

'Kretzman, you have a date with the puncture of a lifetime,' Silverfish whispered. He looked at the grille, the window. He thought he could make out a hint of a shade of a blur of the first light of morning. But who could tell.

Ira Schoenweiss began softly to weep. The hand of his that was not hold-

ing a dirty checkered hankie to his nose was out on the table, a doughy freckled thing near a spot where a past interviewee had carved in the wood of the table the suggestion that Zero Kretzman do to himself an anatomically impossible thing.

Silverfish put his hairy hand on Ira's white hand. They stayed like that. The lamp from the Mug-Shot Department gave off a high faint whine.

'Tell,' whispered Alan.

'Fess up,' whispered Kretzman.

A person from outside knocked on the locked door in an emergency way.

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You want to see people in their eighties who you and I should look so good, look at Sophie's parents, Dr. and Mrs. Otto Schoenweiss. Dr. Schoenweiss the retired dentist tall and straight and meaty as a healthy kind of tree, his thick white hair brushed back over a face like a bird of prey of majestic size, with eyes that have seen pain and decay in the mouths of men and know little fear and little more pity. He is a man who the beauty of the man equals dignity and elegance. His lapel seems always to be crying out for a carnation. And Mrs. Schoenweiss's beauty is that she is *well-preserved*, more impressive at eighty-two than at forty-two because she looks more or less the same believe it or not. From her birth always a person physically cool and hard, she has aged with the immunity of a fly in amber, the inside receiving for itself a visible exemption from time while only the translucent shell gets harder and brittler and maybe a little more difficult to see through all the way. Her hair itself a hard black bouffant that has not changed shape since Eisenhower, the age of her face a matter not of wrinkles so much as rigidity, her body thin and sharply angled and tough like you would hurt your hand on, her nails of her fingers violent red and like the claws to go with the above majestic bird-qualities of her husband the dentist. Not a tremble in any digit of either Schoenweiss. As physical old people these should be an example. They have always made Sophie feel soft and small and slightly unclean. And, now, it is in their presence that she smells most strongly her own sickness.

'Annulment or divorce,' Mrs. Schoenweiss said, smoothing Sophie's blanket. 'Preferably annulment on grounds of marriage under false pretenses. This is the recommendation your Tata and I come after much agonizing between us to give.'

'We come now, from our beds, to watch together, all three, a new and true day begin for our only daughter,' Dr. Schoenweiss said, at the window, checking the time on his watch. 'Though also Mama has bridge breakfast in Hinsdale at Mrs. Rotner's to get to.'

'Forget breakfast,' Mrs. Schoenweiss said, searching the face of her daughter with her eyes. 'Tata and Allie and Ira and I talked this all out. Zero the D.A. Kretzman is even now helping them lean on the false person for him to do the right thing by the Schoenweisses, even if Kretzman has to

use legal threats of repercussions.'

Sophie stared. 'So Ira lied to get Solomon to a police station with Allie and Kretzman? Ira Schoenweiss lied in the middle of the night to his only best friend? Lies to help set a trap of drama and trauma and unfairness?'

'Unfairness don't even speak of unfairness in regard to the person we're speaking of,' Mrs. Schoenweiss hissed, showing teeth that never in sixty-one years ever gave her husband anything but joy and pride. Then she sighed and softened. 'Don't make us do a thing that's hurtful. As a mother I beg. Don't make us give you information such as we could give if we had to give it, Sophie.'

'Oh, but no, let's talk information,' Sophie said, looking from her mother to her father. 'Let's inform.' She breathed and felt at the wig beside her. 'I'll maybe inform you for maybe a minute? What happens when Dr. Prinzmetal finds out I'm why Solomon and I can't have children? Are we remembering? Who feels how? Let's inform how people feel. Ira and Alan and Orly Schoenweiss feel bad for Ira and Alan and Orly Schoenweiss, now they can't be uncles and aunts to Silverfish children. Dr. and Mrs. Otto Schoenweiss feel bad for Dr. and Mrs. Otto Schoenweiss, that the family stays the same size with only Allie and Orly's children. Sophie Silverfish feels bad for Sophie Silverfish, that she can't be a mother and she's let down her Schoenweiss family and her husband-who-she-loves.' She paused and breathed and blinked, looked through sick sticky eyes out the window into a little floating circle of dimming orange streetlight. 'And who does Solomon Silverfish feel bad for?' she said. 'Solomon Silverfish feels bad only for Sophie Silverfish, is who. Flowers every day for a week, surprises and warmth of various kinds. Pretending to say how he can't even stand children come to think about children, or how we can on the other hand easily adopt if we want, if he and I want. Saying how he can turn the nursery you built us into a study for himself, with stuffed animal toys and teddy-bear wallpaper. Never a thought for Solomon Silverfish on the part of Solomon Silverfish. Never a thought except for his wife, bless my fortune and luck for the magic that he loves me so that my feelings mean more than his to him.' She breathed. 'Let's talk free legal services for all Shoeweisses, not to mention Rotners and Kripkes and Guptas and everybody else who only mentions the name Schoenweiss, or if not free then discount while Allie refuses flatly to do anything but divorces for anybody, which if I was precious Orly it would set me thinking. Let's talk Solomon keeping Ira the alcoholic pain-thrower out of jail for drunk driving for twenty years in middles of nights. Let's talk me, let's talk never one piece of indication that Solomon anything but loves his wife, who does not deserve and never has deserved such love or such a person.' She breathed. 'Let's talk cancer. Let's maybe mention a certain person camping himself in my room at B'nai B'rith for near to twenty-four hours a day until the doctors say enough bother with Silverfish already and let him take me home. Let's talk a man who neglects the work of his life that he loves for his wife that he shows he loves

more just when she most needs to know it. Let's talk a man with this wife that's mutilated—'

'Sophie.'

'A wife minus important womanly things, that this man's pupils still dilate when his eyes look at me. A man who watches me melt down into lumps and bones and smells my smell and wipes my crying and when I need him to he takes my BMs away like they were presents and cleans up my vomitings when I can't get to the bathroom and never once does he make me feel weak or foul or less a person or less a Sophie than the first day he danced with me with broken arms.' Sophie coughed with violence. 'The man could turn out to be a Martian from space for all I care. He is my husband and he and I are united in togetherness by a thing called love which in case you haven't heard yet it isn't just a feeling, it's a way of living a life with a person, and this love and life and Silverfish person are also me, your sick Sophie, and my life is his and we are what we are each because of the other one.' She breathed loudly. 'And so mention divorces and annulments and ends of marriages once more and I with regret ask you to leave my home.' She leaned back against pillows. Such speaking left her gray of skin, wringing with sweat, and her green eyes were sunk down into their black round orbits of bruise and black even more than before.

'But that man has lied!' Dr. Shoenweiss shouted from by the window, showing that maybe one thing that had aged was his voice for shouting. 'Constant, life-long lying of the deepest sort. A people and a culture—.'

'A people and their culture aren't worth a cup of spittle if they aren't held together by what God who I thank every minute has given me and my Solomon to have together,' Sophie said as loud as she might. She breathed and closed her eyes. She swallowed. 'That's one, that thing I said. Here's two. How very stupid a person do you think I am? Solomon has never once lied to me, nor have I ever told my husband a really untrue thing.'

'He told you he was pretending?'

'I could live with a man thirty years and not know his heart? If you and Mama love each other, do you pretend with each other about backgrounds?'

'So he said to you Sophie he said I'm not Jewish but let's put one over on your trusting family? Let's have some laughs?'

'You do not understand me. No he didn't.'

'Then what, can I ask?'

Sophie looked down at her hair on the bed. 'We just stopped being different from each other in the important ways.'

'But you *are* different it turns out, is the whole point of why we've agonized and come.'

'No it isn't,' Sophie said. She breathed. She swallowed. She had turned the color of old clams under her sweat.

'Are you all right Sophie?' Mrs. Shoenweiss was looking at her.

## Wallace

'I'm going to be sick I'm afraid,' Sophie whispered. She struggled faintly to get out from under the blankets of the bed. Her wrist was still connected to her tube. The jar full of light clinked in its stand.

'Oh dear.' Mrs. Schoenweiss rose and backed away from the bed, feeling the sides of her hair, watching. 'Oh dear.'

Sophie was unwell on the bed. When she was through she sank back from herself into her pillows.

'Too late,' she said. 'I was sick.' She coughed.

'The new sun is coming I think,' Dr. Shoenweiss said from the window.

'Forget the sun already! Your daughter was just sick in her bed!'

'It's all right I think,' Sophie whispered.

'Does somebody come to clean?' Mrs. Shoenweiss asked from several feet away. She looked at the bed and at Sophie's nightie.

'Mary the hospice person at ten. It's all right. I'm sorry.'

'Are you all right?'

'I'm tired, Mama.'

'It's our fault we came like this. I said to Alan I said sun or no sun, Mrs. Rotner or no Mrs. Rotner.'

Sophie shook her wet head. 'Tiredness your fault? No. Assuming your daughter can't know a heart and that your-son-in-law-who-loves-you-more-than-himself isn't who he is. . .,' again she coughed, '. . . is different. You shame all Schoenweisses and two. . . Silverfish.'

'Are you all right?'

'It's all right.'

'Is that *blood*? Otto I see blood!'

'Blood?'

There was blood.

'Otto!'

'Sophie?'

'Call my husband.'

'Call the hospital!'

'Call my husband.'

'I'll call Alan.'

'Otto is she all right?'

'Please call Solomon.'

'Otto she's bleeding!'

'What, I'm blind? I can't see blood?'

'Sophie?'

'It's all right.'

/ /

Here is Solomon Silverfish, two months ago, this March, age of sixty, on the night of the day the medical people took Sophie back to the hospital after her temperature went through the roof, became a bright hot thing in every sky. The people decided she had definitely Recurred, also probably

Metastasized. Silverfish is home at night now to wash up the crunchy dishes of breakfast and to wash himself and to pack up things to bring for Sophie in her room in the hospital's oncology unit. He is very upset. Right now he is preparing to do dishes, sneezing the last bits of dishwashing liquid out of an almost-empty bottle into a sink of warm water. He looks at the sink of suds, the bubbles little refracting domes of filmy purple and red. Outside everywhere there is March slush. Cars roar in the March slush as they go by. But inside the house of Silverfish it is the end of a long yellow summer. Silverfish's head is with dishes in the soapy water in the sink. His arms are slashing a little at the air. He screams under the dishwater one very long scream. The scream of Silverfish fills bubbles of soap and they leave the sink. They ascend. They twirl in the slightly slashed air of the Silverfish kitchen and ascend and plip open against the ceiling with clean little chirps of leftover Silverfish scream. There are so many bubbles it looks like the Welk program. But what it sounds like is locusts from ever so long ago, a field of locusts and insects in brittle Virginia tobacco and broomsedge and stunted corn, baking and screaming in a dry late heat that carries with it the smell of its own end. It would physically shock you, how long Silverfish can hold a note.

/ /

Here again is Silverfish, again of age sixty, in the very early morning, this morning, in his red Thunderbird convertible, travelling at a great speed back to his home from the Police Station where he was. With him are Alan and Ira Schoenweiss. Also Zero Kretzman. Of spoken words in the car there are exactly none. Far away is the song of a siren. The wind is doing great violence to Silverfish's hair. His hair is flung out to the side by the wind, covering the face of Ira Schoenweiss, including Ira's hot foggy glasses. Ira makes no move to move the veil of hair. All traffic lights are being ignored. The sky to the east, over the lake, is going from black to whatever is the next color lighter than black.

/Too Pretty/

Yall want to play, just don't play with my man S.S. Cause my man be gettin in you ass with his briefcase and these bad arms flying all over and a voice like the el train book by you ass on the platform, roar like to suck you in. Best jump on back from my man. He get in folks ass. But son of a bitch like my karma, dont ask me why. And I be likin the big honky bastard too. He wild. Got this wife with cancer and shit. Look like some walkin undead shit or somethin. But my man love his bitch? I see my man like to die with love. Him and her get along. He be gettin in her ass for fun about ever little thing like you only do with the bitches when they ass gets to be like you own. S.S. month past he take my ass to dinner at his country club? Im dressed down bad for the night and heres my ass in this crib full of shiny pukewhite faces and funeral suits and low dresses on flat old bitches and tinkly light off a sparkle of silver forks like to blind a man when he high.

Little fucker in a tuxedo be tryin to take my hat from my ass fore he let us sit down? There was some white ass in some danger, jack. But my man S.S. take care of the shit, whisper to the penguin to either get lost or get punctured, the penguin jump back. I be gettin off on some fine white food with my bright club silver and gettin on the outside some fine old scotch whiskey, and but my man dont be drinkin, dont even hardly eat, just mostly sit a long time watch me chew and shit, make me tense, finally he look all round and lean his ass over to me so I see the spaces in this long thin pitiful hair and shit he comb over his head. He look round and lean over and ax Too Pretty for some dope for his bitch, she takin cancer drugs and be earlin all the time and be so sick she like to die from bein nauseous. My man ax Too Pretty for some high quality marijuana, how the dude says it, to make his bitch stop hurtin and shit with her stomach. I up right then and take his ass out to my ride out in the lot and fix him up with a fine old juicy bag Too Pretty had got that day for his own self. Wont even let my man reimburse my ass. I say man you kept my ass and my bitches ass out jail and workin so Too Pretty can keep too fat too many times for the reimbursement shit, man. I say I dont want to hear no funk out his ass cept how his bitch be feelin better real soon. And this dope do the job for any old bad shit. Too Pretty hand it out to Candice and Monica and Wardine when they be so drunk they might could earl in front the tricks and shit. A bitch earl in front a trick lose that trick ever time. Gots to keep the bitches workin. Shit I gave my man does em up.

But see my man say his bitch his life. He say his bitch him. Name be Sophie. Bitch be pretty, too. I visit her ass with my man in the cancer hospital one time. But this be a thin bitch, man. With eyes all bruise round the outside and inside all creamy with what she see comin. All creamy with death, man. Like Brenda, time she shot up this Thai shit from Reginald and *knows* right off theres some wrong, wrong shit in there and that her ass be gone. These eyes see death get creamy like the bitch be comin. You ask Too Pretty what it be like go down on a bitch know she dyin, I cant say. Gots to do it to see. But my man say his bitch his life. This some wild shit. This set my ass thinkin. Couldnt haul this here pretty ass out that hospital quick enough, jim, crib smelled like old burn and all the eyes was marbles in cream, but this thin hurt bitch be missin her hair and her tits and got lumps all out her white ass be my mans *life*. He mean the shit. I tell him S.S. child I seen love at angles you ass aint dreamed but I aint never seen no white man love a bitch like you love that titless stick in that little metal bed. My man get pissed off? He never get pissed off at Too Pretty. He just look in Too Prettys face with some bad eyes all aftershave blue and deep as his own head and ax me do I love my own self. And when I say shit whose black ass I gone love if not Too Pretty, my man say what it is, young Schwartz, he be callin my ass Schwartz, knock me out. He say thats it right there, Londell. The bitch be my own ass. The real her, to my ass, aint sick, she just not feelin up to usual snuff and shit. I say man that some very no shit low snuff

bitch up there with lumps and tubes all out her white ass. My man get excited. He say the tubes and lumps and shit be disease and shit, not his Sophie. That what his lady really be cant no sickness lay its cold white hand on. My man know some shit. And Too Pretty know thats why S.S. aint all grievin and moanin bout the shit, just dead serious and lawyerly logical, want his bitch to stop her hurt in her self. I fix my man up with some high quality shit right there in the lot. He knock me out, this hebrew cracker. Like he aint even white or some shit. Like he lots of things at one same time.

But this *here*, this be some very white shit. And fine? Louise, Louise. Can tell fine shit cause it be hot goin in. Gots to see what the bitches be into. Part of Too Prettys craft. Be gettin this here shit off DuWayne. DuWayne score now off some raghead live with his sister. Dude knows dudes in Burma. DuWayne know how I done Reginald over the Brenda shit, he make sure now the bitches get it fine. Just *slides* in that wing, jim. Melts in with these oil swirl feelins like ice in summer gin and you feel it hot and thin all through you ass till it get to you head and you balloon start to pull out the ground. My man S.S. say to Too Pretty I dont prove of heroin Londell. No heroin, please. Heroin a tricky and unpleasant legal affair. But end of a night, Too Pretty like to set back in his ride and count revenues and dabble and shit in what the bitches be into they own selves. A manager dont share the needle with his bitches be lax and shit. Wardines high ass be floatin back in the back seat now, I got to take the bitches tourniquet off she so gone away. I be into a warm pink Burma fog and shit my own self now and I plan be curlin and ridin inside for some space and time, till comin down make me horny and Ill do up Wardine and maybe Monica too back at the crib. First Too Pretty watch the sunrise through his windshield of his ride. Yall want to live some what life got to give? Sit you ass down facin east and watch a sun come up through the motion of some fine Burmese smack, jack. Sun put you ass upside down. Place Too Pretty like to watch it best at is this fine old white folks cemetery, Sinai cemetery, big-ass park of death off Pulaski and Fuller. Pull the ride in this little stone road up at the west side gate and get down into DuWaynes fine shit and float and watch slow life come up round blood over rows of stone white death. Shit aint ghoully, its beauty and wonder, joe. Get up and in you own self meltin down and right and watch the cool black curve of Gods own sky turn ash and then purple and then bloody red over a ice-ocean of white men under white stones grinnin cold and white. Too Pretty see my sun be gettin red and shit now. See? Half a hot coin burnin east through the bars of this iron west gate makes a cage of sunrise blood and there be mornin mist all tissue rivery over greengray ground and white stones and Too Pretty dont know if it be dawn mist or his own high ass but it be hot blood, this light, hot blood pumpin behind the cage of this gate with its bad pale new iron bars and a star big as the sun his own self on top the gate, a wild, wild-ass star, like two triangles fuckin in the sky and the red blood fog shit burn right through it, get split into sharp shadows and jaggedy angles of blood light.

And I be flyin, jim. I hear Wardine purr like a pussy and I be lookin through clean windshield glass at the full circle sun all new start to bleed through bright wet green grass and cold stone and two halfstars fuckin in fire. And my ass so completely high I start to zone in the red new heat light through the glass through the windshield I think I be seein my man S.S. behind that cage of a gate. It be my man. My man S.S. be there, in the swirlin stones, and he be dancin with some bitch be fine! And through Burma mists inside his own eyes Too Pretty watch in the fire and I can see. It be my man and his bitch, his thin bitch, but she not thin now, jim, she and my man both be lookin like young folks, full of milk and honky dream, dancin stiff with some new joy in this mist of new blood, dance round and round a gang of white stones got no names on they marble asses. And my west gate start to glow too red to be right, and my man and his young fine thing be dancin, she hold his ass round the waist and but my mans own arms is out wide and straight, like he hurt, like he nailed to the air and shit. They dance back to stone and my mans bitch she throw some legs in these bad white stockings like a nurse or a nun wear, her legs be round my mans waist, and his ass be on a cold stone, and with her own hands her own self this fine quiet clean bitch reach in herself in these white stockings and rip them open, take they ass down, and they be splittin down her sides of her legs and these legs be some fine white legs, shiny curves of milk, I be sittin up straight in my ride, and she be doin my man standin up, they be doin each other like children, too clean, too happy, my mans ass on marble, and theres no noise I can hear but my breathin and Wardines breathin and this high thin whine of the burnin gate and the stones that be flashin a fire of they own light in the sun. Too Pretty start considerin how this DuWayne shit be maybe too much a thing when my man and his lady round him start movin they ass down toward the gate, toward my ass, S.S. glidin with nailed arms through a red fog sea risin up round his bitches milkwhite creamwhite haunches round his ass, and his bitch have her head back, and my mans eyes be on Too Prettys eyes through the light and the cage and the glass, and I zone, jim. The sun be hotter and swollener and redder and newer than any yesterday, and a blood fog I cant get out my eyes rise up around past my man so they just be his face and a swirl of shiny nightblack hair that be his Sophie ladys bad fine hair, and she got her arms round his neck and be laughin for a happy Too Pretty aint never heard his own self. I be too high. The red Burma fog blow up like atoms light and shit, burn through the cage and my ride and my ass and my eyes, sos Too Prettys eyes bug and burn, and his bones be an oven, and Wardine be moanin in her own self. And light come through us all, and the red in me boil round my man and his lady, and then sun flash yellow mint but the cage of grave stay full of bloody early light, and the stones and the star be on fire, and then I shit, the juice book out my mouth, cause I see my mans pukewhite creamwhite deadwite face at the bars of the cage of graves, and his lady be playin

some shit with his ass in the red from behind, and over new high noise my man whisper Schwartz and I can hear and my man say Schwartz a piece of new information for you maybe? And how he talkin today I know it be my man for me. My mouth be packed with dirt scare and my man do a comehere with his finger, and I be thinkin where his lady at she lost in red, and I look and find Too Pretty nose flat against the windshield inside and my man Solomon Silverfish be there in the burnin cage blood and he open his mouth to say shit no white bastard got no right to know and I lick a dry dirt tongue at the clean hot glass, and I be waitin. And then from out the new sun my mans lady Sophie be behind my man at the bars and twist her fine night hair round his face and little beard and blind his ass in the blood, and my own bitch Wardine in back she up and slide her own hands over my eyes and whisper slow as cold white death cream guess who Pretty honey, she cover my sight, and be laughin and breathin in my ear like she so high she aint never come down to this earth again, and her brown fine hands over my face and misted eyes and she be laughin and my mans lady be cryin out from up high and the inside of Wardines hand be blood she blind me blood I can see from new light burnin through the hands blood I can see pumpin in a cage of fine thin bones I can just smell be white as stone. And in that cage of bones the red sun go up and down and up and down.

**T. Alan Broughton** is a professor of English and directs the Writer's Workshop Program at the University of Vermont. He has published ten books of fiction and poetry, including the novel *Hob's Daughter* (Morrow) and his latest book of poems, *Preparing To Be Happy* (Carnegie-Mellon University Press). He is a recipient of a grant from the 1987 PEN Syndicated Fiction Project.

**Olga Broumas** has just finished translating Odysseas Elytis's new book of poems *The Little Mariner*, due from Copper Canyon Press in April 1988. She lives in Provincetown MA, and is at work on his essays.

**Carl Dennis** lives in Buffalo and teaches at the English Department of SUNY-Buffalo. His fifth book of poems, *The Outskirts of Troy*, has just been published by William Morrow.

**Gail Gilliland's** work has appeared or is forthcoming in *American Poetry Review*, *Dark Horse*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Primavera*, *Rackham*, *Journal of the Arts and Humanities*, *Swallow's Tail*, *Yankee Magazine*, and others. She teaches at the University of Michigan.

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**Rick Kempa**, an MFA graduate of the University of Arizona, has recent work in *Poet Lore*, *Denver Quarterly*, *High Plains Literary Review*, and *Yellow Silk*.

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**Dionisio D. Martinez** has published in the *American Poetry Review* and *Iowa Review*. He has poems forthcoming in the *Wisconsin Review* and *Midwest Quarterly* and one of his poems will appear in the 1986-87 edition of the *Anthology of American Verse & Yearbook of American Poetry*.

Jane Miller's new book *American Odalisque* is just out from Copper Canyon Press. She has a review/essay "Working Time" forthcoming in *The American Poetry Review* this spring. She teaches in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Arizona.

Tenney Nathanson is completing a second book of poetry and a critical study of Walt Whitman. His poems have appeared recently in *Ironwood*, *Social Text*, *Tamarisk* and *The Painted Bride Quarterly*. He teaches American poetry at the University of Arizona.

Alberto Rios has two books of poetry forthcoming: *The Warrington Poems* and *The Lime Orchard Woman*. He is currently director of the Creative Writing Program at ASU. Recent poems have appeared in *Paris Review*, *The Ohio Review*, and *The North American Review*.

Kim Roberts teaches literature and creative writing at the University of Maryland. Her poems have appeared in *Ohio Review*, *Greenfield Review*, *Tendrill*, and *Carolina Quarterly*.

Julie Schumacher's stories have appeared in *The Best American Short Stories*, 1983, *New Letters*, *Four Quarters*, and *The Quarterly*. She lives and writes in Ithaca, New York.

Jim Simmerman's first book of poems, *Home*, was published by Dragon Gate and was a Pushcart "Writer's Choice" selection. The Galileo Press will bring out his second collection, *Once Out of Nature*, in October of 1988. The recipient of a Poetry Fellowship from the Arizona Commission on the Arts in 1987, he lives in Flagstaff and teaches at Northern Arizona University.

Wendy Swallow is a financial reporter for *The Washington Post*. She lives in Washington, D.C., and is currently on maternity leave caring for her first child.

David Foster Wallace, author of *The Broom of the System* (Viking), is a former Fiction Editor of *Sonora Review*. His work has appeared recently in *Arrival* and *Western Humanities Review* and is forthcoming in *Paris Review*. A collection of short stories and novellas, *Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way*, will be published by Viking in 1988.

## Midnight at Dillon

This far out, no other boats, a mile from shore.  
My son clicks a penlight off and on like code.

Far under us dark lunkers cruise deep troughs.  
I close the throttle. Silence, a million stars.

We gild our hooks with sunfish filets  
smooth as suede, splash them over the side

and count. Invisible lines snick out  
down to mad bass needing no moon, no fragile boat

to support them. Bobbing, we brace for whatever  
our fists find leaping and dying at midnight.

## Say Never

### LABOV

**A** thing that is no fun? *Stomach trouble*. You don't believe me, you ask Mrs. Tagus here. She'll illuminate issues. Me: no stomach trouble. A stomach of hardy elements, such as stone. Arthritis, yes, stomach trouble, no.

The tea is not helping Mrs. Tagus's stomach trouble. "Such discomfort Mr. Labov!" she says to me in my kitchen of my apartment, where we are. "Excuse me for the constant complaining," she says, "but it seems like to me anything that is the least little worry these days means the automatic making of my stomach into a fist!" She makes with a fist in the air, inclines with her neck to blow on the very hot tea, which is steaming with violence into the cold kitchen air. "And now such worry," Mrs. Tagus says. She is making a fist in the air in a firm manner which I envy, because of the arthritis I have in my limbs every day, especially in winter, but I only express sympathy to the stomach of Mrs. Tagus, who has been my dearest and closest friend since my late wife and then her late husband passed away inside three months of each other seven years ago may they rest in peace.

I am a tailor. Labov the North Side tailor who can make anything. Now retired. I tailored and stitched the raccoon coat Mrs. Tagus has been wearing for years now and is still inside of now in my kitchen which my landlord keeps cold, like the rest of this apartment, which my late wife and I first rented in the years of President Truman. The landlord wants Labov out so he can raise rent to a younger person. But he should know who should know better than a tailor how it's no trouble to wear finely stitched coats and wait for spring. An ability to wait has always been one of my abilities.

I made the heavy fur-lined raincoat Mrs. Tagus's late husband and my close friend Arnold Tagus was interred in eight years ago this August.

"Lenny," Mrs. Tagus murmurs to the tea. There is no more fist in the air; she is warming her hands on the cup of tea.

## David Foster Wallace

"Lenny," she says.

Lenny is Mrs. Tagus's son Lenny Tagus. Also there is a younger son, Mike Tagus. Me: no children. Mrs. Labov had reproduction problems which I loved her no less when we found out about them. But no children. But me and all the Taguses are like this. Close. I watched the Tagus children grow up, Lenny and Mike, prides and joys.

You know the type who comes right out with it? Mrs. Tagus is not such a type of person. Something is on her mind, she beats around it, a gesture here, a word there, a sigh maybe, she shapes it inside her like with a soft medium, for instance clay, and you have to work the medium with her to get the something out in the open. Me: I come right out with it, when there's something.

### MIKEY AND LOU

"You want to still date her?"

"Are you kidding? I want to strangle her."

" . . . "

"I'd love to still date her."

"Just stay away. She seems like bad news. She seemed like she was really into it."

"She blew me off. I didn't blow her off."

"How, exactly?"

"Carlina blew me off."

"So how, Tagus?"

"She just said how she didn't want to go out no more."

"Just like that?"

"Just like after I'd rammed about half a gram up her nose and bought her drinks all night."

"Bad news."

"I must of rammed about half a gram up her nose."

"I bet you didn't have to ram it up her nose. I bet her nose took it pretty willingly."

"It was her and Lenny and me. Her and him do my whole gram while I'm over at the bar getting them drinks. Then he takes off to like tuck his kids in bed. He's dribbling the coke out his nose, he's bouncing off every wall in sight, and he's going to tuck in his kids. And then later

Carlina just blows me off. She just blows me off, later."

"Want a beer?"

"She just left me sitting there. I don't even know how she got home."

" . . . . "

"I think I feel like killing her."

"Not worth it. Have a beer."

"Two months, man. It's two months down the tube. I had her meet everybody. Mom, Labov. I told her personal stuff, stuff about who I was."

"Bad news."

"You bet your sweet ass bad news."

"So what does Lenny say? You talk this out with Lenny?"

"He'd condescend. He's a pecker in situations like this situation. He talks down to me. And plus he's out like all day, yesterday. Bonnie said she didn't even know where. She's half-crying, herself. Her and Lenny got their own problems. They're both like this about something. Shaky. Pissed off. Lenny hooved that half a gram like he was being timed. I go to the bar for drinks, they just do it without me. Who's gonna figure on that?"

" . . . . "

"And then I bought her drinks all night."

"Open the beer."

"I think I might kill her."

"Nobody's killing nobody, here, Mikey."

"Try to think of somebody for me to hit, at least."

#### LENNY

Cinnamon girl, spiced cream, honey to kiss, melt hot around the center of me.

#### LABOV

"Lenny is your pride and joy," I say to Mrs. Tagus. I say: "What could

be with Lenny that makes stomach trouble for a proud and joyful mother such as you, Mrs. Tagus?"

"If you had gotten a letter and then a phone call like I got today, Mr. Labov, even your perfect stomach would make for itself a fist, a knot. And for me, with stomach trouble. . . ." She shakes her head in her well-made coat.

I press Mrs. Tagus to eat a Saltine.

"Lenny," she murmurs, beating around the something. While a Saltine is being chewed she murmurs also: "Bonnie."

So I gather there are troubles between Lenny, Mrs. Tagus's son, a teacher, in college, who wrote a book, something about Germans before Hitler (in a print so tiny who could read it?), that got called "solid" and "scholarly" in a Book Review Mrs. Tagus has stuck on to her refrigerator with a magnet, trouble between Mrs. Tagus's Lenny and Lenny Tagus's Bonnie, his wife of eight, nine years, a sweeter and better girl than even as perfect a catch as Lenny could hope for, who has borne him healthy and polite children, and who makes a krish so good it is spelled s-i-n.

"Mike, also," Mrs. Tagus whispers, sipping her tea which is now cooler and has stopped its steaming violently into the cold air of my apartment's kitchen.

"So how do letters and calls and your children make for stomach trouble?" I say. I place four stacked crackers next to Mrs. Tagus's saucer.

"If you had gotten this call like I got from Bonnie," Mrs. Tagus says. "From this girl who who would want to hurt her? Who who would want to not give her feelings weight on the scale?"

I can see my breath white a little in the kitchen air. I find a certain reassurance in how I can see it. I put my hand on Mrs. Tagus's fist of a hand on my cold kitchen table. The skin of the knuckles of Mrs. Tagus is drawn dry and tight, and when she unfists the hand, to let me comfort it, I feel the skin crinkle like paper. Me: also skin like a parchment. I look at our hands. If my late Sandra were here I would say to her things like: oldness, coldness, paper-dry skin with brown sprinkles and yellow nails; how it seems to Labov we get old like animals, we get claws, our lips retreat back from teeth like we're baring to snarl. Sharp, snarling, old, who should wonder how nobody cares if I hurt, except another snarler? I would say such things as these.

Me and Mrs. Tagus have gotten close, like if you'll excuse me I think

old people need to these days. Her husband and me were like this, we were so close. For Mr. Tagus and his family: tailored clothes at discounts. For me and Mrs. Labov: insurance at cost. Taguses and Labovs are close. So close I all of a sudden press Mrs. Tagus to tell me the cause of her stomach trouble straight out.

"Lay it on the line, Mrs. Tagus," I say.

She sighs, feels at herself. I watch her breath. She leans and lays it on the line, whispering to me the words: "Infidelity, Mr. Labov." She looks with her milky eyes from operated-on cataracts behind her thick glasses into my eyes and says, with a cleared throat: "Betrayal, also."

I let silence collect around this thing that's finally out in the open and then ask Mrs. Tagus to clear me up on what's all this about betrayal.

"He's maybe going to kill Bonnie by making her die of the pain of it, or Mikey could raise hands against him, his own blood," is what Mrs. Tagus says she is having the awful stomach trouble over tonight, this some sort of problem like from the Bible between the three children that I still don't feel like I'm cleared up on. Mrs. Tagus fights against some tears.

Her tea has gotten cold and light in color, and I get up to my feet for the can of tea and the hot water in the copper kettle my wife Sandra and I received from Arnold and Greta Tagus on the day of our wedding, and Mrs. Tagus clears her throat some more and feels at her stomach through her coat I stitched together.

She says the phone call from her daughter-in-law Bonnie Tagus today that has her in her condition had also to do with half a Xeroxed letter from Lenny, her son and pride, a half a letter which Mrs. Tagus received in her box, also today, but before the phone call from Bonnie Tagus. The half a letter from Lenny she says was a Xerox (not even personal?). He said he sent several copies of the Xerox, by Express Mail. A rush job. "'An outpouring,'" Mrs. Tagus says, "'to all friends and family.'" She looks at me at the kettle of the stove. Did I, Mr. Labov, also get such a half a letter? But I get my mail once a week only, on Tuesday (today is Friday), on account of my box here at the building has been broken into and I feel like it is insecure, and my check from the Government comes by mail, so I have a secure box I got at the Post Office but the Post Office is half an hour by El or seven dollars by taxicab and in this weather who needs the more than once a week bother? Mrs. Tagus

has confidence in the security of her box here in our building, which she and Arnold Tagus have lived in starting with Eisenhower.

I put some hot and dark new fresh tea before Mrs. Tagus, in a new and special mug, from Kresge's, with a lid, to keep the heat in the tea, which I got with emergencies like this one maybe in the back of my mind. The right years ago when Mikey Tagus bent his spine in high school football, cup after cup Arnold and Greta Tagus drank out of some emergency mugs, with lids, at the Emergency Room. That night was the first time Mrs. Tagus's stomach made like a fist. And she is making with the fist with her hand in the air again, and in the fist are crinkled paper pages, from a letter, the half a letter, from Xerox, from Lenny. Mrs. Tagus is rocking in her chair and making sounds to herself.

#### LENNY'S HALF A LETTER

2/21

OPEN LETTER TO THAT COMMUNITY OF MY FAMILY AND INTIMATE FRIENDS—  
LETTER APPROPRIATELY CONCEIVED ALSO AS AN INFORMATIONAL  
SATELLITE DELIVERED INTO THE EMOTIONAL CONSTELLATION  
SURROUNDING AND INFORMING THIS CORRESPONDENT'S  
PERSONAL ORBIT—EXCLUDING THE PARTIES  
BONNIE FLUTTERMAN TAGUS AND MICHAEL ARNOLD TAGUS, REGARDING THIS  
CORRESPONDENT AND THE ABOVE TWO EXCLUDED PARTIES.

Beloved fathers and teachers,

Know that I, Leonard Shlomith Tagus, Gent., Ph.D., author of *Motion in Poetry: The Theme of Momentum in Weimar Republic Verse*, a monograph from which royalties in excess of four figures are forecasted to accrue in fiscal 1985; Northwestern University's lone blade-burnished Teutonicist; student; teacher; son; friend; Husband; that wildest of conjugal mariners; that I, L.S. Tagus, having for nine years navigated successfully between the Scylla and Charybdis of Inclination and Opportunity, have, as of today, 21 February 1985, committed adultery, on four occasions, with one *Carlina Rentaria-Cruz*, former companion (lover) of my brother, *Michael Arnold Tagus*; that I anticipate further

episodes of such *adultery*; and that such definite past and highly probably future episodes will be brought to the attention of my wife, Ms. Bonnie Flutterman Tagus, between 1:00 and 2:00 pm (lunch) this date.

Know further that it is neither the desire & intention of L. Tagus, nor the project of this open letter, either (a) to *excuse* those libidinal/genital activities on the part of this correspondent likely to excite disfavor and/or grief within his intimate constellation; or (b) to *explain* same, since the explanation of any transgression finally and inevitably acts to organize itself under the rubric of *excuse* (see (a)); but rather merely: (c) to *inform* those parties, on whom my existence and the behavior comprised by same can be expected to have an effect, of the events outlined above and discussed below; (d) to *describe* how and/or why those events have taken and do and will take place; and (e) to *project* the foreseeable consequences of such activities for this correspondent, for those other parties (B.F. Tagus, M.A. Tagus) directly affected by his activities, and for those other parties whose psychic fortunes are, to whatever extent, bound up with and influenced by those of myself and the above two excluded (betrayed, proto-cuckolded, adulterated) parties.

(c) having been accomplished heretofore;

(d) thus:

Cinnamon girl. Full-lipped, candy-skinned, brandy-haired South-American-type girl. A type: a girl the color of dirty light, brightwhite eyes and hair like liquor, curled; thin pointed breasts that shimmy (they do) when her chest and self cave in from laughing. From the laughing. This is a merry girl. Laughs at all stimuli not macabre or political, a laugh of the sort that resembles a possessed state, helpless, crumpled in around her perception of anomaly or embarrassment, harm, wet eyes darting around for assistance, some invitation to gravity.

(Brother Michael, in college, after a game, over beers, tells me in all seriousness that love is nothing more than an escape from gravity) decontortion. A merriment that is also pain.

And I watched her crumple, eyes the color of cream squeezed tight, over a tall bright Graphix water-pipe, at the apartment of Michael Tagus, and a wax-deaf man in a city of sirens heard one siren's fatal call; and the malignant, long-slalommed rocks mated with a crunch through the dry eggshell hull of my careful character. Carlina Rentaria-Cruz, secretary at Chicago Park District, twenty, lovely, light and dark, hair like bourbon (as I mentioned), Spanish tilt, pointed boots, a dairy

sheen to ripe white Latin skin, lips that shine a fired light, shine w/o aid of tongue—they *manufacture their own moisture*.

Contrast—neither offense nor explanation intended here—contrast a wide-bottomed, pale, solid, vaguely Hassidic-looking women of thirty-four. Large squash-shaped mole on left arm sports a banner of black hair. Nipples like pencil-erasers, hard and corrective against wide shallow breasts whose broad curves I know like the Lake's own tired sweep. A woman ever armed with a portable and inflatable hemorrhoid pillow, an obscene pink plastic doughnut, her legacy from the long and labored birth of Saul Tagus. A woman whose lips are chronically dry and collect a persistent white paste at the corners. Whose posture has always been a *little too good* for my complete peace of mind. Whose quiet laughter is always appropriate, conscious, complicated by an automatic and sophisticated concern for the feelings and special sensitivities of everyone present.

Bonnie laughs only *with*; Carlina was so conceived and constituted as to laugh only *at* (all are, of course, invited to unhappy speculation on how my emotional movement from former to latter illuminates by own delicate and modal relations vis a vis the non-L.-S.-Tagus exterior).

Before (e), graphic data to support (d) heretofore.

REPRESENTATIVE LAUGHTER-SCENARIO: B.F. Tagus:

Envision dinner party—B.F. Tagus filling her self-imposed quota of one family anecdote that will 'tickle' our guests: 'And Joshua gets his piece of pie from the waiter, and his eyes are getting bigger and bigger' (uncanny imitation here) 'he looks at it, and he says to me, he whispers when the waiter leaves he says Momma, why Momma, there's ice cream on my pie, and I say but Joshua, the waiter asked you if you wanted your pie a la mode honey and you said yes, and Joshua looks at me he's about to cry almost the poor love and he says A la mode? Momma I thought he said *pie all alone*. Is . . . what . . . he . . . thought . . . he . . .' (hand to mouth, eyes troublingly wide open, unaffected, shoulders moving up and down in sync, laughter full of love, good will, etc.).

REPRESENTATIVE LAUGHTER-SCENARIO: C. RENTARIA-CRUZ:

'Len, Len, what is different between beer nuts and deer nuts. I hear this in a club in the Loop.' (The Loop.) 'Beer nuts are fifty cents, deer nuts are just under a buck!' (Becoming here crumpled, other, helpless in the grip of the nasty (*grip of the nasty*).)

Not to mention a simple and utterly killer accent, a fellation of each syllable through the auto-lubricated portal that is at once a deep garden and a tall city. A planet.

'Oh Lenito I will *see* you!'

(Note quickly that the congress here has revealed itself to be a loud and conspicuously goy-esque affair—cries from Carlina and accessory of a desperation only partly channeled; mad twined scrabble of a search for something key hidden at a system of bodies' center.)

And so ungodly *precise* about it all:

'Len, Len, how many girls known as Jewish-American Princesses are needed for the screwing in of a light bulb? Answer is *two* of them. Answer is one to call Daddy and one to buy the Tab!' (Wicked. There is wickedness here, and it is good. see below. (though I must say I found that particular joke offensive))

*to be cont.*

## MIKEY AND LOU

"So what's the point of even calling him, then?"

"Advice, Tagus. He's older. He's been around. He's been there. He can put the thing in some perspective for you."

"He's a pecker in situations like I'm in, is the thing. He always talks down at me when I go to him for advice."

"He saw how you were treating her good and how she was acting like it was going to last."

"It ain't like I wanted it to like last forever or anything."

"Len's a smart guy, Mike."

"It's just if I'm going to stop sleeping with somebody I want it to be my decision to stop it, is all. Or at least to talk about it first."

"He'll understand, probably. You said he met her. He'll tell you not to sweat it."

"He even calls me little brother at times like this, sometimes."

" . . . "

"I really think I'd rather hit somebody."

"Tagus."

"Line's busy."

"Have a beer. At least it means they're home."

"Maybe I should just go ahead and call Carlina."

"I wouldn't."

"I'm predicting right now he'll be a pecker about it."

### Lenny

I have told the cinnamon girl that I will never be forgiven for this. Never. How by the time you reach a certain age and history and situation you're bound up with people, part of a larger thing. How it becomes like liquid, and any agitation ripples. She asked me who it was who first said never say never. I told her it must have been someone young.

She is silk in a bed of mail-order satin. Complete and seamless, an egg of sexual muscle. My motions on her are dislocated, frantic, my lone interstice a wet spice of encouragement I smell with my spine. As, inside her, I go, I cry out to a god whose absence I have never felt so keenly. She wears Catholic medals. Late, quiet, I apologize for speaking the name of god at such a moment. She touches my hip. Tells me something else the Loop taught, viz. that there are no atheists in foxy holes. Really, now. She laughs into my chest; I feel her eyes' squeeze. I ask her whether she even knows what something so full of American idiom means. She is Argentine. She is silent. She asks me if I've ever have the troubles with sincerity in things about women. I needn't even try to parse it; know I am baby-safe with a simple:

'Yes.'

### Labov

I have arranged Mrs. Tagus's chair so she is able to use my wall-telephone on the wall of my kitchen to talk to Lenny, her son, without having to stand, which in her condition, at a time like this, with family and stomach trouble, standing would not be good. She is on the phone with Lenny. There is much bravery here as Mrs. Tagus listens without crying to things Lenny is saying on the phone. My heart is going out. I love Mrs. Tagus like a man friend loves a woman friend. She is my last

true and old friend in this world except for old Schoenwells the dentist who is too deaf now to converse about weather with even. As I sip at my own tea and I look at Mrs. Tagus in her fine and well-made coat and fine old wool dress with some small section of slip showing over heavy dark stockings and then the soft white shoes with the thick rubber soles, for her arches, which fell, her thick glasses for her eyes and still mostly dark hair in color under a beaver hat which it breaks my heart to be remembering her late Arnold Tagus wearing just such a hat to Bears football games, with me, in the cold, I know, inside, I love Mrs. Tagus, who I called Greta to her face while I helped her to the chair I arranged under the wall-telephone and strongly urged her, as a friend I said, to make for the sake of her stomach the telephone call that could maybe clear up some of the total misunderstanding. I am a dry and yellow snarling animal who loves another animal.

There is by my wall-telephone a large and wide section of flowered wallpaper, from the wall of my kitchen, which has been peeling since Jimmy Carter (try talking to my landlord about anything) and it is curving over Mrs. Tagus's hat and head like a wave of cornflower blue water, with flowers. I do not like the way it appears to curve over Greta Tagus.

Anger from me at her Lenny, however? This I could not manage even if I could quite understand this trouble which keeps Mrs. Tagus crumpled over her stomach under my telephone. Lenny Tagus is a nice boy. This is a thing I know. I know the Lenny Tagus who put himself through a college at Northwestern, with a doctorate even, and all the time was helping the finances of Arnold and Greta Tagus when Arnold's office got bought by State Farm and he got put on commission only, which is what killed him. The Lenny who would have helped also put Mikey through a college if Mike had not gotten the scholarship in college football to the Illini of the University of Illinois, but flunked out when it became revealed how he had never quite learned how to read enough, and went instead to work for the Softball Department of the Chicago Park District, where he is doing a fine and solid job, although anybody can see how winters would be slow, in terms of softball business.

The Lenny Tagus who calls his mother, Mrs. Tagus, twice a week, like a clock, "just to talk," he says, except really to always let his mother know she's loved and not forgotten alone in her and Arnold's quiet old apartment. Not to mention how Mrs. Tagus, often myself in addition,

gets invited into Lenny's home and family for such a dinner cooked by Bonnie Tagus! Once a month or more. Joshua Tagus and Saul Tagus and Becky Tagus in pajamas with pajama-feet attached, yawning over milk in plastic cups with cartoons on the side. Lenny smoothing their fine thin hair and reading to them from Kipling under a soft lamp. You know from warmth? There is warmth in the home of Leonard and Bonnie Tagus.

"So I should meet this person?" Mrs. Tagus is saying under the wave of wallpaper into the phone. "Us and Mike and Bonnie and this person should just sit down and talk like old friends maybe?" She broaches to Lenny the possibility that his mind is maybe temporarily out of order, maybe from stress and tension. She respectfully mentions that she can hear Becky, and also it sounds like Bonnie, crying in the telephone's background. She expresses disbelief, plus all-new and severe stomach pain, at Lenny's revealing that a certain girl who was not Bonnie was right there, with him, now, in Lenny and Bonnie's room, under a sheet, with Lenny, and that Bonnie was, when Lenny last saw her, in the broom closet of the utility room, crying.

The Lenny Tagus with a crewcut and Bermuda shorts with black socks who mowed our building's lawn when the super was under the weather from drinking, to save the Tagus family a little rent. Who I remember refused to let Mike (Mike is four years younger but at ten, even, he already had inches and pounds on Lenny, on everybody) who would not let Mike fight a fight for him when wicked boys broke Lenny's violin and kicked him in the back with shoes as he lay on the ground and left yellow bruises I can still with my eyes closed see on the back of young Lenny Tagus, who wouldn't let Mikey fight.

The Lenny who did my wife Mrs. Labov's shopping for months when God knows he had work of his own and plenty of it to do in school for his doctorate, when Mrs. Labov's phlebitis got extreme and I had to be at the shop stitching and the elevator in the building was broken and the landlord, even during Johnson and Nixon he was trying to get us out, he took criminal time in getting to repairs.

Mrs. Tagus is telling Lenny on the phone to just hold it right there. She has things to tell him as a mother. The cold of my kitchen makes a pain in my hands, and I put them under my arms, under my lined raincoat, like Arnold Tagus's old coat, that I made.

## LENNY

As I spoke with—which is I'm afraid rather at—my mother, envisioning her hand at either her stomach or her eyes, the two physical loci of any of the Troubles she gathers to her person like shiny prizes, Mr. Labov doubtless at his black iron teapot, baggy old pants accumulating at his ankles and sagging to reveal the northern regions of his bottom (god I feel pathos for people whose pants sag to reveal parts of their bottoms), envisioning him clucking, casting glances at my mother, at the phone, my mother no doubt leaning for support against the lurid peeling wall of Labov's kitchen; and as I reviewed the letter, undoubtedly couched somewhere on the person of my mother, the letter a loathsome and doomed exercise in disinformation which I could not even finish before I sent, rabid with a desire that things be *known*, that it be out, the waiting over and trauma begun—

—I found myself raw and palsied with the urge, in mid-conversation—which conversation consisted chiefly of pauses, the telephone line's special communication of the sound of distance, electric and lonely—the urge to explain. To explain. And as I urged my mother to come to my home, to help Carlina and me extract Bonnie from a darkness of brooms and rags and Lysol, and to hash this all out, we five, together, I found rising in my throat the gorged temptation to explain, excuse, exhypothese, extingulsh in and for myself the truth, the flat and unattractive and not very interesting truth, which truth became concrete for me via nothing other than a small and lonely line written in faint pencil over the southernmost urinal in the men's room of my office's floor at school, the line simply,

'no more mr. nice guy';

and instead, on the phone, amid the sounds of Becky and Bonnie and the sweet whispered something that came, satin-muffled, from a Carlina hidden on the feminine side of the Tagus bed, on the phone, instead, I found rolling out of me a torrent of misdirection, emotive calculations derived from a tiny child's axioms re what his mother wishes to hear, meta-relational recursions off the base clause that Bonnie and I Are Just Not Right For Each Other Any More Mom, that We've Grown Apart, with Nothing But The Kids To Hold Us

Together.

Which is crapola.

Though I here eagerly recount an episode, too surreal and right to have been a dream, in which one wee-houred morning, late last year, Bonnie and I both half-awoke. In this bed. We half-awoke, we sat up, we looked at each other's thick dark outlines in the green glow of the digital alarm, we looked at each other, first without recognition, then with shock; we looked at each other in shock, started, said, shouted, in unison, together, 'What?' and promptly fell back on our pillows and into deep puffy sleep.

This Mom understands, this sort of moment, marriage-trouble as opposed to person-trouble, troughs in the ebbing and flowing sinial flux that attends all long-term emotional intercourse—she says,

'Every marriage gets its ups and its downs, or else it's not a marriage. You I need to tell about the years me and your late father. . .?'

Yes.

But see, also, no.

Or I could catalogue further comparisons in which this riper girl comes, as it were, out on top. Could say what I see as the emotional paralysis that infallibly attends any sustained intersection of two people's practical concerns; and how this restricts the breath of a man. See for example the way Bonnie's conversation condenses each and every evening around *issues*: the cost of re-covering the love seats in the family room; the quality of market x's cut of meat y; the persistent and mysterious psoriatic rash on Josh's penis that is causing him to scratch in a way that simply cannot go on. Vs. Carlina, who is in all best and worst ways still a child; either sulking, overcome, silent, screaming Yes (Sil! Yes! (God!)); or offering on her Sears sofa, to a tie-loosened teacher pummeled into catatonia by the day's round with the Kafkaesque bureaucracy that is this university's administration, offering to me a cool twittered river of such pointless and treasurable insights as: 'I hate my hair today. I hate it'; or 'I notice on the television last night that the nose of Karl Malden resembles the scrotum of a man, no?' (Yes); or 'I get my period god damn in my new pair of white jeans at the checkout line at the Jewel'; or 'Mike will beat you when he find out I leave being with him to be with you' (were it in any way that simple); or 'I never love anybody ever' (God!); or 'I feel I am sorry for your wife who you don't love anymore' (were it only. . .).

Wary of exigency, *routineschmerz*, mid-life angstperformatively ren-

dered. A unit of cinnamon milk, on fire with love for no one ever, vs. exhaustively tested loyalty, hard-headed realism, compassion, a woman the color and odor of Noxzema for all time.

The reasons that center on others are easy to manipulate. All hollow things are light.

Because I simply tire of being well. Of being good. I'm just tired of failing to know where in me the millennial expectations of a constellation leave off, where my own will hangs its hat. I wish to be willful. I will it. It is not one bit more interesting than no more mr. n. g.

If only Bonnie'd stop scratching at the broom closet door.

## LABOV

"A good boy Lenny," Mrs. Tagus says to the phone. "You're always a good boy and we love you, Bonnie and Mikey and Mr. Labov and I," and the bravery which has held on so long in Mrs. Tagus's case gives up, and Mrs. Tagus weeps, weeping like you can imagine whole nations weeping, and I turn away, for respect. I put my cold and hurting hands under my arms in my coat and look across the courtyard of my building at the window my window faces, which has a shade down which has never once come up. The shade has been down since the Watergate era and I do not know who lives in the apartment. I notice there's no more talking and Mrs. Tagus behind me has replaced the wall-telephone. She is weeping like a whole nation, her eyes squeezed tight from the pain of stomach trouble I don't even want to imagine. I go to her.

## MIKEY AND LOU

"Mikey, all I said is where, is all I said."

" . . . . "

"I like to know where I'm goin, is all"

" . . . . "

"You won't say where we're going, you can at least tell me why that brake light on the dash stays on like that."

"It's a thing in the dash's guts. It never goes out. It's kind of like an

eternal flame."

"Never goes out?"

"Never ever goes out, man."

"Kind of give you the creeps, a little, sometimes?"

"I don't know. I think I like it. I think I think it's kind of reassuring, somehow."

## LENNY

Though even the novice can see quickly that a life conducted, temporarily or no, as a simple renunciation of value becomes at worst something empty and at best something occluded; a life of waiting for the will-be-never. Passive acceptance of the happening and ending of things. I will wait for the arrival of those I have damaged. I will wait through the publicness of the thing—maybe it's what I wanted from the first—the collective countenance, the conferring, recriminating, protestations of loyalty, betrayal, consequence. And then that too will end. The damaged will take the harmed way. My public will be outside my home.

But they will wait, because I will wait. We will wait for the day when the puncture and censure of Carlina Rentaria-Cruz becomes for Leonard Shlomith Tagus a chore. And we will wait for the inevitable day when silent whistles sound and my one siren leaves me for a man the color of a fine cigar.

And do not say that then I will wait for something to wait for.

## LABOV

"Go on out of here with yourselves and leave the lady alone!"

I shout this at a group of bad boys in leather who are taking up all the space in the plastic shelter of the El platform and who are whistling and making with commentaries at the tears which are frozen by the wind on the thick glasses of Mrs. Tagus. I can feel in my cold feet (arthritis in my feet also) the fact that the train is coming.

I tell Mrs. Tagus to call when she needs a late taxicab home, and I will

meet her at our building. A vagrant beside a burning ashcan for garbage is singing the national anthem across the tracks, which the song comes to us and goes in the strongly blowing wind on the platform. I give to Mrs. Tagus the Thermos bottle of the tea for on the train, the ride takes three quarter hours except for thank God no transfers.

I tell Mrs. Tagus to tell her boys to call me. We'll drink something, talk the whole matter out.

So here comes the train. Mrs. Tagus feels her way. She never talks when she cries, Greta. We pretend how it's not happening. She is on the other side of a big window. She gets a seat alone. She takes her gloves from her hands and puts her yellow hands, which I remember when they were white, she puts her hands up to remove from her face her glasses. Without her glasses Mrs. Tagus is older. The doors close themselves and the light in the train flickers white and there is so much noise I can't stand the noise. I have my hands in my gloves over my ears and I see Mrs. Tagus pulled away north on the track. In our building in my kitchen I look at my kitchen and see the bright train pull her away.

# *Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young*

David Foster Wallace

THE METRONOME OF literary fashion looks to be set on *presto*. Beginning with the high-profile appearances of David Leavitt's *Family Dancing*, Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* and Bret Ellis's *Less Than Zero*, the last three-odd years saw a veritable explosion of good-willed critical and commercial interest in literary fiction by Conspicuously Young\* writers. During this interval, certain honored traditions of starvation and apprenticeship were inverted: writers' proximity to their own puberties seemed now an asset; rumors had agents haunting prestigious writing workshops like pro scouts at Bowl games; publishers and critics jockeyed for position to proclaim their own beardless favorite "The first voice of a new generation." Too, the upscale urban young quickly established themselves as a bona fide audience (and market) for C.Y. fiction: Ellis and McInerney, Janowitz and Leavitt, Simpson and Minot enjoy a popularity with their peers unknown since the relative popular disappearance of the sixties' hip black humor squad.

As of this writing, late 1987, the backlash has been swift and severe, if not wholly unjustified. Many of the same trendy reviewers who in the mid-eighties were hailing the precocity of a New Generation now bemoan the proliferation of a literary Brat Pack. The *Village Voice*, which in 1985 formalized the apotheosis of McInerney in a gushy cover story, this autumn uses a scathing review of some McInerney disciples as occasion to headline the news that THE BRAT PACK SPITS UP, with crudely cut-out faces of Janowitz, McInerney, Ellis et al. pasted on photos of diaper models. Nineteen eighty-seven saw the staff and guests of the *New York Times Book Review* suddenly complaining of a trend toward "world-weary creative writing projects," a spate of "Y.A.W.N.S. (Young Anomic White Novelists)," an endless succession of flash-in-the-pan "short-story starlets." In its October 11 issue, no less an éminence grise than William Gass administers "A Failing Grade For the Present Tense":

You may have noticed the plague of school-styled [writers] with which our pages have been afflicted, and taken some account of the no-account magazines that exist in order to publish them. Thousands of short-story readers and writers have been

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\*Hereafter abbreviated "C.Y."

released like fingerlings into the thin mainstream of serious prose. . . . Well, young people are young people, aren't they. . . . Adolescents consume more of their psyches than soda, and more local feelings than junk food. Is no indulgence denied them? . . . I read [a recent Leavitt-edited anthology of C.Y. fiction] as a part of my researches. It is like walking through a cemetery before they've put in any graves.

What's caused this quick reversal in mood? Is it capricious and unfair, or overdue? Most interesting: what does it imply?

In my own opinion, the honeymoon's end between the literary Establishment and the C.Y. writer was an inevitable and foreseeable consequence of the same shameless hype that led to many journeyman writers' premature elevation in the first place: condescending critical indulgence and condescending critical dismissal inhabit the same coin. It's true that some cringingly bad fiction gets written by C.Y.'s. But this is hardly an explanation for anything, since the same is true of lots of older artists, many of whom have clearly shot their bolts and now hang by name and fashion alone.

More germane is the frequent charge of a certain numbing *sameness* about much contemporary young writing. To a certain extent anyone who reads widely must agree with it. The vast bulk of the vast amount of recently published C.Y. fiction reinforces the stereotype that has all young literary enterprises falling into one or more of the following three dreary camps:

(1) Neiman-Marcus Nihilism, declaimed via six-figure Uppies and their salon-tanned, morally vacant offspring, none of whom seem to be able to make it from limo door to analyst's couch without several grams of chemical encouragement;

(2) Catatonic Realism, a.k.a. Ultraminimalism, a.k.a. Bad Carver, in which suburbs are wastelands, adults automata, and narrators blank perceptual engines, intoning in run-on monosyllables the artificial ingredients of breakfast cereal and the new human non-soul;

(3) Workshop Hermeticism, fiction for which the highest praise involves the words "competent," "finished," "problem-free," fiction over which Writing-Program pre- and proscriptions loom with the enclosing force of horizons: no character without Freudian trauma in accessible past, without near-diagnostic physical description; no image undissolved into regulation Updikean metaphor; no overture without a dramatized scene to "show" what's "told"; no denouement prior to an epiphany whose approach can be charted by any Freitag on any Macintosh.

Mean, but unfortunately fair—except for the fact that, like most generalizations, these apply validly only to the inferior examples of the work at hand. Ironically for the critic who wants both to bemoan invasions and pigeonhole the invaders, the very proliferation of C.Y. fiction, with its attendant variety, raises the generation's cream above stereotype. The preternatural smarts with which a Simpson or Leavitt can render complex parental machinations through the eyes of thoroughly believable children; the gritty white-trash lyricism of Pinckney Benedict's *Town Smokes*; the

wry, bitchy humor of a good Lorrie Moore or Amy Hempel or Debra Spark story; the political vision of William Vollmann's *You Bright and Risen Angels*; the conscientious exploration of *motive* behind Yuppie dissolution in McInerney's *Bright Lights*—these transcend Camp-following and, more important, merit neither head-patting nor sneers. See for yourself. Among the C.Y. writers who do, yes, seem to crowd the last half of this decade, there are some unique and worthy talents. Yes, all are raw, some more or less mature, some more or less apt at transcending the hype the hype-mills crank out daily. But more than a couple are originals.

But it's weird: all we C.Y. writers get consistently lumped together. Both lauds and pans invariably invoke a Generation that is both New and, in some odd way, One. Unfamiliar with the critical fashions of past decades, I don't know whether this perception has precedent, but I do think in certain ways it's not inappropriate. As of now, C.Y. writers, the good and the lousy, are in my opinion A Generation, conjoined less by chronology (Benedict is twenty-three, Janowitz over thirty) than by the new and singular environment in and about which we try to write fiction. This, that we are agnate, also goes a long way toward explaining the violent and conflicting critical reactions New Voices are provoking.

The argument, then, is that certain key things having to do with literary production are radically different for young American writers now; and that, fashion-flux aside, the fact that these key things affect our aesthetic values and literary choices serves at once to bind us together and to distance us from much of an Establishment—literary, intellectual, political—that reads and judges our stuff from their side of a . . . well, generation gap. There are, of course, uncountable differences between the formative experiences of consecutive generations, and to exhaust and explain all the ones relevant here would require both objective distance and a battalion of social historians. Having neither at hand, I propose to invite consideration of just three specific contemporary American phenomena, viz the impacts of television, of academic Creative Writing Programs, and of a revolution in the way educated people understand the function and possibility of literary narrative. These three because they seem at once powerfully affective and normatively complex. Great and grim, tonic and insidious, they are (I claim) undeniable and cohesive influences on this country's "New Voices."

Stats on the percentage of the average American day spent before small screens are well known. But the American generation born after, say, 1955 is the first for whom television is something to be *lived with*, not just looked at. Our parents regard the set rather as the Flapper did the automobile: a curiosity turned treat turned seduction. For us, their children, TV's as much a part of reality as Toyotas and gridlock. We quite literally cannot "imagine" life without it. As it does for so much of today's developed world, it presents and so defines our common experience; but we, unlike any elders,

have no memory of a world without such electronic definition. It's built in. In my own childhood, late sixties, rural downstate Illinois, miles and megahertz from any center of entertainment production, familiarity with the latest developments on "Batman" or "The Wild, Wild West" was the medium of social exchange. Much of our original play was a simple reenactment of what we'd witnessed the night before, and verisimilitude was taken very seriously. The ability to do a passable Howard Cosell, Barney Rubble, CoCo-Puff Bird, or Gomer Pyle was a measure of status, a determination of stature.

Surely television-as-lifestyle influences the modes by which C.Y. writers understand and represent lived life. A recent issue of *Arrival* saw critic Bruce Bawer lampoon many Brat-Packers' habit of delineating characters according to the commercial slogans that appear on their T-shirts. He had a scary number of examples. It's true that there's something sad in the fact that Leavitt's sole description of some characters in, say, "Danny in Transit" consists of the fact that their shirts say "Coca Cola" in a foreign language—yet maybe more sad that, for most of his reading contemporaries, this description *does the job*. Bawer's distaste seems to me misplaced: it's more properly directed at a young culture so willingly bombarded with messages equating what one consumes with who one is that brand loyalty is now an acceptable synecdoche of identity, of character.

This schism between young writers and their older critics probably extends to the whole issue of strategic reference to "popular culture" in literary fiction. The artistic deployment of pop icons—brand names, television programs, celebrities, commercial film and music—strikes those intellectuals whose consciousness was formed before the genuine Television Age as at best frivolous tics and at worst dangerous vapidities that compromise fiction's "seriousness" by dating it out of the Platonic Always where it properly resides. A fine and conscientious writing professor once proclaimed to our class that a serious story or novel always eschews "any feature that serves to date it," to fix it in history, because "Literary fiction is always timeless." When we protested that, in his own well-known work, characters moved about in electrically lit rooms, propelled themselves in autos, spoke not Anglo-Saxon but post-WWII English, inhabited a North America already separated from Africa by continental drift, he amended his ruling's application to those explicit references that would date a story in the transient Now. Pressed by further quibbling into real precision, his interdiction turned out really to be against what he called the "mass-commercial-media" reference. At this point, I think, trans-generational discourse breaks down. For this gentleman's automobilized Timeless and our F.C.C.'d own were different. Time had changed Always.

Nor, please, is this stuff a matter of mere taste or idiosyncrasy. Most good fiction writers, even young ones, are intellectuals. So are most critics and teachers (and a surprising number of editors). And television, its advertising,

and the popular culture they both reflect and define have fundamentally altered what intellectuals get to regard as the proper objects of their attention. Those cognoscenti whose values were formed before TV and advertising became psychologically pandemic are still anxious to draw a sharp distinction, à la Barbara Tuchman, between those sorts of things that have genuine "quality" and are produced and demanded by people with refined tastes, on one hand, and those sorts of things which have only "popularity" or "mass appeal," are demanded by the Great Unwashed and cheerfully supplied by those whom egalitarian capitalism has whored to the lowest of denominators, the democratic market, on the other. The enlightened older aesthete, erudite and liberal, weaned let's say between 1940 and 1960, is able to operate from a center of contradiction between genuine refinement and genuine liberalism, advertising scholars like Martin Mayer had already begun to deride by the fifties' end:

The great bulk of advertising is culturally repulsive to anyone with any developed sensitivity. So are most movies and television shows, most popular music, and a surprisingly high proportion of published books. . . . But a sensitive person can easily avoid cheap movies, cheap books, and cheap art, while there is scarcely anyone outside the jails who can avoid contact with advertising. By presenting the intellectual with a more or less accurate image of the popular culture, advertising earns his enmity and calumny. It hits him where it hurts worst: in his politically liberal and socially generous outlook—partly nourished on his avoidance of actual contact with popular taste.

I claim that intellectuals of the New Generation for whom C.Y. writers are supposed to be voices can no longer even wrap their minds around this kind of hypocrisy, much less suffer from it. Not that this "enlightenment" is earned, or even necessarily a good thing. Because it's not as though television and advertising and popular entertainments have ceased to be mostly bad art or cheap art, but just that they've imposed themselves on our generation's psyches for so long and with such power that they have entered into complicated relations with our very ideas of the world and the self. We simply cannot "relate to" the older aesthete's distanced distaste for mass entertainment and popular appeal: the distaste may well remain, but the distance has not.

And, as the pop informs our generation's ways of experiencing and reading the world, so too will it naturally affect our artistic values and expectations. Young fiction writers may spend hours each day at the writing table, performing; but we're also, each and every day, part of the great Audience. We're conditioned accordingly. We have an innate predilection for visual stimulation, colored movement, a frenetic variety, a beat you can dance to. It may be that, through hyper- and atrophy, our mental capacities themselves are different: the breadth of our attentions greater as attention spans themselves shorten. Raised on an activity at least partly passive, we experience a degree of manipulation as neutral, a fact of life. However,

wooded artfully as we are for not just our loyalty but our very *attention*, we reserve for that attention the status of a commodity, a measure of power; and our choices to bestow or withhold it carry for us great weight. So does what we regard as our God-given right to be entertained—or, if not entertained, at least stimulated: the unpleasant is perfectly OK, just so long as it *rivets*.

As one can see popular icons seriously used in much C.Y. fiction as touchstones for the world we live in and try to make into art, so one might trace some of the techniques favored by many young writers to roots in our experience as consummate watchers. E.g., events often refracted through the sensibilities of more than one character; short, dense paragraphs in which coherence is often sacrificed for straight evocation; abrupt transitions in scene, setting, point of view, temporal and causal orders; a surfacy, objective, "cinematic" third-person narrative eye. Above all, though, a comparative indifference to the imperative of mimesis, combined with an absolute passion for narrative choices that conduce to what might be called "mood." For no writer can help assuming that the reader is on some level like him: already having seen, ad nauseum, what life *looks like*, he's far more interested in how it *feels* as a signpost toward what it means.

The technical coin, too, has a tails. For instance, it's not hard to see that the trendy Ultraminimalism favored by too many C.Y. writers is deeply influenced by the aesthetic norms of mass entertainment. Indeed, this fiction depends on what's little more than a crude inversion of these norms. Where television, especially its advertising, presents everything in hyperbole, Ultraminimalism is deliberately flat, understated, "undersold." Where TV seeks everywhere to render its action either dramatic or melodramatic, to move the viewer by displaying constant movement, the Minimalist describes an event as one would an object, a geometric form in stasis; and he always does so from an emotional remove of light years. Where television does and must aim always to *please*, the Catatonic writer hefts something of a finger at subject and reader alike: one has only to read a Bret Ellis sex scene (pick a page, any page) to realize that here pleasure is neither a subject nor an aim. My own aversion to Ultraminimalism, I think, stems from its naive pretension. The Catatonic Bunch seem to feel that simply by inverting the values imposed on us by television, commercial film, advertising, etc., they can automatically achieve the aesthetic depth popular entertainment so conspicuously lacks. Really, of course, the Ultraminimalists are no less infected by popular culture than other C.Y. writers: they merely choose to define their art by opposition to their own atmosphere. The attitude betrayed is similar to that of lightweight neo-classicals who felt that to be non-vulgar was not just a requirement but an *assurance* of value, or of insecure scholars who confuse obscurity with profundity. And it's just about as annoying.

Not that the Catatonic's discomfort with a culture of and by popularity

isn't understandable. We're all at least a little uncomfortable with it—no?—probably because, as technicians like Mayer foresaw thirty years ago, escape from it has gone from impossible to inconceivable. That is, since today's popular TV culture is by its nature *mass, pan-*, it's of course going to impact the styles and choices and dreams not just of a few fingerling artists and their small readerships, but of the very human collectivities about which we try to write. And this impact has been overwhelming; the new Always has changed everything. I'm going to argue that it's done so in ways that are bad and have costs. "Bad" means inimical to many of the values our communities have evolved and held and cherished and taught. "Costs" means painful changes and losses for persons. Because, see, a mysterious beast like television begins, the more sophisticated it gets, to produce and live by an antinomy, a phenomenon whose strength lies in its contradiction: aimed ever and always at groups, masses, markets, collectivities, it's nevertheless true that the most powerful and lasting changes are wrought by TV on *individual persons*, each one of whom is forced every day to understand himself in relation to the Groups by virtue of which he seems to exist at all.

Think, for instance, about the way prolonged exposure to broadcast drama makes each one of us at once more self-conscious and less reflective. A culture more and more about *seeing* eventually perverts the relation of seer and seen. We watch various actors who play various characters involved in various relations and events. Seldom do we think about the fact that the single deep feature the characters share, with each other and with the actors who portray them, is that they are *watched*. The behavior of the actors, and—in a complicated way, through the drama they're inside—even the characters, is directed always at an audience for whom they behave . . . indeed, in virtue of whom they exist as actor or character in the first place, behind the screen's glass. 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. Precious distinctions between truly being and merely appearing get obfuscated. Imagine a Berkleyan *esse-est-percipi* universe in which God is named Nielsen.

Then consider that well-known, large, "ignorant" segment of the population that believes on a day-to-day level that what happens on televised dramas is "real." This, the enormous volume of mail addressed each day to characters and not the persons who portray them, is the iceberg's extreme tip. The berg itself is a generation (New) for whom the distinction between (real) actor artificially portraying and (pretend) character genuinely behaving gets ever more tangled. The danger of the berg is badness and cost—a shift from an understanding of self as a character in a great drama whose end is meaning to an understanding of self as an actor at a great audition whose end is *seeming*, i.e., being seen.

Actually there are uncountable ways in which efficiently conceived and disseminated popular entertainment affects the existential predicaments of both persons and groups. And if "existential" seems too weighty a term to attach to anything pop, then I think you're misunderstanding what's at stake. You're invited to consider commercial dramas that deal with violence and danger and the possibility of death. There are lots, today. Each drama has a hero. He's purposely designed so that we by our nature "identify" with him. At present this is still not hard to get us to do, for we still tend to think of our own lives this way: we're each the hero of our own drama, others around us remanded to supporting roles or (increasingly) audience status.

But now try to recall the last time you saw the "hero" die within his drama's narrative frame. It's very rarely done anymore. Entertainment professionals have apparently done research: audiences find the deaths of those with whom they identify a downer, and are less apt to watch dramas in which danger is creatively connected to the death that makes danger dangerous. The natural consequence is that today's dramatic heroes tend to be "immortal" within the frame that makes them heroes and objects of identification (for the audience, VCR- and related technology give this illusion a magnetic reality). I claim that the fact that we are strongly encouraged to identify with characters for whom death is not a significant creative possibility has real costs. We the audience, and individual you over there and me right here, lose any sense of eschatology, thus of teleology, live in a moment that is, paradoxically, both emptied of intrinsic meaning or end and quite literally *eternal*. If we're the only animals who know in advance we're going to die, we're also probably the only animals who would submit so cheerfully to the sustained denial of this undeniable and very important truth. The danger is that, as entertainment's denials of the truth get even more effective and pervasive and seductive, we will eventually forget what they're denials of. This is scary. Because it seems transparent to me that, if we forget how to die, we're going to forget how to live.

And if you think that contemporary literary artists, of whatever stature, are above blinking at a reality we all find unpleasant, consider the number of serious American fictional enterprises in the last decade that have dealt with what's acknowledged to be the single greatest organized threat to our persons and society. Try to name, say, two.

Maybe the real question is—how serious can people who have a *right* to be entertained permit "serious" fiction to be anymore? Because if I claimed above that the C.Y. writers' intellectual fathers held dear a contradictory blend of cutting-edge politics and old-guard aesthetics, I'm sure most of us would gladly trade it for the contradictions that are its replacement. Today's journeyman fiction writer finds himself both a lover of serious narrative and an ineluctably conditioned part of a pop-dominated culture in which the social stock of his own enterprise is falling. What we are inside of—what

*comprises* us—is killing what we love.

Hyperbole? It's important to remember that most television is not just entertainment: it's also narrative. And it's so true it's trite that human beings are narrative animals: every culture countenances itself as culture via a story, whether mythopoeic or politico-economic; every whole person understands his lifetime as an organized, recountable series of events and changes with at least a beginning and middle. We need narrative like we need space-time; it's a built-in thing. In the C.Y. writers today, the narrative patterns to which literate Americans are most regularly exposed are televised. And, even on a charitable account, television is a pretty low type of narrative art. It's a narrative art that strives not to change or enlighten or broaden or reorient—not necessarily even to "entertain"—but merely and always to *engage*, to *appeal to*. Its one end—openly acknowledged—is to *ensure continued watching*. And (I claim) the metastatic efficiency with which it's done so has, as cost, inevitable and dire consequences for the level of people's tastes in narrative art. For the very *expectations* of readers in virtue of which narrative art is art.

Television's greatest appeal is that it is engaging without being at all demanding. One can rest while undergoing stimulation. Receive without giving. It's the same in all low art that has as goal continued attention and patronage: it's appealing precisely because it's at once fun and easy. And the entrenchment of a culture built on Appeal helps explain a dark and curious thing: at a time when there are more decent and good and very good serious fiction writers at work in America than ever before, an American public enjoying unprecedented literacy and disposable income spends the vast bulk of its reading time and book dollar on fiction that is, by any fair standard, trash. Trash fiction is, by design and appeal, most like televised narrative: engaging without being demanding. But trash, in terms of both quality and popularity, is a much more sinister phenomenon. For while television has from its beginnings been openly motivated by—has been *about*—considerations of mass appeal and L.C.D. and profit, our own history is chock full of evidence that readers and societies may properly expect important, lasting contributions from a narrative art that understands itself as being about considerations more important than popularity and balance sheets. Entertainers can divert and engage and maybe even console; only artists can transfigure. Today's trash writers are entertainers working artists' turf. This in itself is nothing new. But television aesthetics, and television-like economics, have clearly made their unprecedented popularity and reward possible. And there seems to me to be a real danger that not only the forms but the *norms* of televised art will begin to supplant the standards of all narrative art. This would be a disaster.

I'm worried lest I sound too much like B. Tuchman here, because my complaints about trash are different from hers, and less sophisticated. My complaint against trash fiction is not that it's plebeian, and as for its rise I

don't care at all whether post-industrial liberalism squats in history as the culprit that made it inevitable. My complaint against trash isn't that it's vulgar art, or irritatingly dumb art, but that, given what makes fiction art at all, trash is simply *unreal, empty*—and that (aided by mores of and by TV) it seduces the market writers need and the culture that needs writers away from what *is* real, full, meaningful.

Even the snottiest young *artiste*, of course, probably isn't going to bear personal ill will toward writers of trash; just as, while everybody agrees that prostitution is a bad thing for everyone involved, few are apt to blame prostitutes themselves, or wish them harm. If this seems like a non sequitur, I'm going to claim the analogy is all too apt. A prostitute is someone who, in exchange for money, affords someone else the form and sensation of sexual intimacy without any of the complex emotions or responsibilities that make intimacy between two people a valuable or meaningful human enterprise. The prostitute "gives," but—demanding nothing of comparable value in return—perverts the giving, helps render what is supposed to be a revelation a transaction. The writer of trash fiction, often with admirable craft, affords his customer a narrative structure and movement that *engages* the reader—titillates, repulses, excites, transports him—without demanding of him any of the intellectual or spiritual or *artistic* responses that render verbal intercourse between writer and reader an important or even *real* activity. So when our elders tell our graduate fiction class (as they liked to do a lot) that a war for fictional art's soul is being waged in the 1980s between poetry on one side and trash on the other—to this admonishment we listen, at this we take pause. Especially when television and advertising have conditioned us to equate net worth with human worth. Sidney Sheldon, a gifted trash-master, owns jets; more people in this country write poetry than read it; the annual literary budget of the National Endowment for the Arts is less than a third of the U.S.'s yearly expenditures on military bands, less than a *tenth* of the three big networks' yearly spending on Creative Development.

Sidney Sheldon, by the way, was the Creative, Developing force behind both "I Dream of Jeannie" and "Hart to Hart." Oprah Winfrey asks him in admiration for the secret behind his success in "two such totally different media." I say to myself, "Ha," watching.

It's in terms of economics that academic Creative Writing Programs\* offer their least ambiguous advantages. Published writers (assuming they themselves have a graduate writing degree) can earn enough by workshop teaching to support themselves and their own fiction without having to resort to more numbing or time-consuming employment. On the student side, fellowships—some absurdly generous—and paid assistantships in

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\*These words are capitalized because they *understand* themselves as capitalized. Trust me on this.

teaching are usually available to almost all students. Programs tend to be a sweet deal.

And there are more such programs in this country now than anywhere anytime before. The once-lone brow of the Iowa Workshop has birthed first-rate creative departments at places like Stanford, Houston, Columbia, Johns Hopkins, Virginia, Michigan, Arizona, etc. The majority of accredited American I.H.E.s now have at least some sort of formal academic provision for students who want vocational training in fiction writing. This has all happened within the last fifteen years. It's unprecedented, and so are the effects of the trend on young U.S. fiction. Of the C.Y. writers I've mentioned above, I know of none who've not had some training in either a graduate or undergraduate writing department. Most of them hold M.F.A.'s. Some are, even as we speak, working toward a degree called a "Creative Ph.D." Never has a "literary generation" been so thoroughly and formally trained, nor has such a large percentage of aspiring fiction writers eschewed extra-mural apprenticeship for ivy and grades.

And the contributions of the academy's rise in American fiction go beyond the fiscal. The workshop phenomenon has been justly credited with a recent "renaissance of the American short story," a renaissance heralded in the late seventies with the emergence of writers like the late Raymond Carver (taught at Syracuse), Jayne Anne Phillips (M.F.A. from Iowa), and the late Breece Pancake (M.F.A. from Virginia). More small magazines devoted to short literary fiction exist today than ever before, most of them either sponsored by programs or edited and staffed by recent M.F.A.s. Short story collections, even by relative unknowns, are now halfway viable economically, and publishers have moved briskly to accommodate trend.

More important for young writers themselves, programs can afford them time, academic (and parental!) legitimacy, and an environment in which to Hone Their Craft, Grow, Find Their Voice,\* etc. For the student, a community of serious, like-minded persons with whom to exchange ideas has pretty clear advantages. So, in many ways, does the fiction class itself. In a workshop, rudiments of technique and process can be taught fairly quickly to kids who might in the past have spent years in New York lofts learning basic tricks of the trade by trial and error. A classroom atmosphere of rigorous constructive criticism helps toughen young writers' hides and prepare them for the wildly disparate responses the world of real readers holds in store. Best of all, a good workshop forces students regularly to formulate consistent, reasoned criticisms of colleagues' work; and this, almost without fail, makes them far more astute about the strengths and weaknesses of their own fiction.

Still, I think it's the Program-sword's other edge that justifies the various Establishments' present disenchantment with C.Y. fiction more than

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\*On these, too: they are to Programs what *azan* are to mosques.

anything else. The dark side of the Program trend exists, grows; and it's much more than an instantiation of the standard academic lovely-in-theory-but-mangled-in-practice conundrum. So we'll leave aside nasty little issues like departmental politics, faculty power struggles that summon images of sharks fighting for control of a bathtub, the dispiriting hiss of everybody's egos in various stages of inflation or deflation, a downright unshakable publish-or-perish mentality that equates appearance in print with talent or promise. These might be particular to one student's experience. Certain problems inherent in Programs' very structure and purpose, though, are not. For one thing, the pedagogical relation between fiction professor and fiction student has unhealthiness built right in. Writing teachers are by calling writers, not teachers. The fact that most of them are teaching, not for its own sake, but to support a separate and obsessive calling, has got to be accepted, as does its consequence: every minute spent on class and department business is, for Program staff, a minute not spent working on their own art, and must to a degree be resented. The best teachers seem to acknowledge the conflict between their vocations, reach some kind of internal compromise, and go on. The rest, according to their capacities, either suppress the resentment or make sure they do the barely acceptable minimum their primary source of income requires. Almost all, though, take the resentment out in large part on the psyches of their pupils—for pupils represent artistic time wasted, an expenditure of a teacher's fiction-energy without fiction-production. It's all perfectly understandable. Clearly, though, feeling like a burden, an impediment to *real* art-production, is not going to be conducive to a student's development, to say nothing of his enthusiasm. Not to mention his basic willingness to engage his instructor in the kind of dynamic back-and-forth any real creative education requires, since it's usually the very-low-profile, docile, *undemanding* student who is favored, recruited, supported and advanced by a faculty for whom demand equals distraction.

In other words, the fact that creative writing teachers must wear two hats has unhappy implications for the quality of both M.F.A. candidates and the education they receive in Programs. And it's very unclear who if anyone's to blame. Teaching fiction writing is darn hard to do well. The conscientious teacher must not only be both highly critical and emotionally sensitive, acute in his reading and articulate about his acuity: he must be all these things with regard to precisely those issues that can be communicated to and discussed in a workshop *group*. And that inevitably yields a distorted emphasis on the sorts of simple, surface concerns that a dozen or so people can talk about coherently: straightforward mechanics of traditional fiction production like fidelity to point-of-view, consistency of tense and tone, development of character, verisimilitude of setting, etc. Faults or virtues that cannot quickly be identified or discussed between bells—little things like interestingness, depth of vision, originality, political assumptions and agendas, the question whether deviation from norm is in some cases OK—

must, for sound Program-pedagogical reasons, be ignored or discouraged.

Too, in order to remain both helpful and sane, the professional writer/teacher has got to develop, consciously or not, an aesthetic doctrine, a static set of principles about how a "good" story works. Otherwise he'd have to start from intuitive scratch with each student piece he reads, and that way the liquor cabinet lies. But consider what this means: the Program staffer must teach the practice of art, which by its nature always exists in at least *some* state of tension with the rules of its practice, as essentially an applied system of rules. Surely this kind of *enforced* closure to further fictional possibilities isn't good for most teachers' own literary development. Nor is it at all good for their students, most of whom have been in school for at least sixteen years and know that the way the school game is played is: (1) Determine what the instructor wants; and (2) Supply it forthwith. Most Programs, then, produce two kinds of students. There are those few who, whether particularly gifted or not, have enough interest and faith in their fiction instincts to elect sometimes to deviate from professors' prescriptions. Many of these students are shown the door, or drop out, or gut out a couple years during which the door is always being pointed to, throats cleared, Fin. Aid unavailable. These turn out to be the lucky ones. The other kind are those who, the minute fanny touches chair, make the instructors' dicta their own—whether from insecurity, educational programming, or genuine agreement (rare)—who row instead of rock, play the game quietly and solidly, and begin producing solid, quiet work, most of which lands neatly in Dreary Camp #3, nice, cautious, boring Workshop Stories, stories as tough to find technical fault with as they are to remember after putting them down. *Here* are the rouged corpses for Dr. Gass's graveyard. Workshops *like* corpses. They *have* to. Because any class, even one in "creativity," is going to place supreme value on *not making mistakes*. And corpses, whatever their other faults, never ever screw up.\*

I doubt whether any of this is revelatory, but I hope it's properly scary. Because Creative Writing Programs, while claiming in all good faith to train professional writers, in reality train *more teachers of Creative Writing*. The only thing a Master of Fine Arts degree actually qualifies one to do is teach . . . Fine Arts. Almost all present fiction professors hold something like an M.F.A. So do most editors of literary magazines. Most M.F.A. candidates who stay in the Business will go on to teach and edit. Small wonder, then, that older critics feel in so much current C.Y. fiction the tweed breeze that

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\*Only considerations of space and legal liability restrain me from sharing with you in detail the persistent legend, at one nameless institution, of the embalmed cadaver cadged from the medical school by two deeply troubled young M.F.A. candidates, enrolled in a workshop at their proxy, smuggled pre-bell into the seminar room each week, and propped in its assigned seat, there to clutch a pencil in its white fist and stare straight ahead with an expression of somewhat rigid good cheer. The name of the legend is "The Cadaver That Got a B."

could signal a veritable storm of boredom: envision if you dare a *careful, accomplished* national literature, mistake-free, seamless as fine linoleum; fiction preoccupied with norm as value instead of value's servant; fiction by academics who were taught by academics and teach aspiring academics; novel after critique-resistant novel about tenure-angst, coed-lust, cafeteria-schmerz.

Railing against occluded subject matter and tradition-tested style is one thing. A larger issue is whether Writing Programs and their grinding, story-every-three-weeks workshop assembly lines could, eventually, lower all standards, precipitate a broad-level literary mediocrity, fictional equivalents of what Donald Hall calls "The McPoem." I think, if they get much more popular, and do not drop the pose of "education" in favor of a humbler and more honest self-appraisal—a form of literary patronage and an occasion for literary community—we might well end up with a McStory chain that would put Ray Kroc to shame. Because it's not just the unhealthy structure of the Program, the weird creative constraints it has to impose on instructors and students alike—it's the type of student who is attracted by such an arrangement. A sheepheaded willingness to toe any line just because it's the most comfortable way to survive is contemptible in any student. But students are just symptoms. Here's the disease: in terms of rigor, demand, intellectual and emotional requirement, a lot of Creative Writing Programs are an unfunny joke. Few require of applicants any significant preparation in history, literature, criticism, composition, foreign languages, art or philosophy; fewer still make attempts to provide it in curricula or require it as a criterion for graduation.

Part of this problem is political. Academic departments of Creative Writing and "Straight Literature" tend to hold each other in mutual contempt, a state of affairs that student, Program, and serious-fiction audience are all going to regret a lot if it continues to obtain. Way too many students are being "certified" to go out there and try to do meaningful work on the cutting edge of an artistic discipline of whose underpinnings, history, and greatest achievements they are largely ignorant. The obligatory survey of "Writers Who Are Important to *You*" at the start of each term seems to suggest that Homer and Milton, Cervantes and Shakespeare, Maupassant and Gogol—to say nothing of the Testaments—have receded into the mists of Straight Lit; that, for far too much of this generation, Salinger invented the wheel, Updike internal combustion, and Carver, Beattie and Phillips drive what's worth chasing. Forget Allan Bloom gnashing his teeth at high-school students who pretend to no aspirations past an affordable mortgage—we're supposed to want to be *writers*, here. We as a generation are in danger of justifying Eliot at his zaniest if via a blend of academic stasis and intellectual disinterest we show to the dissatisfaction of all that culture is either cumulative or it is dead, empty on either side of a social Now that admits neither passion about the future nor curiosity about the past.

The fact that we Aspiring Voices as a generation show so little intellectual curiosity is the least defensible thing of all. But it could well be that the very thing that makes our anti-intellectualism so obscene renders it also extremely temporary. Thing in question: our generation is lucky enough to have been born into an artistic climate as stormy and exciting as anything since Pound and Co. turned the world-before-last on its head. The last few generations of American writers have breathed the relatively stable air of New Criticism and an Anglo-American aesthetics untainted by Continental winds. The climate for the "next" generation of American writers—should we decide to inhale rather than die—is aswirl with what seems like long-overdue appreciation for the weird achievements of such aliens as Husserl, Heidegger, Bakhtin, Lacan, Barthes, Poulet, Gadamer, de Man. The demise of Structuralism has changed a world's outlook on language, art, and literary discourse; and the contemporary artist can simply no longer afford to regard the work of critics or theorists or philosophers—no matter how stratospheric—as divorced from his own concerns.

Crudely put, the idea that literary language is any kind of neutral medium for the transfer of \_\_\_\_\_\* from artist to audience, or that it's any kind of inert tool lying there passively to be well- or ill-used by a communicator of meaning, has been cast into rich and serious question. With it, too, the stubborn Romanticist view of fiction as essentially a mirror, distinguished from the real world it reflects only by its portability and mercilessly "objective" clarity, has finally taken it on the chin. Form-content distinctions are now flat planets. Language's promotion from mirror to eye, from *organikos* to organic, is yesterday's news (except in those two lonely outposts, TV and the Creative classroom) as the tide of Post-Structuralism, Marxism, Feminism, Freudianism, Deconstruction, Semiotics, Hermeneutics, and attendant -isms and -ics moves through the ("Straight") U.S. academy and into the consciousness of the conscious American adult.

The crux being that, if mimesis isn't dead, then it's on life-support courtesy of those who soon enough will be.

And what a row C.Y. writers can see among its heirs! Only about eighty years after visual-arts movements like Dada and Cubism supplanted "referential" art (no camera inventions to threaten the sovereignty of literary mimesis, see), the *literature* of the referent, of "psychological glow," of *illusion* has finally come under constructive attack from angles as disparate as they are dazzling. The refracted world of Proust and Musil, Schulz and Stein, Borges and Faulkner has, post-War, exploded into diffractation, a weird, protracted Manhattan Project staffed by Robbe-Grillet, Grass, Nabokov, Sorrentino, Bohl, Barth, McCarthy, García Márquez, Puig, Kundera, Gass, Fuentes, Elkin, Donoso, Handke, Burroughs, Duras,

\*Take your pick of Tolstoy, Schopenhauer or Richards and insert "feeling," "freedom from phenomena," or "relevant mental condition," respectively, in the space provided.

Elkin, Coover, Gombrowicz, LeGuin, Lessing, Acker, Gaddis, Coetzee, Ozick. To name just a few. We, the would-be heirs to a gorgeous chaos, stand witness to the rise and fall of the *nouveau roman*, Postmodernism, Metafiction, The New Lyricism, The New Realism, Minimalism, Ultra-minimalism, Performance-Theory. It's a freaking maelstrom, and the C.Y. writer who still likes to read a bit can't help feeling torn: if the Program is maddening in its stasis, the real world of serious fiction just *won't hold still*.

If one can stomach a good dose of simplification, though, there can be seen one deep feature shared by all the cutting-edge fiction that resonates with the post-Hiroshima revolution. That is its fall into time, a loss of innocence about the language that is its breath and bread. Its unblinking recognition of the fact that the relations between literary artist, literary language, and literary artifact are vastly more complex and powerful than has been realized hitherto. And the insight that is courage's reward—that it is *precisely* in those tangled relations that a forward-looking, fertile literary value may well reside.

This doesn't mean that Metafiction and Minimalism, the two most starkly self-conscious of the movements that exploit human beings' wary and excited new attention to language, compose or even indicate the directions in which the serious fiction of "whole new generations" will move. Both these forms strike me as simple engines of self-reference (Metafiction overtly so, Minimalism a bit sneakier); they are primitive, crude, and seem already to have reached the Clang-Bird-esque horizon of their own possibility—self-reference being just a tiny wrinkled subset of aboutness. I'm pretty convinced, though, that they're an early symptom of a dark new enlightenment, that quite soon no truly serious C.Y. writer will be able to pretend anymore that the use of literary expression for the construction of make-believe is a straightforward enterprise. We are the recipients of a knife unprecedentedly vulnerable to its own blade, and all the Writing Program prizes and "Mary Tyler Moore Show" reruns in the world can't hide what's in our hands forever.

Exciting is also confusing, and I'd be distrustful of any C.Y. snot who claimed to know where literary fiction will go during this generation's working lifetime. It's obviously true that the revolution I've just gushed about has yielded changes in outlook that are as yet primarily destructive: illusions exposed, assumptions overturned, dearly held prejudices debunked. We seem, now, to see our literary innocence taken from us without anything substantial to replace it. An age between. There's a marvelously apposite Heidegger quotation here, but I'll spare you.

The bold conclusion here, then, is that the concatenated New Generation with whom the critics are currently playing coy mistress is united by confusion, if nothing else. And this might be why so much of the worst C.Y. fiction fits so neatly into the Three Camps reviewers consign it to: Workshop

Hermeticism because in confusing times caution seems prudent; Catatonia because in confusing times the bare minimal seems easy; Yuppie Nihilism because the mass culture the Yuppie inhabits and instantiates is itself at best empty and at worst evil—and in confusing times the revelation of something even this obvious is, up to a point, valuable.

Well, but it's fair to ask how valuable. Of course it's true that an unprecedented number of young Americans have big disposable incomes, fine tastes, nice things, competent accountants, access to exotic intoxicants, attractive sex partners, and are still deeply unhappy. All right. Some good fiction has held up a mercilessly powder-smearred mirror to the obvious. What troubles me about the fact that the Gold-Card-fear-and-trembling fiction just keeps coming is that, if the upheavals in popular, academic and intellectual life have left people with any long-cherished conviction intact, it seems as if it should be an abiding faith that the conscientious, talented, and lucky artist of any age retains the power to effect change. And if Marx (sorry—last dropped name) derided the intellectuals of his day for merely interpreting the world when the real imperative was to change it, the derision seems even more apt today when we notice that many of our best-known C.Y. writers seem content merely to have reduced interpretation to whining. And what's frustrating for me about the whiners is that precisely the state of general affairs that *explains* a nihilistic artistic outlook makes it *imperative* that art *not* be nihilistic. I can think of no better argument for giving Mimesis-For-Mimesis'-Sake the chair than the fact that, for a young fiction writer, inclined by disposition and vocation to pay some extra attention to the way life gets lived around him, 1987's America is not a nice place to be. The last cohesive literary generation came to consciousness during the comparatively black-and-white era of Vietnam. We, though, are Watergate's children, television's audience, Reagan's draft-pool, and everyone's market. We've reached our majority in a truly bizarre period in which "Wrong is right," "Greed is good," and "It's better to look good than to feel good"—and when the poor old issue of trying to *be* good no longer even merits a straight face. It seems like one big echo of Mayer the fifties' ad-man: "In a world where private gratification seems the supreme value, all cats are grey."

*Except art*, is the thing. Serious, real, conscientious, aware, ambitious art is not a grey thing. It has never been a grey thing and it is not a grey thing now. This is why fiction in a grey time *may not be grey*. And why the titles of all but one or two of the best works of Neiman-Marcus Nihilism are going to induce aphasia quite soon in literate persons who read narrative art for what makes it real.

And, besides an unfair acquaintance with many young writers who are not yet Conspicuous and so not known to you, this is why I'd be willing to bet anything at least a couple and maybe a bunch of the Whole New Generation are going to make art, maybe make great art, maybe even make

great art change. One thing about the Young you can trust in 1987: if we're willing to devote our lives to something, you can rest assured we get off on it. And nothing has changed about why writers who don't do it for the money write: it's art, and art is meaning, and meaning is power: power to color cats, to order chaos, to transform void into floor and debt into treasure. The best "Voices of a Generation" surely know this already; more, they let it inform them. It's quite possible that none of the best are yet among the Conspicuous. A couple might even be . . . *autodidacts*. But, especially now, none of them need worry. If fashion, flux and academy make for thin milk, at least that means the good stuff can't help but rise. I'd get ready.

CRASH OF '69

by David Foster Wallace

KARRIER

It's great. I'm always wrong. It's great.

Ask anybody except my agent if it's great. He'll be in checks and Weejuns, pointing binoculars at narrow horses hung with satin as they're led toward their boxes.

Mr. Diggs will say it's great. He holds his racing form a certain way. He folds both sides together, to compare possibilities.

He'll say So what about Rusty Hull in the Fourth, kid.

And I'll say A winner, so sure a thing it's almost boring, money in the account of our choice, Mr. Diggs.

He'll put the forms side by side and feel the square of hair on his chin and say So then what about Siberian Saber-Toothed Crotch-Cricket, Karrier? Does Siberian Saber-Toothed Crotch-Cricket have a chance here in the Fourth?

I'll say Mr. Diggs sir, no way. As in no chance. As in I feel in my chest, bowels the absence of even one slim snowball's chance for Siberian Saber-Toothed Crotch-Cricket.

The form trembles a certain way in his hands as he trains the glasses on a certain horse, from here a tiny hull atop legs.

But are you sure Karrier.

I feel it, Mr. D. It's that feeling, with the tight hide and velvet lips. That no-way certainty.

THE WOMAN WHO'S GOING TO BE HIS LOVER

I'll take Father's arm and we'll take our constitutional together through the dawning halls of the Federal Reserve, to the sound of the click of my heels and the squeak of his chair, as the fire in the East window yellows. He says We can't live like this, child. A whole nation has lost the cool side of the pillow. First thing every morning I taste in my mouth the human potential for evil.

His neck's slow tic sends his head around over his shoulder. It has ceased to be great. The only brilliance he sees is over his shoulder, now.

KARRIER

And, since it's great, it ends up great, like always. Mr. Diggs will have collected our winnings, we'll be on our way through the Throughway back downstate, drinking some liquor out

of the back seat's bar and tossing nuts at the back of the chauffeur's little distant head, in its cap.

How's this for a year, then, Mr Diggs will say, inspecting, unwrapping linen from a bottle's body. Have a try, boyo. He'll pour, blowing off the heads.

I'll have a try.

A terrible year. Bluck. This is awful. Bluck. Patooey.

Good enough, he'll say.

If I hate it, it's good enough for Mr. Diggs. Because I'm always wrong.

#### THAT WOMAN

My Father, behind his toothless breakfast pap and the paper that's the room's fifth wall: Have a look at this: According to this boy a giant gravity of the truth's greatness bends light around the whole circumference of the planet, allowing the kid's agent to see the back of his own head.

His own sunflower head whips at the sun. The back of Father's head has a strange phrenological jut, as if his skull were trying to exit. His newspaper is in his yogurt. A spare man, late in Term, in doubt, his bones are his beauty, now.

#### MR. DIGGS

I don't know the driver's who talked to the Journal? Try a cashew on for size, driver! Clunk! Right in the noggin. See that, Karrier? Clunk!

#### KARRIER

My Dad was always wrong. It was great.

He worked on Wall Street. He was Wall Street. He analyzed the market. Always wrongly. He was always wrong for a big firm that kept him high in a corner office with drawn shades and a bare bulb. He was the worst.

He was the worst, your old man, the former retired market analysts will say to me, in admiration, no rancor, their faces recessed and protruding, eyes redly milky, at the anniversary of the Crash.

I'll disagree.

He was the worst, they'll insist, shaking their manes, raising snifters of superior sherry:

Yadley here remembers the time he went in to your old man and he said Karrier he said he said Karrier, gone over the material yet on this newfangled Eastman Kodak outfit? and your old man he said, Yadley, no. As in not even a fraction of a chance. Meaning a bare zero potential for growth. He pleaded with Yadley, Yadley did he plead or did he plead? he said You gotta

believe me. Trust me on this one. A dead bird. Stillborn. A loser. A dink. A dead bird, spiralling out of the sky. I'm imploring here, he said. He said grab Mr. Lynch by the lapels. Get Mr. Merrill in a headlock if you have to. Not a cent into this dry sponge. This commode for funds. My gut is crying out on this one.

Yadley has a snapshot of the whole thing, he'll say.

He was great, they'll say.

And he was great. He was wrong about Coca Cola. Frozen OJ. Ford. ITT. CBS. AT&T. Radio. Nabisco. Xerox. He put himself squarely behind The Dumont Network; washboards; the Calvin Coolidge Charm School; the Fatty Arbuckle kid's doll. An automatic icepick concern out of Sag Harbor. The future of chipped beef. Teapot Dome Petroleum. Lead paint. Streudle; scones; the Ritz-, as opposed to the Marx-, Brothers.

He was Wall Street. His big firm reacted negatively off his every call. And got so big they became Wall Street, for a while. They relied on him. He was their weapon. This was what was great: he was always wrong.

LOVER, DAUGHTER, WOMAN

So when Father falls into the doubts that surround this whole fiscal policy of economic aggression, fighting guns with butter, and I bring him to trusted Billy G., Billy G. says to him Don't be so naive, Father, about this thing. This democracy and freedom of choice issue. You cannot let those people hold an election and then turn around and elect what means no more elections. Can you let them vote for no more voting? Can you underwrite their freedom of speech to utter commands for silence? He joins the apostle who sings, as he completes Billy's pedicure, the Gregorian he's come to love.

Quod fervet tanto circum te, Christe, tumultu  
Non hoc ira maris, Christe, sed ambitio est  
Haec illa ambitio est, hoc tanto te rogat ore,  
Possit ut ad monitus, Christe, tacere tuos.

But Father vacillates. Who is to be trusted to be more than just sincere? Everyone is right from their own perspective: the Left, State, the Right, War. We laugh, across the table: can you vote for no more voting?

KARRIER

Though Mr. Diggs, long as the honest day, will disagree:

The key was to always be wrong. Karrier, Karrier's old man, they were always wrong. Infallibly wrong. Which when you get down to tacks is as good as right. Right? Am I right? I get input on a matter from Karrier here. I know for sure the input's wrong-- Karrier here's basically in his way telling me what's right. Right? He's magic. He's like a pointer, that points with the back of his head. So what if the SEC's got the kid barred from the market? We've got him consulting to some very gigantic names in entertainment and games of chance: L.A. and A.C. and L.V. Casinos. Horses and greyhounds. He gives out input for Nielsen on the potential of certain elements of entertainment, TV pilots, certain performers, which stars will mean which market shares for which year, which scripts and songs spell Blockbuster, with a H. We've got feelers from political guys. Candidates, who don't mind how he has to stay behind the scenes in shadows. Also alternative energy industries. Coal. Certain foreign governmental bodies. Currency traders. There's a galaxy of markets for infallible error out there. We're rolling in it. The kid's a mine, under certain conditions. I just keep him happy: he keeps being wrong.

#### THAT WOMAN WHO WILL SHAPE EVENTS

And, in the way of the sincerely tortured, Father is right. Whom to trust? Anyone with enough critical distance on his best-held convictions to know? We all put our heads together.

Billy G. nominates God, over sherry. But Allen G. dabs angrily with his napkin. God? By 1969 God is operating on a marginal utility of 0, in terms of trust. Billy G. settles back into a patient smile and the professional waft of his iron-waver. Really, he inquires, a nautilus-shaped bit of scene at a lip's corner.

If Allen G. is right about this intuition, this prediction-of-now, that the public reality they all rent space in is fundamentally textual, then God, the big non-de-plume, is either a sadist or a dyslexic. His reality wants to revolve off contradictions--straight lines are curved; I am both subject and object; Billy G. is unattractively attractive; Father's best chance at immortality is to die in Term; I both love and hate my Father. Fine. But then why invest us with mental schemata in which contradictions are either lacunae or lunatic, the Pale to be Beyond? Why write us as rational when our very faith in the penman's efficacy requires an arational leap? Why invest us with a compulsion for Romance and then make our genitals look as they do?

Allen G. is wrong. Father is wracked by policy questions that have become bigger than all of us. He needs the practical, the directive. He complains Allen diddles while Diem burns.

He needs someone in whom to Believe, Billy G., who has DECOME HIS DEBUTER, beseeches the Fed's barrel vaults.

Though later we'll both laugh, together, across yards of

breakfast nook, the Journal; new Nietzsche; God is Dyslexic, as  
Father scans the racing form.

KARRIER

I'm pretty unhappy. I live in a watch-towered uptown  
condominium I was sure I'd hate when Mr. Diggs put down the  
deposit. It's up-to-the-minute, metal and daco and glass, and the  
glass and metal windows are just so much more art; they make me  
feel empty, outside them. Though the price was sure right.

I tend to be dour. I'm overweight and asthmatic. My chest  
twitters when I breathe. My lips are wet all the time. I've got a  
kind of dent in my forehead, as if I'd been creamed with a  
shovel. My skull juts in back, I waddle, and sweat. I have  
retrograde ejaculations and unpleasant breath. My wife is a  
beautiful girl whose love for me I doubt. I see the hate behind  
her smile. I feel the restraint of black uges behind every neck  
massage.

And the baby. Don't even ask about the fat white baby with  
its little dent and empty Halloween grin.

It's great to always be wrong, though. Just thank God I  
found Mr. D. there next to me on that bridge that night. He  
explained how he'd pulled over when he saw me balancing my weight  
between the weight and the rope. He asked me why, kid, why. Give  
it here, he said. I gave it there. Cars were going across the  
bridge. I could see his eyes: they were the color of skin in the  
light of his Day-Blo tie. Those ties were the rage. I trusted  
him. It was an instinctive thing. I tend to be ruled by instinct.  
I refused to even consider going back to his Agency's office with  
him. In his car I told him several lies.

In his Agency's offices Mr. Diggs tested my claims at  
length.

The Edsel, kid? he asked, eating tuna with his fingers from  
a can on a desk in an office of the docks, near the bridge.

I had Edsel-instincts.

All the way. A national phenom. Sell the farm. Run don't  
walk to your nearest Edsel dealer.

This Elvis boy?

All hips and lips. Dirty, derivative, dark, doomed to die,  
thin as a rail, destitute. In detention. Moral charges.

He ran his finger around the inside of the can.

I feel stuff like this I said. It's like I feel it, inside  
me.

He looked at the empty can of fish. Your destiny? he said.

I began to wish I could see the noosed braid of the bridge's  
lights across the docks and unlit Sound. To try to follow in my  
Dad's footsteps, I said, and to fail. To miss every print in the  
snow.

I began not to sob. I insisted it had nothing to do with  
Dad, or the blur of banker's vest and teller's visor, the dead  
MIRD's spiral into the Manhattan sidewalk.

'26. He'd been right. He begged his firm not to invest in  
its own stock. No more valueless paper, he'd cried, at the

breakfast table. The market's running on sheer hunger he said. Illustrating messily with a muffin. Hunger everywhere, that results in a Consuming Panic. Analogous to a dying animal, running. It's all of a sudden all investment and profit-taking and predication and no production or insight or making do. I feel it, he told Mr. Lynch, falling into itself. In the future.

But word got out, even with drawn shades. They all rushed to invest in themselves.

But he was right, in '26. It crashed inward. Lynch went down. Merrill slapped Dad around, under the office's bare bulb. From the dusty hall, Yadley the analyst could hear Dad being slapped, called a fallible fraud who'd brought everything down, for Merrill.

The market was a rabid starving Ursine Bull.

Dad said he watched out the shaded window as captains of industry and investment held their noses and jumped from their holes all up and down Wall Street's grey canyon. It rained bankers in blue vests and captains of industry. The air hung with plummeting well-dressed forms. It was a seminal day. Magritte painted the plummeting forms. A. Korschach conceptualized the Korschach test from his little analyst's office overlooking the sidewalk.

And the sidewalk. We found a note in Dad's vest pocket, spread out all over. It said he found the axis-tilting embarrassment of fallible fallibility too much to bear, though he was sure, deep inside, he'd find a way to get through it emotionally.

MR. DIGGS

But except I'm wondering, lately, how long the kid can keep it up, this wrongness. He's been at it, what, six years? And this mistaken belief that his old man died in '29. Of course his old man agreed. Kid asks him Are you the dead one, what's a guy that's always wrong going to say? You have to be very careful with this type of commodity what you ask them. The old guy's still up there convinced he's lying there, dead. They even rigged a kind of crypt in the office. You want to go to a crypt for financial advice? Some chicken-sides, some-earth fumes, a little old wine too? This year is what year?

The whole thing's getting less great, I'm thinking.

KARRIER

I talk with Dad's enduring and nextinguishable spirit quite a bit. We're closer than just about anyone else and I. We visit Mom's grave. He gives me advice about Mr. Diggs, which I take, since it's wrong. The whole thing tends to be spiritual, dream-like, near the grave.

The whole thing, to tell the truth, is--while of course still great--dream-like. Every morning I wake up, tasting a kind

Wallace/

of evil that needs to be spit, and I'm facing my smiling wife's smile, and the bars of the crib beyond that. And I feel now like I'm saving this spiritual kind of dream-like quality from a kind of near-disaster every morning.

At work the whole thing has the quality of speechlessness in a dream, too. An inability to speak when there's something so important to speak about that it makes you unable. I don't feel like I ever speak, now.

#### WHO WILL LOVE HIM

I'm going to get on a train. D.C. will retreat, chugging. West Virginia will be dingy and clotted, Pennsylvania lush and Dutch, Philadelphia a lunge against its own umbrella of soot.

The Bronx will be blasted, lunar, craggy, recessive. When I disembark it'll be afternoon, autumn, the sun a bloody nugget past the blasted watching sky. The streets will be nothing like canyons. Paper flutters with the soft synchronicity of doves in all the gutters. A van's snout bears a spare tire like a shield.

I see all this.

I'll hail a cab. The driver will be one of those New York cab drivers, born past time, who lock your doors and then chatter. He'll sound out every syllable of 'interesting' and will pronounce 'especially' 'expectally.' I ask for the financial district, a term which in timeless-New-York-cab-driverese seems to mean 'Please give me your opinion on every issue facing collective man, making reference whenever possible to your own life and experience.'

I narrow the request to Wall Street, but we're at Cuba, the Berlin Wall, and I begin to doubt my own arrival.

#### KARRIER

I think maybe I'm being followed. It's maybe the girl in the taxi. The taxi is behind me wherever we go. The cabbie has a donkey-shaped face and wears a regulation cap and keeps talking in the mirror to the possible girl, gesturing with his left hand. I'm going to mention it to Mr. Diggs so he'll assure me I'm wrong.

I'm pretty sure it's a girl.

She also follows me wherever I go on foot, wearing sunglasses much like Jackie O. She walks slowly, but doesn't skulk, or pretend to be at all interested in store windows when I turn to try to face her, as she possibly tailgates me.

When I think I'm looking, she just looks at me and smiles, chewing at her lips. It is easy to both smile and chew your lips. I've never tried, but this girl and possible follower chews her lips in a kind of meaningful way. It's something like the way an elephant chews its leaves: very slow, centered totally inward. She reminds me of a slim attractive sunglasses-wearing elephant, delicately picking food off a branch and centering it inward to

her mouth, as she smiles beside the store window. There is a kind of slow, elephantine, inevitable grace to her way of possibly following me. I'm not sure about it. And I like that, somehow.

MR. DIGGS

Except now you have to watch what you ask the kid. All of a sudden you need your basic yes-or-no type situation. You need a situation where you can go Karrier. I got this option right here, or on the other hand I got this option over there, is all I've got to choose from. 1-50 you say. Then if you can give him two options he'll murder the right one by pleading for the other. He'll show you what I want by pointing the other way.

But yes I admit we're facing possible trouble on the wider options out there on the market that keep getting wider and more numerous every day. Things can get misleading now. Now if you ask the kid 2+2, he'll give you any answer but 4. So OK, don't get me wrong, I'm not looking at horse-mouths, he's still wrong. But is he infallible? Because how are you supposed to know from exactly 4 out of maybe 6, or 9, or 3000, or the any-answer-but-4 he'll always give you now. See? That's what's not great, now. He used to be able to name it anything-but-4, he used to be able to say anything but 4 Mr. Diggs, just steer way clear of 4. Now maybe he'll say 6, or 19. Now he can say anything but 4, but he doesn't say Anything But 4.

He's getting scared, or else cocky. He rebels against the seclusions, the projections, the drawn shades and the 3rd St. brownstone. He wants a wife, a family. Says he wants to do more than just misinterpret what's past the window. He has to be handled with care. You have to maneuver him, now, like something you want to think before you point it at something.

Plus don't breathe a word one but I live in terror of the day somebody gets the kid to lose faith. To know he's always wrong. Cause if he trusts it if he says I'm always wrong, either way no way he's still infallibly wrong. Right? It'd be it. He'd be finished. It'd be the old man all over again. It'd be back to blue comics and leather dancers and fish in cans for L. Dempsey Diggs.

THE WOMAN OF KARRIER DREAMS

And when I finally climb across, skulk and lie my way into him, high above the street, when I see him, over the card table, in the office, I don't see him: I see against the bulb's bare glare a kind of embryonic, wrinkled and cervically pink, floating, its fists to its face, upside-down in an amnion of dirty tungsten light and cleanly dancing error. I feel, inside, that what's been said is true. It's Oliver Father's greetings, refer to what's been said, up and down the Coast, from the Florida dog tracks to the Boston promoters of British musicians.

I sit in the folding chair and open myself to him, whom we

Wallace/

10

need. For Father, late in Term as dying of doubt.  
I speak my peace.

KARRIER

Her nipples--it makes me nervous that it's been her shadowing me, so I was right, and right about her being a girl, behind Jackie's horny black glasses, she's a girl because as she undresses with the no-nonsense a little child her nipples seem sort of to burst from her breasts. (She has breasts.) They tumble, really, as if from those things at Thanksgiving. A...cornucopia of nipple.

A WOMAN WHO HAS AN ALIVE FATHER OUT OF LOVE FOR WHOM SHE WILL LOVE  
KARRIER, AND ALLOW HIM TO SHARE EVENTS, VIA HER

Open, I see what he sees as he paces with Webster's C's. Here are pin-up thighs, the shadow of a butter-fed belly. An aspect of hair at each temple's dent. shaded eyes that break what they see.

Is what the driver and Webster and Allan G. say about you true. Is the truth great, for

KARRIER

The nipples on her breasts seem to point, the way Uncle Sam points, at wherever I am. He keeps folding her garmented districts and looking at the open shade. Maybe waiting for me to draw it. I never draw the shade it wouldn't be right.

I'm pacing back and forth in front of the powerful government girl who probably leads about me and follows me and who's chewing delicately at her lips undressed. I begin to doubt Mr. Diggs asked her here. I look at the back of my skull, which juts.

MISS M. LYNCH, DAUGHTER OF THE 1st CHAIRMAN OF THE FEDERAL RESERVE  
BANK OF THE UNITED STATES, OCTOBER, '69:

I have to laugh at the sight of his moist, girl-shy, touching at the indentation of his forehead, pacing back and forth, refusing to look with the headfret aversion of the Born Locker.

I ask him whether he's ever had a proposition. Before. Gee, he says, nervous beyond account, is that the door I see over there?

But the part of him he looks down on knows what's true. This is not a born liar.

Wallace/

11

KARRIER

They want to trust me, so trust me. What happens when his  
naked nipply chewed daughter spins her glasses around a pink-  
nailed finger and asks you if it's great to always be wrong: you  
see yourself as she might see: the eyes over shiny thighs promise  
a greatness earned, a navigator of options. In her eyes are  
seismic shudders, sparks of monetary infusion. She sees me like a  
man sees a weapon. Wanting to promise what to do.

DIGGS

I know the rest. Spare me the Laissez business-cycle shit.  
Since who'd asked the old man the question in the first place,  
that brought the whole thing in focus, after all? Not even he'd  
deny he thinks the whole thing is great.

KARRIER

It's great. It's like a thing I feel, I admit it.

Wallace/

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SECTION: STYLE; PAGE D3; BOOK WORLD  
LENGTH: 1002 words  
HEADLINE: The Horror of Pretentiousness  
SERIES: Occasional  
BYLINE: David Foster Wallace  
BODY: THE GREAT AND SECRET SHOW  
By Clive Barker Harper & Row. 550 pp. \$ 19.95

Today less an art than an industry, a pop genre like horror is nevertheless its own literary province with its own evaluative standards. Good horror fiction knows its job and proceeds to do it efficiently. Aiming to stimulate pretty basic parts of the readerly psyche -- to titillate, shock, agitate, scare, to provide both escape and reassurance -- quality horror takes care to seem above all unpretentious: i.e., to keep its conceits simple and its settings banal enough to be familiar. By these modern standards, the fictions of Stephen King up through, say, "Cujo" represent nearly perfect American pop horror: Ensouled appliances run darkly amok in a world of Fritos, flatulence and trailer-park angst. By the same standards, King's putative heir, Clive Barker, has produced in "The Great and Secret Show" a really disappointing novel. A Manichaeian soap opera billed by the author as about "Hollywood, Sex and Armageddon," Barker's novel is really just a derivative mix of King's apocalyptic "The Stand," the hell-beneath-suburbia shticks of "Poltergeist" and "Blue Velvet," the celebrity-bashing voyeurism of a Jackie Collins or Sidney Sheldon, and the sophomoric metaphysics of undergrad fantasy. Plus it's pretentious beyond belief. One R. Jaffe, an unhappy postal worker, happens on an ultra-secret cabal of crazies who keep informing each other (through the U.S. mail!) that "America had a secret life ... the world was not as it seemed." Jaffe commits some murder, does some time-hitchhiking, makes the sort of windy proclamations to the audience we associate with cartoon villains, and before we know it has coerced a brilliant but fatally flawed all-purpose professor, one R. Fletcher, into developing a mysterious alchemical cordial that seems able to enhance evolution, alter body into spirit, induce psychosis, raise the dead or

give people nasty Christlike stigmata, depending on authorial whim. This stuff transforms Jaffe and Fletcher, now "Dynasty"-type nemeses, into sort of odd archetypes of Really Good and Really Bad. Jaffe is the bad one. He keeps announcing to whoever will listen that he wants to use "The Art" to draw aside "The Veil" to reveal "The Shoal," "The Ephemeris" and the oceanic "Quiddity" that separates "The Cosm" from "The Metacosm" and the latter's sinister residents, "The Iad Uroboros." Few of these ponderous terms are even explained, much less given referents, except via pronouncements like: "Quiddity is the sea. And in it are islands, called the Ephemeris"; and "This was an Art in defiance of flesh. All the profoundest certainties were forfeit in the face of it." Amid all this forfeiture of profound certainties, the superhuman but awfully randy Jaffe and Fletcher are busily impregnating virgins in the small California town where their battle's brought them. The resultant hyper-evolved offspring grow up in a few pages, hate each other or fall desperately in love, and in *The Present* release the entombed spirits of their opposed fathers on the community and the universe. The resulting melodrama of sex, gore, celebrity, bad science and worse cosmology, drawn out to an excruciating 500-plus pages, leads to a mysterious Art-induced tear in reality's "screen," the epiphany that "The whole ... world's a movie," an imminent invasion by meta-creatures who resemble mountains covered with fleas, some heroic mystical puzzle-solving by a Hollywood screenwriter and a burned-out tabloid journalist, and salvation by atomic blast. Lots of things make this novel too pretentious to like. The misuse of scientific and philosophic terms, for one thing. There's lots of alarming prose, here, stuff like: "It was twenty years since that life-shattering day when he'd found the symbol of The Shoal"; "He wasn't the only one reeling before this revelation"; "Reason could be cruel; logic could be lunacy." But most of the pretension in this novel is a function of the fact that Clive Barker demands that the reader take him seriously but declines to do the artistic work necessary to make his story believable or even coherent. A contempt for his characters -- none of whom even comes close to being 3-D -- is matched by an odd condescension toward the reader that has Barker constantly telling you how to think and feel about everything in the book -- e.g., the evil characters "shamble" and "cackle"; the good guys "stride" and "laugh heartily" -- and playing fast and loose with the very concepts and theories he litters the story with. Physical laws are suspended and then restored (a nuclear explosion can vanquish creatures and seal holes that are in defiance of all physics) as it suits the author. One minute people are reeling before hideous revelations and shaking fists at the sky and declaring their shattered lives will never again be the same, and the next minute they're eating a bologna sandwich and negotiating with their editors about how to write the world's end as an *Enquirer* expose'. The novel is not without some cool sections: a parodic battle between the TV stars who represent human dreams and the icky caterpillars that embody our fears; and a wonderful description of a talk-show comedian's plunge down a haunted hole would make a great short story: "Johnny Carson in Hell." But, for the most part, the same dull dispiritedness the British Barker so relentlessly attributes to his American characters pervades his own "The Great and Secret Show." Too long by half, and basically just silly, it seems the work of one of those dreaded commercial successes who've become so impressed with themselves they no longer think they have to work at being interesting. Perhaps, if this tome doesn't do well, Barker will return to the goopy enthusiasm for straight pop horror that made him an '80s staple.

fiction challenging and distinctive. Missing from it are the elaborate metaphorical structures drawn from science and technology, as well as the depth of historical investigation out of which Pynchon usually generates his subjects. Pynchon's genius for evoking unfamiliar settings--German Southwest Africa during the massacres of 1904, Malta during World War Two, the windy stretches of Turkistan, the post-war German occupied zones, etc., is here over-worked in producing a setting with which we are all too familiar. (This familiarity and simplicity also make the work more accessible than usual for Pynchon, which partly explains its immense sales.) And this over-familiarity is intensified by the constant allusions to television, the novel's reigning medium and central subject. *Gravity's Rainbow* succeeded more than any other novel in capturing the effects of cinema on the imagination because it conveyed a sense not only of the subject matter of the movies and where they fit into the culture of the 1940's, but also the way the medium itself conditions the perception of its viewers. The nostalgia of movie-going at that time is both evoked and subjected to a kind of critique. *Vineland*, by contrast, is simply cluttered with reference to the lore of television, a subject already trite. Someday it may be interesting to reconnect the life of the late twentieth century with its pop idols--if these ever go away--but now is not the time to remind us that people were watching *Star Trek* and making constant reference to Mr. Spock.

*Vineland* is bound to suffer by comparison with *Gravity's Rainbow*. And indeed, taken on its own terms, it has significant weaknesses. Nevertheless, it gives more pleasure on every page than most recent books I can think of. Those who have not read Pynchon will here find access to a strange and dynamic form of fancy quite unlike anything they have encountered in fiction. Veteran readers will know better than to miss a book by Thomas Pynchon.

John Farrell



**Stories in an Almost Classical Mode** Harold Brodkey. Vintage, \$12.95 ISBN 0-679-72431-1

This is a remarkable collection of stories. The writing is seriously, often painfully, honest, the kind of honesty of memory and perception that only the best writers can and will venture to explore. One feels in reading these stories that Brodkey has quite decidedly thrown emotional caution to the wind and permitted himself a degree of risk-taking that leaves the reader breathless with surprise and recognition.

One striking feature of Brodkey's long, slow dive into the waters of personal chaos and despair is how controlled yet explorational these stories are. They are told in a rich, compelling, vibrant prose, not minimalist, yet economical and adventurous. Although in these stories one is faced with the terrifying psychological and physical pain of the characters, the smooth, wise, often lyrical writing nudges one onward, as if in promise of some kind of resolution for both writer and reader. To read these stories is to experience viscerally why such pain exists at all. This is particularly palpable in those stories set in childhood and told from the point of view of the child narrator, occasionally identified as Brodkey himself. The portrayal of the intricacies of childhood perception, of the enormous influence of the parent on the child, and the layers and complexities of the child's psyche, is masterful. If it is true that one's personality--i.e. defense mechanisms, unconscious needs and desires, conscious manifestations--is formed in early childhood, then it is all the more important, even amazing, that Brodkey has focused so much of his energy on these early years in this collection.

In the story from which the title to this collection is drawn, "A Story in an Almost Classical Mode," Brodkey examines how the young, vulnerable child must learn to compensate in order to deal with the overpowering, crushing effect of a physically devastated and psychologically needy parent. In the story Brodkey details in horrifying exactitude the abuse inflicted upon him by the woman who had adopted him as a young boy and whom he refers to by her first name, during her struggle with cancer and descent into drug use, delirium, and finally death. To understand her, and to keep himself from going mad, the thirteen-year-old Brodkey performs the ultimate act of grace, the relinquishing of the self, the fusion of his self and his mother's, so that he too can suffer, comprehend, and forgive. In "The Pain Continuum," the very young child narrator is literally tortured by his jealous sister, and is finally

delivered a horrible blow to the eye. This child, still a baby, is forced to learn the cruel, darker side of human nature, and finds out that he can survive. "I will bear this filth and filth-to come," as he states, and, in the end, goes off "in search of what comfort there is for me now." It is real, it is painful; but reality is like that, and Brodkey's characters early on are not offered the fantastic oblivion of childhood with which to shield this reality. Most people cannot recall their early childhoods, and commonly tend to idealize their youngest years and the parents that went along with them. But Brodkey's characters seem incapable of such delusion, forced, rather, to re-examine every minor detail, good and bad, in absolute honesty, to discover where the truth lies.

In another story, "Innocence," Brodkey writes: "I distrust summaries, any kind of gliding through time, any too great a claim that one is in control of what one recounts; I think someone who claims to understand but who is obviously calm, someone who claims to write with emotion recollected in tranquility, is a fool and a liar. To understand is to tremble. To recollect is to reenter and be riven." Although perhaps unintended, this passage aptly describes the process and power of Brodkey's writing; the characters tremble, they remember, they journey through memory not in tranquility, but in pain. We journey, too, and are left with breathtaking illumination.

MaryEllen Linnehan



**Fort Wayne is Seventh on Hitler's List: Indiana Stories** Michael Martone. Indiana University Press, \$20.00 ISBN 0-25-333-679-1

Michael Martone's third book of short fiction, *Fort Wayne is Seventh on Hitler's List: Indiana Stories*, is a credit both to the author's talent and to the willingness of university presses to take chances commercial houses can't or won't. This collection's queer publishing history is sketched in an authorial preface/manifesto that would be ostentatious were the book's fiction itself not so good. *Fort Wayne is Seventh on Hitler's List* apparently comprises an earlier Knopf collection, *Alive and Dead in Indiana*, which latter itself represented a gutted version of Martone's original project, *Biograph*, a tapestry of thematically connected "... stories playing with the notions of story and history, questioning the border between fact and fiction when in the presence of fame." Martone's preface explains how the pieces were conceived: "I started with a story of an actual person. Manipulating the facts and the widely held beliefs about these people, I hoped to create a kind of pedestrian mythology of Indiana." Well, terms like "manipulating facts" and "actual person" are like dogwhistles to the infringement-attorneys major houses have elevated to near-editorial status. By the time *Alive and Dead in Indiana* came out in May 1984, Knopf's "... lawyers had thrown out two stories," others had had to be substituted, and the resultant book, according to Martone, "never hit on all cylinders." *Fort Wayne is Seventh on Hitler's List* represents Indiana University Press's attempt to let the book Martone originally wrote see light, even though "One of the stories, first questioned by Knopf lawyers, remains in legal limbo."

In a sound-bitten age when more Americans watch "Wheel of Fortune" than all three network newscasts combined, when celebrity is royalty and fame grace, there is a weirdly apposite movement in realistic prose that might be called the Fiction of Image. Max Apple's *The Oranging of America* and *The Propheteers*, Jay Cantor's *Krazy Kat*, and Don DeLillo's *Libra* are good examples of a realism that traces the collapse of distinctions between objective reality and perceived image into a gorgeous chaos of cultural self-reference and electric myth. Realist fiction's big job used to be to afford easements across unseen and unknown places and ways to be -- to make the strange familiar. Today, when we can eat Tex-Mex with chopsticks while listening to rap music and watching a CBC-cable newscast of the Berlin Wall's dismantling, i.e. when just about everything offers itself as familiar, a lot of the best realist fiction seems to be trying to make the familiar strange, and, in so doing, to restore what is "real" to three dimensions, to reconstruct an environment/world out of an object/spectacle.

Martone's new collection is a genuine achievement in this Fiction of Image, in the new mythology that's starting to pulse at the edges of 2-D fame. In the story "Pieces," a never-named Colonel Sanders delivers a monologue on his rise to franchised greatness alongside the federal highways of a Midwest designed to be traversed at high speeds. In "Everybody Watching and the Time Passing Like That," James Dean's high-school speech coach meditates on Dean's life and apotheosis and on what it means to live in a place

famous people are only "from." In "Whistler's Father," a marvelously earnest teenage scientist who has trouble finding feeling in anything he can't see, discovers and lives history as a part-time actor in a frontier fort turned tourist trap.

What makes this book way better than good is that it's simultaneously effective on three different realistic levels. The first is the prenominate level of image, public truth, here movingly slanted as a study of the Midwest in all its self-conscious averageness, a place that understands itself as always origin and never end. The second level is the collection's full and accurate evocation of Indiana as place. Some of the stories' deadly accuracy is a function of good old glass-clear prose:

I saw the Wayne Knitting Mills tall smokestack, Wayne built right into the bricks. I flew by the elevators, followed Main Street downtown and circled the courthouse. Then over the Old Fort, looking defenseless, and the filtration plant with the ponds. I followed the Maumee from the three rivers downstream, sweeping by the old Studebaker plant, Zollner Piston, all the wire-and-die works, Magnavox. Then banking up the bypass, north, over the shopping centers and malls and their parking lots, over Eckrich and the campus, to my house.

But the uncanniness of the landscapes' capture seems in this book to be more a spiritual than a technical achievement. Michael Martone (unlike the transplanted William Gass, who "immortalized" Indiana while awaiting tenure at Purdue) is first and last a native, and he has made Indiana his own in a manner reminiscent of Breece Pankake with West Virginia or Walker Percy with New Orleans. Here is an Indiana limned in marvelously offhand detail as environment and not setting: wind and soybeans, flat black land, schizoid temperatures, elms blighted by Dutch rot, tornadoes as religion, basketball as mantra, diners and single-car crashes and endless road construction and agribusiness and casket factories and normality under the watchful eyes of sociologists studying normality and municipal monuments with blank plaques awaiting a fame sufficient to cause some emigre's (e.g. Deans's, Pound's, Letterman's) reclamation.

Here the reader is warned that the reviewer, who's from rural Illinois, might be prejudiced by sentiment. It may be that some of Martone's Midwestern portraiture will not have the same emotional resonance for an East-Coaster. If, for example, you don't know that Eckrich is a conglomerate of evil-smelling meat plants, or that Speech Team is to the Midwest's nerds what computer science is to Cambridge's, that elevators are for grain and not for people, or that the Maumee River has catfish to die for and flows into Fort Wayne and the St. Joseph's and St. Mary's from Defiance, Ohio ... some of Martone's impeccable detailing might be just data to you.

A similar but bigger problem with the stories is that the same "use-popularly-endemic-facts-about-the-famous" strategy that works so well for Martone in the cases of Colonel Sanders or Ezra Pound or James Dean works less well with "public" figures who just aren't all that famous. If you don't know (as I didn't) that Heinrich Schliemann is the guy who supposedly discovered Troy at Hissarlik, or that Robert Welch founded the John Birch Society, or much at all about the specifics of John Dillinger's career, then stories like "Schliemann in Indianapolis" and "Dear John" and the impressionistic "Biograph" are going to be confusing. The question of how much erudition a fiction writer gets to require of his reader is, of course, eternally vexed. And none of these stories are really inaccessible. The special knowledge they presuppose is a problem only because of Fort Wayne's professed project: in order to "question the border between fact and fiction when in the presence of fame," the fame needs to be sufficient to comprise a body of fact to transfigure, a familiarity to estrange. The kind of allusive detail that, in "Pieces," rings true because of what we know about the Colonel--"In the restroom, I wash my face and shave quickly. I have very little beard"--fails to ring many bells in "Schliemann in Indianapolis"--"I have created this elaborate life of lies. I do this in order to one day scratch in the dirt. My languages have only helped me lie in every tongue"--for here the story must work to create the very "facts" Martone professes to "manipulate." In pieces like "Schliemann..." when 90% of the facts have to be built up, as it were, around the character by the narrative itself, one wonders what the big deal is about basing the character on someone "real" in the first place.

That occasional obscurity of referent in *Fort Wayne is Seventh on Hitler's List* is finally only a minor problem is attributable to the collection's third

level of realistic triumph: a truly superior rendering of voice and sensibility. All of these stories are monologues, exposition. There's hardly any dialogue, no scenes that are not mediated through one central character's psyche and voice. And Martone's voices are superb, from the prim stoicism of Dean's teacher to the tired stoicism of Pound's ex-lover the frat-mother, to the modest honesty of the kid who plays "Whistler's Father," to the near-stilted educated German's English of Schliemann's diaries. It is its fidelity to character and expression, its integrity as an act of witness, that makes Martone's collection the great book I'm pretty sure it is. Its medium is, finally, less the projected image of an era or the emotional cartography of a region than it is the timeless theme of people in circumstances. Martone's people are unique and 3-D and worthwhile not only because of their studied normalcy or their brushes with fame, but because they're drawn with the animating care which sheer talent can confer. They have life breathed into them; their author has given them and us a good gift.



David Foster Wallace

**The Things They Carried** Tim O'Brien. Houghton Mifflin/Seymour Lawrence, \$19.95 ISBN 0-395-51598-X  
**Fever** John Edgar Wideman. Henry Holt, \$16.95 ISBN 0-8050-1184-6

For Tim O'Brien aficionados the milieu in his new book, *The Things They Carried*, will be familiar: Vietnam, circa 1968, the bush and rice paddies and hootches and Bouncing Betties. The recurring characters are the men who comprise Alpha Company, an infantry platoon in which the average age is nineteen or twenty, and their names and idiosyncrasies become intimate to us in this interconnected collection of stories.

There is Henry Dobbins, who wraps his girlfriend's pantyhose around his neck "as a comforter" before heading out on ambush; Ted Lavender, who can be counted on, with the four or five tranquilizers he pops each morning, to give a pleasant status report: "Mellow--a nice smooth war today"; Curt Lemon, who on Halloween night goes to a Vietnamese village in camouflage paint, naked, "just boots and balls and an M-16," and rings doorbells, as it were, whispering, "Trick or treat"; and Kiowa, who as a devout Indian Baptist from Oklahoma keeps with him at all times an illustrated New Testament, along with his grandfather's hunting hatchet.

They are a childish group, given to macabre pranks and jokes, and they are often cruel, but their transgressions are understandable considering the circumstances. As we have all learned by now, the old rules do not apply in this war, a war where the enemy is largely unseen--"ghosts," they are called--and where death can come so unexpectedly, gruesomely, more often during quiet moments than in fire fights. While peeing in the woods, Ted Lavender is shot in the head by a sniper. Goofing around on a jungle trail, Curt Lemon steps on a booby trap and is blown upwards into a tree, from which his remains must be peeled. When the platoon is camped for the night along a river, it begins to rain, the water rises, and then mortar rounds start exploding craters in the field, sucking Kiowa into one of them, and in the morning the platoon must wade through the muddy stink looking for him; the field turned out to be the village toilet, and Kiowa has disappeared in the waste that is Vietnam.

Taken individually, many of the twenty-two stories in this book are remarkably good. Four or five--explicating the various and complex sensations of going to war--are brilliant and indelible. The title story, a recitation of the grunts' weapons and gear, builds an incantatory rhythm, the metaphorical melding with the mundane; they carried M-60s and C rations and Claymores, and "the common scent of cowardice barely restrained, the instinct to run or freeze or hide, and in many respects this was the heaviest burden of all, for it could never be put down, it required perfect balance and perfect posture." In "How to Tell a True War Story," the paradox of beauty and awareness in the midst of battle is precisely revealed, that "there is a kind of largeness to it, a kind of godliness. Though it's odd, you're never more alive than when you're almost dead." In "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," a fable in which a teenaged girlfriend is smuggled in-country from Cleveland, the seduction of combat is rendered palpably; it is entirely believable that she could fall in with the Green Berets on night ambushes, drugged by "that mix of unnamed terror and unnamed pleasure that comes as the needle slips in and you know you're risking something ... you want to string it out and go wherever the trip takes you and be host to all the possibilities inside yourself." And in the collection's final

*The Empty Plenum:*  
*David Markson's Wittgenstein's Mistress*

David Foster Wallace

But what other philosopher has found the antidote to illusion in the particular and repeated humility of remembering and tracking the uses of humble words, looking philosophically as it were beneath our feet rather than over our heads?

—S. Cavell

There is nobody at the window in the painting of the house, by the way.

I have now concluded that what I believed to be a person is a shadow.

If it is not a shadow, it is perhaps a curtain.

As a matter of fact it could actually be nothing more than an attempt to imply depths, within the room.

Although in a manner of speaking all that is really in the window is burnt sienna pigment. And some yellow ochre.

In fact there is no window either, in that same manner of speaking, but only shape.

So that any few speculations I may have made about the person at the window would therefore now appear to be rendered meaningless, obviously.

Unless of course I subsequently become convinced that there is somebody at the window all over again.

I have put that badly.

—*Wittgenstein's Mistress* (54-55)

Tell them I have had a wonderful life.

—Wittgenstein on deathbed, '51

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CERTAIN NOVELS NOT ONLY cry out for critical interpretations but actually try to direct them. This is probably analogous to a piece of music that both demands and defines the listener's movements, say like a waltz. Frequently, too, those novels that direct their own critical reading concern themselves thematically with what we might consider highbrow or intellectual issues—

stuff proper to art, engineering, antique lit., philosophy, etc. These novels carve out for themselves an interstice between flat-out fiction and a sort of weird cerebral *roman à clef*. When they fail, as my own first long thing did, they're pretty dreadful. But when they succeed, as I claim David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress* does, they serve the vital & vanishing function of reminding us of fiction's limitless possibilities for reach & grasp, for making heads throb heartlike, & for sanctifying the marriages of cerebration & emotion, abstraction & lived life, transcendent truth-seeking & daily schlepping, marriages that in our happy epoch of technical occlusion & entertainment-marketing seem increasing consummable only in the imagination. Books I tend to associate with this INTERPRET-ME phenomenon include stuff like *Candide*, Witold Gombrowicz's *Cosmos*, Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game*, Sartre's *Nausea*, Camus's *Stranger*. These five are works of genius of a particular kind: they shout their genius. Markson, in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, tends rather to whisper, but his w.o.g.'s no less successful; nor—particularly given the rabid anti-intellectualism of the contemporary fiction scene—seems it any less important. It's become an important book to me, anyway. I'd never heard of this guy Markson, before, in '88. And have, still, read nothing else by him. I ordered the book mostly because of its eponymous title; I like to fancy myself a fan of the work of its namesake. Clearly the book was/is in some way 'about' Wittgenstein, given the title. This is one of the ways an INTERPRET-ME fiction clues the critical reader in on what the book's to be seen as on a tertiary level 'about': the title: *Ulysses*' title, its structure as Odyssean/Telemachean map (succeeds); R. Goldstein's *The Mind-Body Problem* (really terrible); Cortázar's *Hopscotch* (succeeds exactly to the extent one ignores the invitation to hop around in it); Burroughs's *Queer & Junkie* (fail successfully (?)). W/r/t novels like these it's often hard to see the difference between a title and an epigraph, except for quotidian facts like the latter's longer, overter, & attributed. Another way to invite a kind of correspondence-interpretation is to drop the name of a real person like bricks throughout the text, as Bruce Duffy does in his so-called fictional biography of Wittgenstein, the execrable 1988 *The World as I Found It*, in which, despite loud 'this-is-made-up' disclaimers, Duffy brings to bear such an arsenal of historical fact and allusion that the critical reader can't help but confuse the homosexuality-crazed fictional 'Wittgenstein' with the real and way more complex & interesting Wittgenstein. Another way for a novel to linearize its reading is to make an intellectual shibboleth serve a repetitive narrative function: eg, in *Candide*, Pangloss's continual 'All for the best in the best of all possible worlds' is a neon sign out front of what is, except for its end, little more than a poisonously funny parody of the metaphysics of Leibniz.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> . . . one that succumbs to the hazard of most parody and gets the point of

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Kate, the monadic narrator of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, gets a lot of her master's remarks wrong, too—the philosopher's better-known words and ideas are sprayed, skewed, all over the book, from its epigraph about sand to the *Tractatus's* 'The world is everything that is the case' to *Investigatory* speculations on adhesive vs. magnetic 'tape' that unequivocally summon the later Wittgenstein's concerns over words' 'family resemblances' to one another. Contra Voltaire, though, when Markson's Kate recalls lines & concepts incorrectly her errors serve the ends not of funny propaganda but of both original art and original interpretation. Because *Wittgenstein's Mistress*,<sup>2</sup> w/r/t its eponymous master, does more than just quote Wittgenstein in weird ways, or allude to his work, or attempt to be some sort of dramatization of the intellectual problems that occupied and oppressed him. Markson's book renders, imaginatively & concretely, the very bleak mathematical world Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* revolutionized philosophy by summoning via abstract argument. *WM* is, in a weird way, the colorization of a very old film. Though Wittgenstein's philosophical stuff is far from dead or arid, *WM* nevertheless succeeds at transposing W's intellectual conundra into the piquant qualia of lived—albeit bizarrely lived—experience. The novel quickens W's early work, gives it a face, for the reader, that the philosophy does not & cannot convey . . . mostly because Wittgenstein's work is so hard and takes so long just to figure out on a literal level that the migranous mental gymnastics required of his reader all but quash the dire emotional implications of W's early metaphysics. His mistress, though, asks the question her master in print does not: What if somebody really had to live in a *Tractatusized* world?

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I don't mean to suggest that Markson's achievement here consists just in making abstract philosophy 'accessible' to an extramural reader, or that *WM* is in itself simple. Actually, though its prose & monotone are hauntingly pedestrian, the novel's diffracted system of allusions to everything from antiquity to Astroturf are a bitch to trace out; and the concentric circularity that replaces linear development as its plot's 'progression' makes a digestive reading of *WM* a challenging & protracted affair. Markson's is not a pop book, and it's not decocted philosophy or a Duffy-esque docudrama-of-the-week. Rather, for me, the novel does artistic & emotional justice to the politico-ethical implications of Ludwig Wittgenstein's abstract mathematical metaphysics, makes what is designed to be a mechanism pulse, breathe, suffer, live, etc. In so doing, it pays emotional tribute to a philosopher who by all evidence lived in personal torment over the questions too many of his academic followers have made into elaborate

empty exercise. That is, Markson's *WM* succeeds in doing what few philosophers glean & what neither myriad biographical sketches nor Duffy's lurid revisionism succeeds in communicating: the consequences, for persons, of the *practice of theory*; the difference, say, between espousing 'solipsism' as a metaphysical 'position' & waking up one fine morning after a personal loss to find your grief apocalyptic, literally millennial, leaving you the last and only living thing on earth, with only your head, now, for not only company but environment & world, an inclined beach sliding toward a dreadful sea. Put otherwise, Markson's book transcends, for me, its review-enforced status of 'intellectual tour de force' or 'experimental achievement': what it limns, as an immediate study of depression & loneliness, is far too moving to be the object of either exercise or exorcism. The ways in which the book is moving, and the formal ingenuity by which it transforms metaphysics into angst and so reveals philosophy as being first and last about spirit—these are enough for me, right now, to think of the novel as one of the U.S. decade's best, to deplore its relative neglect & its consignment by journals like the *NYTBR* to smarmy review by a young Carverian.<sup>3</sup> But add to the novel's credits a darkly pyrotechnic achievement in the animation of intellectual history—the way *WM* so completely demonstrates how one of the smartest & most important contributors to modern thought could have been such a personally unhappy son of a bitch—& the book becomes, if you're the impotent unlucky sort whose beliefs inform his stomach's daily state, a special kind of great book, literally profound, and probably destined, in its & time's fullness, to be a quiet classic.

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One reason *WM* whispers, as both a kind of classic & an interpretation-director, is that its charms & stratagems are very indirect. It's not only a sustained monologue by a person of gender opposite the author's, it is structured halfway between shaggy-dog joke and deadly serious allegory. A concrete example of how the prose here works appears as the second epigraph *supra*. Devices like repetition, obsessive return, free-/unfree association swirl in an uneasy suspension throughout. Yet they communicate. This studied indirection, a sustained error that practically compels misprision, is how Kate convinces us that, if she is forcene, so must we be: the subtextual emotive agenda under the freewheeling disorder of short isolated paragraphs, under the flit of thought, under the continual struggle against the slipping sand of English & the drowning-pool of self-consciousness—a seductive order not only in but *via* chaos—compels complete & uneasy acquiescence, here. The technique rings as true as a song we can't quite place. You could call this technique 'deep nonsense,' meaning I guess a linguistic flow of strings, strands, loops and quiffs that through the very manner of its formal construction flouts the ordinary cingula of 'sense' and

through its defiance of sense's limits manages somehow to 'show' what cannot ordinarily be 'expressed.' Good comedy often functions the same way.<sup>4</sup> So does good advertising, today.<sup>5</sup> So does a surprising amount of good philosophy. So, usually on a far less explicit level than *WM*'s, can great fiction.

The start of *WM* has Kate painting messages on empty roads: 'Somebody is living in the Louvre,' etc. The messages are for anyone who might come along to see. 'Nobody came, of course. Eventually I stopped leaving the messages.' The novel's end involves the use, not the mention,<sup>6</sup> of such a message: 'Somebody is living on this beach.' Except use on what &/or whom? It's probably not right, as I think I did *supra*, to call this novel's form a monologue.<sup>7</sup> Kate is typing it. It's written & not spoken. Except it's not like a diary or journal. Nor is it a 'letter.' Because of course a letter to *whom*, if there's no one else at all? Anyway, it's self-consciously written. I personally have grown weary of most texts that are narrated self-consciously as *written*, as '*textes*.' But *WM* is different from the Barthian/post-Derridean self-referential hosts. Here the conscious rendition of inditement not only rings true but serves essential functions. Kate is not a 'writer.' By vocation a painter, her time at the typewriter is thoroughly & terribly avocational. She is shouting into her typing paper's blankness. Her missive is a function of need, not art—a kind of long message in a big bottle. I need to admit here that I have a weird specular stance with respect to this novel's form as *written*. I am someone who tries to write, who right now more & more seems to need to write, daily; and who hopes less that the products of that need are lucrative or even liked than simply received, read, *seen*. And *WM*, in a deep-nonsensical way that's much more effective than argument or allegory'd be, speaks to why I'm starting to think most people who somehow must write must write. 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, when the imagination becomes not just a more

<sup>4</sup> cf 'Who's on First?'

<sup>5</sup> cf Audi's '89 slogan for print adverts: "It sets the standard by ignoring it."

<sup>6</sup> A distinction of Frege, a Wittgenstein-era titan: to *mention* a word or phrase is to speak about it, w/ at least implicit quotation marks: eg 'Kate' is a four-letter name; to *use* a word or phrase is to mention its referent: eg Kate is, by default, the main character of *Wittgenstein's Mistress* . . .

<sup>7</sup> Unless you can empty your head of connotation and translate the word literally from the Attic Greek—then it probably has a Marksonian poignancy no other term'd have . . .

congenial but a realer environment than the Big Exterior of life on earth. Markson's book's first epigraph, from Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, invites & imposes this first interpretation of Kate's bind & its relation to her 'typing.'<sup>8</sup> The need to get the words & voices not only *out*—outside the 16-inch diameter of bone that both births & imprisons them—but also *down*, trusting them neither to the insubstantial country of the mind nor to the transient venue of cords & air & ear, seems for Kate—as for anyone from a Flaubert to a diarist to a letter-fiend—a necessary affirmation of an Outside, some Exterior one's written record can not only communicate with but *inhabit*. Picasso, harking to Velasquez as does Markson to Kierkegaard & Wittgenstein, did big things for the idea of visual artworks as not just 'representations' but also things, objects . . . but I can think of no lit.-practitioner (as opposed to New-Critical or poststructural theorist) who's captured the textual *urge*, the emotional urgency of text as both sign and *thing*, as perfectly as has Markson here.<sup>9</sup> The other side of the prenominate 2-bind—the side rendered explicitly by *WM*'s opening and close—involves why people who write need to do as a mode of *communication*. It's what an abstractor like Laing calls 'ontological insecurity'—why we sign our stuff, impose it on friends, mail it out in brown manila trying to get it printed. 'I EXIST,' is the impulse that throbs under most voluntary writing—& all good writing. And 'I EXIST' would have been, in my ungraceful editorial hands, the title of Markson's novel. But Markson's final choice, far better than his working *Keeper of the Ghosts* (deep but not nonsensical), is probably better than mine. Kate's text, one big message that someone is living on this beach, is itself obsessed & almost defined by the possibility that it does not exist, that Kate does not exist. And the novel's title, if we reflect a moment, serves ends as much thematic as allusive. Wittgenstein was gay. He never had a mistress.<sup>10</sup> He did, though, have a teacher and friend, one Bertrand Russell, who, with his student's encouragement, before the '20s trashed the *Cogito*-tautology by which Descartes had relieved 300 years' worth of neurotic intellectuals of the worrisome doubt that they existed. Russell pointed out that the *Cogito*'s 'I think and therefore am' is in fact invalid: the truth of 'I think' entails only the existence of *thinking*, as the truth of 'I write' yields only the existence of

<sup>8</sup>The ep. is 'What an extraordinary change takes place . . . when for the first time the fact that everything depends upon how a thing is thought first enters the consciousness, when, in consequence, thought in its absoluteness replaces an apparent reality.' . . . from 'The Task of Becoming Subjective' in the *Postscript*—maybe worth noting that the form of 'change' in the Danish is accusative rather than nominative, & that what Markson renders as 'extraordinary' appears in some other translations as 'terrible' or 'fearful.'

<sup>9</sup>. . . maybe' kett in *Molloy*. . .

<sup>10</sup>Too, 'mistress' conveys the exquisite loneliness of being the linguistic beloved

text. To posit an 'I' that's *doing* the thinking/writing is to beg the very question Descartes had started out impaled on. . . . But so anyway, Kate's situation in *WM* is doubly lonely. After having spent years 'looking' for people,<sup>11</sup> she has literally washed up on shore, now sits naked & in menses before a manual typewriter, producing words that, for her & us, render only the words themselves 'ontologically secure'; the belief in either a reader for them or a (meta)physical presence producing them would require a kind of quixoticism Kate's long since lost or resigned.

What keeps the title from being cute or overheavy is that Kate really *is* Wittgenstein's mistress, the ghostly curator of a world of history, artifacts, & memories—which memories, like TV images, one can access but never really own—and of *facts*, facts about both the (former) world and her own mental habits. Hers is the affectless language of fact, and it seems less like by skill than by the inevitable miracle of something that had to be written that Markson directs our misprision in order to infuse statements that all take the form of raw data-transfer<sup>12</sup> with true & deep emotional import.

Kate's spare, aphoristic style, her direct & correct quotation of 'The world is everything that is the case,' and her obsessive need to get control of the facts that have become her interior & exterior life—all this stuff directs the reader to run, not walk, to Ludwig Wittgenstein's 1921 *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.<sup>13</sup> The reason why I, who am no critic & tend to approach books I admire with all the hesitancy of the blind before walls, feel I get to assert all the flat indicatives about Kate's plight above is that so much of *WM* so clearly sends one to the *Tractatus* for critical 'clarification.' This isn't a weakness of the novel. Though it's kind of miraculous that it's not. And it doesn't mean that *WM* is just written 'in the margins of' the *Tractatus* in the way *Candide* marginalizes *The Monadology* or *Nausea* simply 'dramatizes' part three of *L'Être et le néant*. Rather *WM*, if it is any one thing for me, is a kind of philosophical sci-fi. Ie, it's an imaginative portrait of what it would be like actually to *live* in the sort of world the logic & metaphysics of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* posits. This sort of world started out, for Wittgenstein, to be logical heaven. It ends up being (I opine) a metaphysical hell; and the way its philosophic picture rasped against the sort of life and worldview Wittgenstein the man thought worthwhile was (I claim) a

<sup>11</sup> . . . though she never says what's true: that it was at first for a particular person, her husband, then only eventually for just anyone at all . . .

<sup>12</sup> (data transferred to herself, or her self-consciousness, or to whoever may come down the pike, or to both herself and someone else, or to neither, or maybe all that's supposed to be left there is the sand of English, awaiting tides)

<sup>13</sup> hereafter abbreviated *Tractatus*, and the equally famous 1953 *Philosophical*

big motivation for the disavowal of the *Tractatus* represented by his master work, 1953's *Philosophical Investigations*.<sup>14</sup>

Basically the *Tractatus* is the first real attempt at exploring the now trendy relation between language and the 'reality' it is language's putative function to capture, map & represent. The *Tractatus*'s project is Kantian: what must the world be like if language is even to be possible? The early Wittgenstein, much under the spell of Russell and the *Principia Mathematica* that revolutionized modern logic, saw language, like math, as logic-based; and he viewed the paradigmatic function of language as mirroring or 'picturing' the world. From this latter belief everything in the *Tractatus* follows, just as Kate's own fetish for paintings, mirrors, & the status of mental representations like memories & associations & perceptions forms the canvas on which her memoir *must* be sketched. The Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* chose as the paradigm of language the truth-functional logic of Russell & Whitehead's *Principia*. His choice made practical sense, project-wise: if you're going to try to construe the world from human language, you'll be best off choosing the most perspicuous, precise type of language available—one faithful to Wittgenstein's belief that the business of language is to state facts—as well as selecting the most direct & uncontroversial relation between a language and its world of referents. The latter, I iterate & stress, is simply the relation of mirror to mirrored; and the criterion by which to judge the perspicuity of a statement is entirely & only its fidelity to that feature of the world it denotes: cf W's 'The statement is a *picture* of the fact.'<sup>16</sup> Now, technically, the Russellian logic that comprises language's Big Picture consists all & only of 3 things: simple logical connectives like 'and,' 'or' & 'not'; propositions or 'statements'; & a view of these statements as 'atomic,' meaning that the truth or falsity of a complex statement like 'Ludwig is affable and Bertrand is well-dressed' depends entirely on the truth value of its constituent atomic propositions—the prenominate molecular proposition is true if & only if it is true that Ludwig is friendly *and* it is true that Bertrand is dapper. The atomic propositions that are language's building blocks are, for both Russell and Wittgenstein, 'logically independent' of one another: they do not affect one another's truth values,

<sup>14</sup>Eg 'What is the use of studying philosophy,' Wittgenstein wrote to a U.S. student while working on the *Investigations* in 1946, 'if all that it does for you is to enable you to talk with some plausibility about some abstruse questions of logic, etc., and if it does not improve your thinking about the important questions of everyday life?'

<sup>15</sup>Scholars tend to schizofy Wittgenstein, counterposing the 'early' W of the *Tractatus* and the 'late' W of the *Investigations*, *Blue and Brown Books*, & *Philosophical Grammar*.

<sup>16</sup>See *Tractatus* 2.1512 & .3 & .4; emphasis supplied.

only the values of those logical molecules in which they're conjoined—eg, 'L is cheerful or B is well-heeled,' 'It is not the case that if B is wealthy then L is cheerful,' etc. Except here's the kicker: since language is the world's 'mirror,' the world is metaphysically composed only & entirely of those 'facts' that statements in the language stand for. In other words—the words of the *Tractatus*'s first & foremost line—the world is everything that is the case; the world is nothing but a huge mass of data, of logically discrete facts that have no *intrinsic* connection to one another. Cf the *Tractatus* 1.2: 'The world falls apart into facts . . .' 1.2.1 'Any one [fact] can either be the case, or not be the case, and everything else remains the same.'

T. Pynchon, who has done in literature for paranoia what Sacher-Masoch did for whips, argues in his *Gravity's Rainbow* for why the paranoid delusion of complete & malevolent connection, whacko & unpleasant though it be, is preferable at least to its opposite—the conviction that *nothing* is connected to anything else & that *nothing* has anything intrinsically to do with *you*. Please see that this Pynchonian contraparanoia would be the appropriate metaphysic for any resident of the sort of world the *Tractatus* describes. And Markson's Kate lives in just such a world, while her objectless epistle 'mirrors' it perfectly, manages to capture the psychic flavor both of solipsism and of Wittgenstein in the simple & affectless but surreal prose & short aphoristic paragraphs that are also so distinctive of the *Tractatus*. Kate's textual obsession is simply to find connections between things,<sup>17</sup> any strands that bind the historical facts & empirical data that are all her world comprises. And always—necessarily—genuine connections elude her. All she can find is an occasional synchronicity: the fact that certain names are similar enough to be richly confusing—William Gaddis and Taddeo Gaddi, for example—or that certain lives & events happened to overlap in space & time. And even these fairly thin connections turn out not to be 'real,' features only of her imagination; and even *these* are nonetheless isolate, locked into themselves by their status as fact. When Kate recalls, for example, that Rembrandt suffered bankruptcy & Spinoza excommunication, & that, given biographical data, their paths may well have intersected at some point in the Amsterdam of the 1650s, the only encounter she can even *imagine* between them is:

'I'm sorry about your bankruptcy, Rembrandt.'

'I'm sorry about your excommunication, Spinoza.'

The basic argument-thrust here is that Markson, by drawing on a definitive atomistic metaphysics & transfiguring it into art, has achieved something

<sup>17</sup> this connection-urge more fundamental and scary than the humanistic syrup of *Howards End*'s 'Only connect': the latter refers to relations between persons, the former to the possibility of any extracranial universe at all . . .

like the definitive anti-melodrama. He has made facts sad. For Kate's existence itself is that of an atomic fact, her loneliness metaphysically ultimate. Her world is 'empty' of all but data that are like the holes in a reticular pattern, both defined & imprisoned by the epistemic strands she knows only she can weave. And weave she does, constantly, unable to stop, self-consciously mimicking Penelope of the Attic antiquity that obsesses her. But Kate—unlike Ulysses' legit mistress—is powerless either to knit intrinsic pattern into or to dismantle what her mind has fabricated. She ends up, in this respect, not Penelope but both Clytemnestra & Agamemnon; the Clytemnestra whom Kate describes as killing Agamemnon 'after her own grief,' the Agamemnon 'at his bath, ensnared in that net and being stabbed through it.' And since no things *present* connect either with each other or with her, Kate's memorial project in *WM* is sensible & inevitable even as it reinforces the occluded solipsism that is her plight. Via her memorial project, Kate makes 'external' history *her own*. It rewrites it as personal. Eats it, as mad van Gogh 'tried to eat his own pigments.' It is not accidental that Markson's novel opens with the Genetic prepositional 'In the beginning. . . .' It is neither colorful tic nor authorial pretension that the narrator's 'irreverent meditations' range from classical prosody to Dutch oils to Baroque quartets to 19th-century French Realism to post-Astroturf baseball. It is not an accident (though it is an allusion) that Kate has a fetish for feeding the warp & woof of tragic history into fires—she is the final historian, its tragedian and destructor, cremating each page of Herodotus (the 1st historian!) as she reads it. Nor is it cute or casual that she feels 'as if I have been appointed the curator of all the world. . . ,' living in museums and placing her own paintings next to masterworks. The curator's job—to recall, choose, arrange: to impose order & only so communicate meaning—is marvelously synecdochic of the life of the solipsist, of the survival strategies apposite one's existence as monad in a world of diffracted fact.

Except a big question: *whence facts*, if the world is empty?

Dalkey Archive Press's jacket copy for *WM* describes the solipsism of the Mistress as 'obviously a metaphor for ultimate loneliness.' And Kate is indeed awfully lonely, though her ingenuous announcements—'Generally, even then, I was lonely'—are less effective by far than the deep-nonsensical facts via which she communicates isolation's meaning—'One of those things people generally admired about Rubens, even if they were not always aware of it, was the way everybody in his paintings was always touching everybody else'; 'Later today I will possibly masturbate'; 'Pascal . . . refusing to sit on a chair without an additional chair at either side of him, so as not to fall into space.' Though for me the most affecting rendition of her

partner,<sup>18</sup> probably the most fecund symbols of Kate's damnation to a world logically atomized in its reflective relation to language as bare data-transfer concern the narrator's obsession, marvelously American, with property & easements & houses. The following excerpt is condensed:

I do not believe I have ever mentioned the other house.

What I may have mentioned are houses in general, along the beach, but such a generalization would not have included this house, this house [unlike Kate's own] being nowhere near the water.

All one can see of it from [my] upper rear window is a corner of its roof. . . .

Once I did become aware of it, I understood that there would also have to be a road leading to it from somewhere, of course.

Yet for the life of me I was not able to locate the road, and for the longest time. . . .

In any case my failure to locate the road eventually began to become a wholly new sort of perplexity in my existence. (88-89)

It's of course tempting, given the book's critical imposition of Wittgenstein as referent & model & lover, to read Kate's loneliness as itself an intellectual metaphor, as just a function of the radical skepticism the *Tractatus's* logical atomism itself imagines. Because, again, whence and wherefore the all-important 'facts' which, for both Wittgenstein & Kate, the world 'falls apart into'<sup>19</sup> but does *not* comprise? Are facts—genuine existents—intrinsic to the Exterior? admitting of countenance only via the frailties of sense-data & induction? Or, way worse, are they not perhaps perversely *deductive*, products of the very head that countenances them as Exterior facts & as such genuinely ontic? This latter possibility—if internalized, really believed—is a track that makes stops at skepticism & then solipsism before heading straight into insanity. It's the latter possibility that informs the neurasthenia of Descartes's *Meditations* & so births modern philosophy (and with it the distinctively modern 'alienation' of the individual from all wholes both natural & social). Kate flirts with this Cartesian nightmare repeatedly, as in:

What happened after I started to write about Achilles was that halfway through the sentence I began to think about a cat, instead.<sup>20</sup>

The cat I began to think about instead was the cat outside of the broken window in

<sup>18</sup> plus continual reference to bunches of tennis balls bouncing all over the place made me realize tennis balls are about the best macroscopic symbol there is for the flux of atomistic fact . . .

<sup>19</sup> *Tractatus* 1.2

<sup>20</sup> Since I can't find any more graceful place to stick it in, let me invite you, with this line as exemplar, to see another cool formal horizon-expansion Markson effects in *WM*—the mode of presentation is less 'stream of consciousness' than 'stream of conscious utterance'; Markson's technique here shares the associative qualities of Joycean s.o.c. but differs in being '*directed*': at what or whom it's directed comes the novel's implicit, or anti-, plot, & accounts for a 'narrative movement' that's less

the room next to this one, at which the tape frequently scratches when there is a breeze.

Which is to say that I was not actually thinking about a cat either, there being no cat except insofar as the sound of scratching reminds me of one.

As there were no coins on the floor of Rembrandt's studio, except insofar as the configuration of the pigment reminded Rembrandt of them. (62)

The thing is that the painted coins that fooled Rembrandt, & Rembrandt, & Achilles, too, are all just like 'the cat' here: Markson's narrator has nothing left *except* 'sounds of scratching'—ie memory & imagination & the English language—with which to construct any sort of Exterior. Its flux is that of Kate's own head; why it resists order or population is attributable to the very desperation with which Kate tries to order & populate it: her search's fevered pathos ensures dissatisfaction. Note that by page 63, after the shine of metaphysical scrupulousness has faded, Kate goes back to talking about the unreal cat as 'real.' The big emotional thing is that, whether her treatment of linguistic constructs as existents is out of touch with reality or simply an inevitable response to the novel's reality, the solipsistic nature of that reality, *as far as Kate's concerned*, remains unchanged. A double-bind to make Kierkegaard, Shakespeare & Wittgenstein all proud.

Still, as I read & appreciate *WM*, more is at stake for Kate in countenancing the possibility that her own 'errors' are all that keep the world extant than questions of metaphysics or even of madness. Kate's pretty sanguine about the possibility of insanity—jokes about having been mad, before, at times, 'times out of mind.' Actually, what are finally at stake here seem to be issues of ethics, of guilt & responsibility. One of the things that putatively so tortured Wittgenstein in the twenty years between the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations* was that a logically atomistic metaphysics admits exactly nothing of ethics or moral value or questions about what it is to be human. It's history that Wittgenstein the person cared about what made things good or right or worthwhile. He did things like volunteer for the Austrian infantry in 1918 when he could & should have 4F'd out, like give his huge personal inheritance away to people (Rilke among them). A deadly serious ascetic, Wittgenstein lived his adult life in bare rooms devoid of even a lamp or coccyx-neutral chair. But it was no accident that the *Tractatus*, very much the product of the same Vienna that birthed '... two of the most powerful and symptomatic movements of modern culture: psychoanalysis and atonal music, both voices that speak of the homelessness of modern man,'<sup>21</sup> nevertheless itself birthed the Vienna Circle & the philosophical school of Logical Positivism the Circle promulgated: a central tenet of Positivism being that the only utterances that made any sense at all were the well-formed

<sup>21</sup>See William Barrett, 'Wittgenstein the Pilgrim,' in *The Illusion of Technique*.

data-transferring propositions of science, thus that considerations of 'value' such as those of ethics or aesthetics or normative prescription were really just a confused mishmash of scientific observation & emotive utterance, such that saying 'Killing is not right' really amounts just to saying 'Killing: YUCK!' The fact that the metaphysics of the *Tractatus* not only couldn't take account of but pretty much denied the coherent possibility of things like ethics, values, spirituality & responsibility had the result that 'Wittgenstein, this clear-headed & intellectually honest man, was hopelessly at odds with himself.'<sup>22</sup> For Wittgenstein was a queer sort of ascetic. He did deny his body & starve his senses—except not, as with most monkish personalities, simply to enjoy a consequent nourishment of the spirit. His big thing seems to have been denying his *self* by denying, through his essays at philosophical truth, the things most important to him. He never actually wrote anything about the exquisite tensions between atomism & attendant solipsism on the one hand & distinctively human values & qualities on the other. But, see, this is *exactly* what Markson does in *WM*; and in this way Markson's novel succeeds in speaking where Wittgenstein is mute, weaving Kate's obsession with responsibility (for the world's emptiness) gorgeously into the character's mandala of cerebral conundrum & spiritual poverty.

Of the many specular vantages *WM* demands, Kate's central identification with the 'fact' of historical personage is with Helen of Troy/Hisarlik—the Face That Launched 1000 Ships & the body that lay behind the Trojan War's impressive casualty-count.<sup>23</sup> And the vehicle for this identification with Helen is a distinctively female sense of 'responsibility': like the *Iliad*'s Helen, Kate is haunted by the passive sense that 'everything is her fault.' And Kate's repeated attempts at defending Helen against the charge of instigating exactly what emptied Ionia of men have a compulsive & shrill insistence about them that bespeak too much protesting:

I have always harbored sincere doubts that Helen was the cause of that war, by the way.

A single Spartan girl, after all.

As a matter of fact the whole thing was undeniably a mercantile proposition. All ten years of it,<sup>24</sup> just to see who would pay tariff to whom, so as to be able to make use

<sup>22</sup>Dr. James D. Wallace, unpublished response to his son's cries for help with *Wittgenstein's Mistress & Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

<sup>23</sup>Also true that Kate identifies closely with Penelope, Clytemnestra, Eve, Agememnon, & particularly Cassandra, the mad prophetess who warned about armed men inside empty gifts. But I'm thinking Cassandra's importance is more a function of Kate's *self-consciousness* about her own identification with Helen and feminine culpability, about which more below.

<sup>24</sup>(the same period of time Kate spent traversing the ancient & modern empty worlds, flopping in museums and 'looking' for people)

of a channel of water. . . .

Still, I find it extraordinary that young men died there in a war that long ago, and then died in the same place three thousand years after that. (59, cf 8-9, 22)

Issues orbiting Helen & femininity & guilt mark a sort of transition in this novel & its reading. Have I yet mentioned that a notable feature of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, male-written, is that the novel's composed entirely of the words of a female character? And it is in terms of gender & authenticity, I think, that Markson's book becomes at once least perfect & most interesting. Most 1988ish. Most important as not just a literary transposition of a philosophic position but also a transcendence of received doctrine. Here Descartes & Kant & Wittgenstein cease being overt critical touchstones and become springboards for a flawed, moving meditation on loneliness, language & gender.

See, Homer's Helen is 'guilty' finally not because of anything she's done but because of who she is, how she appears, what she looks like; because of the effect she has, hormonally/emotionally, on men who're ready to kill & die over what they're made to feel. Kate, like Helen, is haunted by an unspoken but oppressive sense that '... everything is her [own] fault.' What everything? How close is she to the Helen she invokes?<sup>25</sup> Well, first off, it's easy to see how radical skepticism—Descartes's hell & Kate's vestibule—yields at once omnipotence & moral oppression. If The World is entirely a function of Facts that not only reside in but *hail from* one's own head, one is just as Responsible for that world as is a mother for her child, or herself. This seems straightforward. But what's less clear & way richer is the peculiar slant this omniresponsibility takes when the responsible monad in question is historically *passive*, per- & conceived as an object and not a subject—ie when one is a woman, one who can effect change & cataclysm not as an agent but merely as a perceived entity . . . perceived by historically active testosterone glands positively *gush* with agency. To be an object of desire (by hirsute characters), speculation (by hirsute author), oneself the 'product' of male heads & shafts is to be almost *Classically* feminized, less Eve than Helen, 'responsible' without freedom to choose, act, or forebear. The [my] terribly blanket assumption is that received Western perceptions of women as moral agents divide into those of Hellenic & those of Evian (Eve-ish) responsibility; the claim I can support is that Markson, despite his worst intentions, manages to triumph over 400 years of post-Miltonic tradition and to present the Hellenic as the more poignant—certainly more apposite—situation of women in any system where *appearance* remains a 'picture' or 'ap' of *ontology*. This presentation seems neither pre- nor

<sup>25</sup>Evidently pretty close for readers: over half the reviewers of *WM* misnamed the

post-feminist: it's just darned imaginative, ingenious even; and as such—despite some failures of authorial vision & nerve—flies or falls on its own merits.

The degree of success with which Markson has here rendered the voice & psyche & predicament of a female, post-Positivist or otherwise, is a vexed issue. Some of the fiction I try to write is in feminine voice, and I consider myself sensitive to the technical/political problems involved in 'cross-writing,' and I found the female persona here compelling & real. Some female readers on whom I've foisted *WM* report finding it less so. They objected not so much to the voice & syntax (both of which are great in *WM* in a way I can't demonstrate except by quoting like 20 pages verbatim) as to some of the balder ways Markson goes about continually reminding the reader that Kate is a woman. The constant references to Kate's menses, for example, were cited as clunky. Menstruation does come up a lot, & for reasons that remain narratively obscure; and if it isn't a clunky allusion to Passion or martyrdom then it's an equally clunky (because both unsubtle & otiose) reminder of gender: yes, women are persons whose vaginas regularly bleed, but repeating & dwelling on it reminds one of bad science fiction where aliens are making continual reference to cranial antennae that, were they & the narrative voice truly alien/alien-empathic, would be as unquestioned & quotidian a fact of life as ears or noses or hair.<sup>26</sup> Personally I'm neutral on the menstruation point. What I'm negative on is the particular strategy Markson sometimes employs to try to explain Kate's 'female' feelings both of ultimate guilt & of ultimate loneliness. The *realistic* or character-based explanation is not, thank God, just that Kate's been left in the emotional lurch by all sorts of objectifying men, psychic abandoners who range from her husband (variously named by her Simon or Terry or sometimes Adam) to her final lover, univocally called Lucien. The proffered explanation is rather that, back in the halcyon pre-Fall days when the world was humanly populated, Kate betrayed her husband with other men, & that subsequently her little boy (variously Simon or, gulp, again Adam) died, in Mexico, possibly of meningitis, & that then her husband left her, about ten years ago, 'time out of mind,' at the same psychohistorical point at which Kate's world emptied and the diasporic quest for anyone else

<sup>26</sup>This is not my analogy, but I can't think of a better one, even though this isn't all that good; but I see the point & trust you do—it's one of those alarm-bell issues where the narrative voice is clearly communicating to a reader while pretending not to, as in dialogue like 'Lord, Cragmont, the vermilion of your MOTHER tattoo is looking even more lurid against the dead-white of your prison pallor now that the circulation's returned to the legs you smashed trying to outrun a 74-car in train in Decatur IL that balmy yet somehow also chill night in 1979'—clunky about the best analysis for stuff like this.

alive in the world at all commenced, a search that led Kate to the empty beach where she now resides & declaims to no one. Her betrayals & her son's death & husband's departure—alluded to over & over, albeit coyly—are the Evian diagnosis of her transgression & metaphysical damnation; they're presented, with an insistence impossible to ignore, as Kate's Fall<sup>27</sup> across gender, a Fall from the graces of a community in which she is both agent & object<sup>28</sup> into a post-Romantic, Wittgensteinian world of utter subjectivity & pathological responsibility, into the particular intellectual/emotional/moral isolation a 1988 U.S. reader associates with *men*, males alienated via agency from an Exterior we have to objectify, use up, burn the pages of in order to remain subjects, ontologically secure in shield & shaft. All this stuff I find fecund & compelling, a pregnant marriage of Attic & Christian reductions of women. But the death of her son & separation from her husband are also in *WM* presented as a very particular emotional 'explanation' of Kate's psychic 'condition,' a peculiar reduction of Markson's own to which I kind of object. The presentation of personal history as present explanation, one that threatens to make *WM* just another madwoman monologue in the Ophelia-Rhys tradition, is oblique & ever artful, but still prominent & insistent enough to make it hard [for me] to blink its intent:

Possibly [I was not mad] before that. [When I went south] To visit at the grave of a child I had lost . . . named Adam.

Why have I written that his name was Adam?

Simon is what my little boy was named.

Time out of mind. Meaning that one can even momentarily forget the name of one's only child, who would be thirty by now? (9)

<sup>27</sup>cf in this respect:

After he knew that he had fallen, outwards and down, away from the Fullness, he tried to remember what the Fullness had been. . . .

He did remember, but found he was *silent, and could not tell others.*

He wanted to tell others that she leapt farthest forward and fell into a Passion *apart from his embrace.*

She was in great agony, and would have been swallowed up by the sweetness, had she not reached a limit, and stopped.

But the Passion *went on without her, and passed beyond the limit.*

Sometimes he thought he was about to speak, but *the silence continued.*

He wished to say: *strengthless and female fruit.*

—w/emphasis supplied, from Valentinus's *AD 199 Pleroma*, part of the Neo-Platonic Gnosticism that functions as a metaphysical counterpoint to the anti-idealism of the *Tractatus*, & signals nicely Markson's artistic ambivalence about whether Kate's bind is ultimately Hellenic or Evian.

<sup>28</sup>this community being nothing other than sexual society as limned by the males who wrote *ature & epic*, these males themselves interpreted & transfigured by

As a matter of fact I believe it was when I went back to Mexico, that I [gessoed a blank canvas & then stared at it for a long time & then burned it]. In the house where I had once lived with Simon, and with Adam.

I am basically positive that my husband [Simon/Terry] was named Adam. (24)

There is no longer any problem in regard to my husband's name, by the way. Even if I never saw him again, once we separated after Simon died. (52)

Although probably I did leave out this part before, about having taken lovers when I was still Adam's wife. (225)

I'm told Shiite women walk swaddled & veiled in deference to their responsibility to be invisible & so keep poor barely-keeping-it-together males from being maddened by exposure to fair sexuality. I find in *WM* the same complex & scary blend of Hellenic & Evian misogyny—Helen essentially guilty as object & Eve guilty as subject, temptress. Though I personally find the Hellenic component more interesting & a better easement into contemporary politics, I find Markson's vacillation between the two models narratively justified & psychologically neat. It is when, though, he seems to settle on the Evian as both character-archetype & narrative explanation—as the argument traced *supra* & beyond indicates—that his *Wittgenstein's Mistress* becomes most conventional as fiction. It is here, too, that for me the novel falters technically by betraying its authorial presence as thoroughly male, outside Kate &/or womanhood generally. As in most cutting-edge experimental fictions, too, this technical flaw seriously attenuates the thematics. It seems very interesting to me that Markson has created a Kate who dwells so convincingly in a hell of utter subjectivity, yet cannot, finally, himself help but objectify her—ie by 'explaining' her metaphysical condition as emotional/psychical, reducing her bottled missive to a mad monologue by a smart woman driven mad by the consequences of culpable sexual agency, Markson is basically subsuming Kate under one of the comparatively stock rubrics via which we guys apparently must organize & process fey mystery, feminine pathos, Strengthless & Female fruit. Kate's Fall, ostensibly one into the ghastly spiritual manifestation of a masculinely logic-bound twentieth-century metaphysic, becomes, under a harsh reading, little more than a(n inevitable?) stumble into alienation from the heroine's role—her self—as mother, wife, lover, *beloved*. Under this reading, Kate's empty solipsism does not get to become a kind of grim independence from objectification: Kate has rather simply exchanged the role of real wife of real man for the part of nonexistent mistress of an absolute genius of objectification<sup>29</sup> indisposed toward heterosexual union. And I found it weird that many of the female readers who disapproved things like *WM*'s menstruation-cues as 'ringing false' nevertheless approved

<sup>29</sup>The world is everything that is the case. The world falls apart into facts.'

Markson's provision of Kate's ostensible 'motivation,' here. Though I'm coming to accept that it's the petrifiedly standard critical line w/r/t fiction these U.S. days: readers want stories about very particular persons with very particular qualities in very particular circumstances whose genesis must on some level be personally-historic & psychological as well as 'merely' intellectual or political or spiritual, pan-human. The 'successful' story 'transcends' its thoroughgoing individuality/idiosyncrasy by subsuming the peculiarities of character & circumstance to certain broad archetypes & mythopeiae inherited from Jung or Shakespeare or Homer or Freud or Skinner or Testament. Particularity births form; familiarity breeds content. Rarely is our uncritical inheritance of early Wittgensteinian & Logical Positivist models so obvious as in our academic & aesthetic prejudice that successful fiction encloses rather than opens up, organizes facts rather than undermines them, diagnoses rather than genuflects. Attic myths were, yes, forms of 'explanation.' But it's no accident that great mythos was mothered by the same culture that birthed great history—or that Kate divides her reading- & burning-time between classical tragedies & histories. To the extent that myth enriches facts & history, it serves a Positivist & factual function. But the U.S.'s own experience with myth-making & myth-worship—from Washington & cherries to Jackson & hickory to Lincoln & logs to dime novels & West as womb & soul's theatre to etc., etc. to Presley & Dean & Monroe & Wayne & Reagan—an experience that informs & infects the very physics of reading, today—confirms that myth is finally compelling only in its opposition to history & data & the cingulum of Just The Facts, Ma'am. Only in that opposition can story enrich & transfigure & transcend explanation. Kate's idiosyncratic/formulaic 'real' past in *WM* isn't weak as an explanation; it is for me weak & disappointing *because* it's an explanation. Just as it would have been weak & disappointing to have 'explained' & particularized Kate's feelings of isolation & imprisonment, not via the idea that the typing hands she holds out in search of communion form the very barrier between Self & World they're trying to puncture, but, say, by plunking her down via shipwreck on a deserted island à la TV's Gilligan or Golding's flylord schoolboys or the Police's top-40 'Message in a Bottle.'

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I'm struggling to make clear, I think, that it's its own masculinely prejudiced imperfection that illuminates how important & ambitious *WM* is as an experimental piece of late-'80s literature. As a would-be writer I like how the novel inverts received formulae for successful fiction by succeeding least where it conforms to them most: to the precise extent that Kate is presented here as circumstantially & historically unique, to just that extent is the novel's monstrous power attenuated. It's when Kate is *least* particular, *least* 'motivated' by some artfully presented but standardly digestible

most e- & affecting. For (obvious tho this seems) to the extent that Kate is not motivationally unique, she can be all of us, and the empty diffraction of Kate's world can map or picture the desacralized & paradoxical solipsism of U.S. persons in a cattle-herd culture that worships only the Transparent I, of guiltily passive solipsists & skeptics trying to warm soft hands at the computer-enhanced fire of data in an Information Age where received image & enforced eros replace active countenance or sacral mystery as ends, value, meaning. Etc. The familiar bitch & moan that Markson's novel promises & comes close to transfiguring, dramatizing, *mythologizing* via bland bald fact.

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I think finally the reason I object to *WM's* attempt to give Kate's loneliness a particular 'motivation' via received feminine trauma is that it's just unnecessary. For Markson has in this book succeeded already on all the really important levels of fictional conviction. He has fleshed the abstract sketches of Wittgensteinian doctrine into the concrete theatre of human loneliness. In so doing he's captured far better than pseudobiography what made Wittgenstein a tragic figure & a victim of the very diffracted modernity he helped inaugurate. Markson has written an erudite, breathtakingly cerebral novel whose prose is crystal & whose voice rivets & whose conclusion defies you not to cry. Plus he's also, in a way it'd seem for all the world he doesn't know, produced a powerfully critical meditation on loneliness's relation to language itself.

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Though of course any writer's real motivations are forever occult & objects of at best lucid imagining, it's safe to point out that the post-atomist metaphysical peripety that is L. Wittgenstein's late *Philosophical Investigations* articulates philosophical concerns & assumptions so different from those of the early *Tractatus* that the *PI* amounts to less a renunciation than a kind of infanticide-by-bludgeon. For Marksonian purposes, the three important blunt instruments, near-diurnal differences between 'early' & 'late' Wittgenstein, all concern W's enduring obsession with language-&-reality questions. One. *PI* now takes as paradigmatic of the language with which philosophers ought to be concerned not the ideal abstraction of math-logic, rather now just ordinary day-to-day language in all its general wooliness & charm.<sup>30</sup> Two. The *PI's* Wittgenstein expends much energy & ink arguing against the idea of what's been called 'private language.' This term is the Pragmatist William James's, whom W., not an enemy to welcome, accused of looking forever 'for the artichoke amongst its leaves.' But *PI's* concern to show the impossibility of private language (which it does, pretty much) is also a terrible anxiety to avoid the solipsistic consequences of mathematical

<sup>30</sup>Very cool elaborations on this sort of move are observable in J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* & Stanley Cavell's 'Must We Mean What We Say?'

logic as language-paradigm. Recall that the truth-functional schemata of math-logic & the discrete facts the schemata picture exist independent of speakers, knowers, & most of all *listeners*. *PI*'s insistence—as part of the book's movement away from what the world must be like for language to be possible & toward what language must be like given the way the world in all its babble & charm & deep nonsense actually *is*—that the existence, nay the very *idea* of language depends on some sort of communicative *community*<sup>31</sup> . . . this is about the most powerful philosophical attack on skeptic-/solipsism's basic coherence since the Descartes whose *Cogito* Wittgenstein had helped to skewer. Three. The final big difference is a new & clinical focus on the near-Nixonian trickiness of ordinary language itself. A tenet of the *PI* is that profound philosophical stuff can be accomplished via figuring out why linguistic constructions get used as they are, & that many/most errors of 'metaphysics' or 'epistemology' derive from academics' & humans' susceptibility to language's *pharmakopia* of tricks & deceptions & creations. Late Wittgenstein is full of great examples of how persons are constantly succumbing to the metaphysical 'bewitchment' of ordinary language. Getting lost in it. Eg, locutions like 'the flow of time' create a kind of ontological UHF-ghost, seduce us into somehow seeing time itself as like a river, one not just 'flowing' but doing so somehow external to us, outside the things & changes of which time is really just the measure.<sup>32</sup> Or the ordinary predicates game and rules, attached simultaneously to, eg, jacks & gin rummy & softball & Olympiade, trick us into a specious Platonic universalism in which there is some transcendently existent feature common to every member of the extensions of 'game' or 'rule' in virtue of which every member *is* a 'game' or a 'rule,' rather than the fluid web of 'family resemblances'<sup>33</sup> that, for Wittgenstein, perfectly justifies the attachment of apparently univocal predicates as nothing more or less than a type of *human behavior*—rather, that is, than any sort of transcendental reality-mapping. Wittgenstein, by life's end, conceived meaningful human brain-activity (ie philosophy) as exactly & nothing more than ' . . . a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language' (*PI* I, 109). The *PI* holds that persons must or at any rate do live in a sort of linguistic dream, awash & enmeshed in ordinary language & the deceptive 'metaphysics' linguistic usage & communication among persons imposes . . . or costs.

<sup>31</sup> cf *PI* I, 23 . . .

<sup>32</sup> Tachyons & causality violations & the Superposition Principle all complicate W's point quite a bit, and actually there's very interesting stuff starting to appear in industry mags about deep affinities between ordinary-language temporal locutions & cutting-edge quantum models . . . but anyway you get the idea.

<sup>33</sup> the famous & infamous *Familienähnlichkeiten* (no kidding)—cf *The Blue Book* 17 & 124 or *Philosophical Grammar* 75 or *PI* I, 67. For equally famous

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The above summary is pretty crude.

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But, actually, so, on the surface, is *Wittgenstein's Mistress's* use & reconstitution of the *PI's* seminal new perspective. Much of the overt master/mistress relation here again involves resemblance-as-allusion [sic]. Lines in the novel like 'Upstairs, one can see the ocean. Down here there are dunes, which obstruct one's view' are conscious echoes of the *PI's* 'A philosophical problem has the form: "I don't know my way about."<sup>34</sup> Also heavily allusive (sometimes just plain heavy) are Kate's prolonged musings on the ontological status of named things: she (as would we all) still refers to the house she burned down as a house, but she keeps wondering in what way a destroyed house is still a 'house,' except in virtue of language-habits from time out of mind. Or, eg, she wonders about questions like 'Where is the painting when it is in my head instead of on the wall?' & whether, were let's say no copies of *Anna Karenina* still extant (unburned) anywhere, the book would still be called *Anna Karenina*. Or marvels at facts like 'One can drive through any number of towns without knowing the names of the towns.'

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A little of this narcissistic echoing goes a long way, and Markson is sometimes tiresome, allusively, on the surface. Again, though, the mistress like the master invites you/me *down*: what's ponderous on the first pass opens up later. It's toss-offs like the last just above that are most interesting as invitations, less allusions to a genius than gauzy prefigures of Markson's own meditations about & around some of the themes dominant in *PI*. What first strikes one as heavy or ponderous refines itself after time into a fragile note of resignation—ie *weltschmerz* as opposed to *naïveté* or *hubris*—in most of Kate's speculations on the way a name tends to 'create' an object or attribute<sup>35</sup>; albeit on the other hand a twinge of envy whenever she countenances the possibility of things existing without being named or subjected to predication. Why this battle occupies Kate & engages the reader has partly to do with the actual ethical pain that we may assume filled the long silence between the *Tractatus* & *PI*, but it's also attributable to an original &

<sup>34</sup> *PI*, 123, a profound little offering meaning roughly to point out that we are now & forever 'down here' in language, inside it, on ground-level, & thus have no better a view of the Big Picture than someone earthbound in contrast to someone aloft who can look down at the earthbound guy & the terrain around him, discerning patterns against backdrops of other bigger patterns, seeing them as *patterns of something larger* instead of as the -bound man's terrain, maze, world, total . . .

<sup>35</sup> note in passing that themes of nomination-as-enfranchisement, presence-as-privilege, also run through much of the feminist theory with which this novel's author reveals himself familiar . . .

deeply smart exploration by Markson of something that might be called 'the feminization of skepticism.'

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Which is probably a bad term to start throwing around in this late inning, since it requires definitions & so on; this is already pretty long.

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But recall to this abstraction's ambit prenominate stuff about Helen & Eve & Cassandra & the *Tractatus*, plus the longly discussed second half of the double bind that cingulizes solipsism: radical doubt about not only the existence of objects but of *subject*, self. Kate's text, acknowledged within itself as writing, is a desperate attempt to recreate & so animate a world by *naming* it. The attempt's desperation underlies her near-pathologic obsession with names—of persons, personages, figures, books, symphonies, battles, towns & roads—and it accounts for what Markson communicates so well via repetition & tone: Kate's extreme upset when she can't remember—'summon,' 'recall'—names well enough to make them *behave*. And her attempts at ontology-thru-nomination are a moving synecdoche of pretty much the whole history of intellectual endeavor in the whitely male West. She, no less than was Wittgenstein, or Kant, or Descartes, or Herodotus, is writing a world. The ingenious poignancy of Markson's achievement here is that Kate's modernly female vantage, in conspiracy with the very desperation that underlies her attempt at worldmaking,<sup>36</sup> renders her project doubly doomed. Doom 1 is what's evoked on surface: skepticism & solipsism. I.e., that there *is* no 'world' to see itself mirrored in Kate's text is unhappy enough; but in *WM*, Kate's memoir *itself* is 'written in sand,' itself subject to the 'deterioration'<sup>37</sup> & dry rot that is such a dominant recurring image in the loops of recollection & assembly here.

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I'm going to shut up right after I make this idea clear. I'm pretty sure *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is an imperfect book. Questions of voice, over-allusion, & 'explanation' get to be pushed aside, though, because of the novel's terrific emotional & political/fictional & theoretical achievement: it evokes a truth a whole lot of books & essays before it have fumbled around: (at least) for the modern female—viz the female who understands herself as both female & modern—both sides of the solipsistic bind:

<sup>36</sup>ie, she's doing it for mental survival, not for interest or acclaim or tenure . . .

<sup>37</sup>I keep waiting for feminist theorists to start talking about *deterioration* as a textual phenomenon; it would be the sort of wry joke that captures truths: 'deterioration' is essentially 'deconstruction' made passive, observed rather than performed, *the reader the ultimate 'absentee'* in the post-structural totem of absence: one of the *things* Kate's stoic, unpacks is the terrific power of writer-as-witness, utterly passive, unheard: it might be this, more than what's argued in my final paragraph,

If I exist, nothing exists outside me

But

If something exists outside me, I do not exist<sup>38</sup>

amount to the same thing—damnation to ghostliness among ghosts, curating a plenum of statues, mistaking echoes for voices. And, too, here both binds force on the subject just what her own dramatic predicament forces on Kate: a kind of parodic *masculinization*, one in which the Romantic Quest for the Absent Object, a desire for attainment w/r/t which *unattainability* is that desire's breath & bread, replaces an ability to be-in-the-world as neither center nor cipher, neither all-responsible nor impotent, part of one great big Family Likeness. Markson's Kate's sudden loss of interest in roads once she's found them & in data once she's 'mastered' (!! ) it is just as clunky & imperfect & human & real as, say, Stendhal's rush to wind up *Charterhouse* the minute Fabrizio finally nails Clelia. . . . And Kate's valuation, finally, only of what's *unsaid*, *unread*—burning pages once she's read them, jettisoning family once she's 'responsible' for them; probably even fueling her epistle with the doomed/delicious knowledge that it's headed toward nothing—summons perfectly, again, the terrible & moving final prescription of the master's *Tractatus*. This, loosely translated, is 'Anybody who understands what I'm saying eventually recognizes that it's nonsense, once he's used what I'm saying—rather like steps—to climb up past what I'm saying—he must, that is, throw away the ladder after he's used it.'<sup>39</sup> This passage, like most of W, is only indirectly about what it's really about. It whispers & plays. It's really about the plenitude of emptiness, the importance of silence in terms of speech. Markson nails this idea (from my male p.o.v.); Kate's monograph has the quality of speechlessness in a dream, the cold muteness urgency enforces, a psychic stutter. If it's true her ladder goes noplacé, it's also true nobody's going to throw either book away.

<sup>38</sup>I won't waste anybody's time shouting about what a marvelous inversion of the *Caute & Ontological* . . .

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BODY: WAR FEVER

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BRITAIN's J.G. Ballard is not a great fiction writer, but he is an important one. If that seems like an inconsistent judgment, be advised that American readers who know Ballard only via his moving, Spielbergable memoir *Empire of the Sun* do not know the real J. G. Ballard. The real Ballard has since the early '60s been a pioneer of a certain sort of literary science fiction I like to call Psy-Fi. Psy-Fi, often parodic, surreal and grotesque, and almost always set in some near and recognizable future, seeks to explore the psychopathology of post-atomic life, stuff like high technology, mass-media, advertising, PR, totalitarianism, etc. Ballard's 1973 cult novel *Crash*, a coldly theoretical fable about the eroticism of automobile accidents and the relations of violence to orgasm and deformity to celebrity, ranks with Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* and William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* as basically defining the Psy-Fi genre. And, forays into memoir and mass-market appeal notwithstanding, Ballard has toiled and produced his best work in the metal arbor of this weird allegorical techno-lit. His latest U.S. release, *War Fever*, a collection of short stories written between the mid-'70s and the late '80s, is vintage Ballardian Psy-Fi, and its most successful pieces show Ballard at his engaging, exasperating best. And Ballard at his best helps show why the Psy-Fi masters have had such a profound influence on contemporary American fiction writers, not only genre-restricted cyberpunks like William Gibson but serious postmodern artists like Don DeLillo, William T. Vollmann and Mark Leyner.

Clinical, dogmatic, relentlessly reifying and world-class imaginative, Ballard is really more a social critic than a storyteller. And, except for a couple of hard-core science fiction pieces like "Report on an Unidentified Space Station," all of *War Fever's* 14 stories grow out of the parodic expansion of some single angst-producing feature of modern social life. In "The Secret History of World War 3," Ronald Reagan is brought back from advanced senescence for a third presidential term in '92, and when the U.S. electorate, "Watching this robotic figure with his goofy grins . . . began to ask if the

President was brain-dead, or even alive at all," Reagan's handlers begin releasing exhaustive reports on his health, updates and panel discussions that so mesmerize a nation of TV-watchers (for whom the President's EKG-trace is finally broadcast like stock quotations at the bottom of all programming) that the people ignore a spasmodic nuclear exchange with the U.S.S.R. in favor of expert analyses of presidential bowel-function and the First Lady's cosmetic tucks. In "Dream Cargoes," a scuttled garbage barge spills toxic wastes onto the shores of a Caribbean atoll, spawning gorgeous new life forms and metamorphosing human consciousness into a kind of techno-mysticism until the Navy steps in with flamethrowers to stop the "pollution." In the collection's title story, the factional warfare in Beirut is revealed to be orchestrated by the U.N., which has been protecting 30 years of complete global peace by fueling paranoia and hatred among the Beirut combatants, using the fighting as a controlled experiment in mutating "the virus of war." War Fever is an unusually tight, unified story collection, not only because its author has three or four basic Psy-Fi obsessions he simply works and reworks, but also because Ballard uses such a distinctive set of styles and techniques. Structurally, every one of this book's stories is exoskeletal: its symbols and meanings are right on the surface, right in your face; and they, rather than plot or character, provide the story's developmental drive. As is S.O.P. for Ballard, many of War Fever's selections are narrated in the first-person, with the narrator adopting this "I'm-the-last-and-only-person-who-can-articulate-what's-happened" tone so common to science fiction. And Ballard, as always, loves his formal fun. A diehard experimentalist, he has stories here in the form of an index to the autobiography of some eminent fictional 20th-century guy ("The Index," cute but slight, like a concrete poem), and, in the labyrinthine "Notes Towards a Mental Breakdown," in the form of numbered scholarly glosses on a one-sentence fragment of an unfinished essay detailing a famous neurosurgeon's plunge into schizophrenia and murder. This last story, my favorite in the collection, is not only a Borgesian marvel of involution, it's an ingenious study in dissociation, in which the academic objectivity of the glosses and the pathological pathos of the notes' subject counterpoint and dance and finally marry in the creepy revelation of just who's authoring the glosses. One of Ballard's finest stories ever, "Notes Towards . . ." alone makes War Fever worth the purchase. Yet another unifying feature of this collection is that here Ballard betrays all three of his biggest weaknesses as a Psy-Fi writer. The first is that his tone is so very cold. It's not an accident that most of War Fever's characters manifest dissociation's numbness and automatism, nor that Ballard's most effective narrative persona here is that of a detached clinical-report-writer (four of these stories are narrated by M.D.'s, with academics, surgeons, psychiatrists and scientists playing key roles in another six). The genre of Psy-Fi, postmodern to the quick, seems to demand this flat, scholarly narrative voice, an air of lab technicians looking at stuff under glass. But the poverty of affect here makes Ballard's stories at once creepier and empty of human quality; too many of the pieces seem loud but empty, like screams. Another of this collection's troubles is that Ballard's prose isn't all that great. His narrators have consistent penchants for stilted rhetorical questions, for clunky, bombastic pronouncements, and for rather cliched descriptions. Ballard's third and worst weakness is that he's about the least subtle major writer going. As do many Psy-Fi fictions, Ballard's stories wield their themes like black-jacks, rarely give their readers a chance to exercise discernment or insight. You never really get a chance to read Ballard. His narrators pontificate constantly, declaiming on the meaning of symbols, the irony of

twists, the significance of everything even remotely significant. These lead-footed intrusions, together with the fact that Ballard's fictions are basically one-trick ponies, all working off some single surreal metaphor, can often leave the audience wanting less. Still, the stories in *War Fever* are surprisingly and consistently compelling. They're predictable and sometimes annoying, but they're usually under 10 pages; and Ballard's inverted, thoroughly post-industrial philosophy of fiction -- which is basically that delusion, hallucination and rationalization are today's mediation, attempts to construct an inner psychic reality in the face of an empty, mechanized, mass-marketed and fictional modern world -- has, since the '60s, been worth readers' attention. The short story, a mode where Ballard can dispense with developed character and diachronic plot, and where he can use his great gift for formal ingenuity to afford the reader freshness and variety, seems to me to be J.G. Ballard's strongest form. Short, dense, vivid, hallucinatory, sometimes pompous, often truly disturbing, these pieces in *War Fever* are Ballard's Psy-Fi gems, and they have value.?

David Foster Wallace's most recent books are the short-story collection "Girl With Curious Hair" and, with Mark Costello, "Signifying Rappers," an essay about music and race.

# The Million-Dollar Tattoo

## Laura's Skin

By J. F. Federspiel.

Translated by Breon Mitchell.

211 pp. New York:

From International. \$18.95.

By D. F. Wallace

**S**ARDONIC cultural parody is so hot that we're now importing more of it from abroad. If you like ultra-ironic contemporary fiction — mordant sendups of consumerism, celebrity, pretension and vanity, laced with arty swirls of surrealism and myth — then the Swiss author J. F. Federspiel's "Laura's Skin" is a novel you'll want to read.

The first half is set in Milan. Primo Antonio Robusti is a rich old sugar daddy and art collector who collects women and keeps his paintings lined up sideways like books on shelves; he's a hard-core capitalist, so when with marriage he does things like make "the sign of the cross three times over the safe which was hidden behind a toilet bowl." He covets one Laura Granati, a gorgeous barracuda-naïf from the provinces who is cruising Milan's fast lane. Laura's most flawless feature is her bottom, and Robusti decides to make that bottom his finest art acquisition. He offers her all his dead mom's jewelry if she'll let him have the world's pre-eminent tattoo artist, the New Age American Omai O'Hara, place his magnum opus on her buttocks. The tattoo is a very pretty map of the world from which Vivaldi's "Four Seasons" emanates — apparently because of magically musical ink.

After some interminable needle sessions, both Robusti and O'Hara fall in love with Laura-as-masterpiece, and both promptly exit the novel after grisly coital mishaps. Laura flees with her loot and Robusti's maid, Lucia, to the United States, where, because O'Hara is apparently such an important artist that Newsweek devotes its cover story to his obituary, Laura's rear end is appraised in the millions, and she tours the nation like a museum show, displaying her posterior to various professional and civic organizations, cosmologists and Japanese gangsters for meaty fees, all the while feeling appropriate rations of sexual degradation, existential confusion and fiscal glee.

Mr. Federspiel, the author of the novel "The Ballad of Typhoid Mary," is immune to the criticism that his characters in no way resemble real people. This is because his novel presents itself as a satiric fable. Its diction (assuming Breon Mitchell's translation from the German is faithful) is simple and gentle. Its plot seems purposely stagy, its scenes' brief and episodic, with disorienting transitions and abrupt authorial asides. And the characters have to be seen as intentional stereotypes.

Robusti, the archetypal art patron, is "lonely in the midst of his riches," ashamed of his peasant heritage and as relentless in his exploitation of women as he is haunted by his dead mother. Lucia, the earthy clubfooted maid who becomes Laura's business agent, is a bawdy sidekick right out of Chaucer. O'Hara, a caricature of the modern artist as narcissistic mystic, sports silver makeup and disposable eyebrows, communes with "the angels of the moon" (angels repeatedly intervene in the book's action) and gets erections from flexing his muscles in the bathroom mirror. Laura is the most complex character because she is the least consistent. She moves without much trauma from being coveted as an erotic object to being famous and

D. F. Wallace's most recent books are "Girl With Curious Hair" and "Signifying Rappers" (written with Mark Costello).

enerated as the medium on which is projected a great male artist's vision of the world. Her occasional angst is romantically resolved by a blind New York street person named David, a parody of a wounded healer who can really love the spoiled heroine because he can't see O'Hara's transcendent work.

If these characters seem shallow and unengaging, it's because they are. But we're not asked to feel anything for them, just to smile knowingly at their allegorical significance and admire Mr. Federspiel's ironic commentaries on the relations between property/power/display and phallus/fece/firmament, respectively.

More compelling are the angels from various religions who pop down ex machina in the middle of scenes; discharge some intricate duty according to exhaustively described celestial regulations and then vanish. It's completely unclear whether the human characters know they are there. A lot of the angels' missions serve no discernible purpose — as when Oertha, "angel of the North and of glaciers," freeze-dries and then chews Manhattan — but some work yeomanlike to advance the plot. Another reason the book's human characters seem so flat is that whatever development they undergo isn't caused by what they learn or decide, it's simply zapped into them by angelic decree: it's when a nice angel blesses Laura "with the gift of being able to love" that she falls for the blind David, and this

An obsessive art collector,  
a bevy of angels and a  
tattoo artist transform  
Laura from a naïf into a  
venerated work of art.

allows the rest of her emotional story to be resolved along desperately conventional lines.

Mr. Federspiel's surreal flourishes and commentaries straddle the line between interesting and otiose. Most of the surrealism is pretty but pointless: And the authorial asides — usually in the service of some fuzzy theme about spatiotemporal relativity — start out somehow incongruous and apposite at the same time but quickly become annoying. The narrator is such a breathy presence that he finally emerges as a kind of archangelic master of ceremonies, orchestrating the whole silly plot and inviting us to laugh at every pratfall. Yet Mr. Federspiel has a near-maternal compassion for his pathetic stick figures, and the gentle charity he extends them offers a welcome contrast to the cynical manipulations they suffer at the hands of one another, of the angelic puppeteers and of the novelist's unsubtle thematics.

"Laura's Skin" is least interesting in its tired, derivative rehashing of the contemporary correspondence between art and property, love and consumption. But the novel does a service in suggesting that our modern habit of reducing one another to commodities has its origins not in greed or lust but in plain old fear. □

### Author's Query

For a book on the French actor Harry Baur (1880-1943), I would appreciate personal or professional information, anecdotes, remembrances of his film portrayals or knowledge of surviving children or other relatives.

RICHARD HAUER COSTA  
1119 Neal Pickett Drive  
College Station, Tex. 77840

## TRAGIC CUBAN EMIGRE AND A TALE OF 'THE DOOR TO HAPPINESS'

Jul 14, 1991

Reviewed by David Foster Wallace

### THE DOORMAN

By Reinaldo Arenas

Translated from the Spanish by Dolores M. Koch

Grove Weidenfeld. 208 pp. \$16.95

The Doorman, a small, strange novel, is the mid-'80s product of probably the best Cuban-born writer since Alejo Carpentier - Reinaldo Arenas. His life was as sad and difficult as any in 20th-century letters.

Arenas, born in 1943, left home at 15 to join the anti-Batista forces, and, at 22, established himself as a major literary figure in Fidel Castro's revolutionary Cuba with his first novel, *Singing From the Well*. His second novel was denied Cuban publication because of its treatment of homosexuality; he was arrested on charges of immorality and "extravagance" at 25, and two more novels and a story collection were suppressed in Cuba but published in Mexico and Uruguay to acclaim.

Then his life took another turn for the worse. In 1970, Arenas was convicted by old Communist Party comrades of being a "social misfit," and he was sentenced to two years of cane-cutting at a labor camp, an experience about which he wrote in *El Central: A Cuban Sugar Mill*, a Spanish-language classic not published in America until a few years ago. After a decade of prison terms for various counterrevolutionary activities, punctuated by periods of low-profile-keeping in Havana, Arenas finally escaped to the United States during the Mariel boat lift of 1980.

He lived in obscure poverty in a Hell's Kitchen apartment in New York, spurned for his anti-Castro leanings by the same literati who praised him when he was in prison. His American career was revived in the mid-'80s with the translation of several of his early books and contracts to write three more (including *The Doorman*) - just in time for Arenas to be diagnosed with AIDS. Close to death, Arenas rejected a final trip to the hospital and committed suicide in late 1990.

The facts of Arenas' life and death lend a gray weight to the opening of *The Doorman*: "This is the story of Juan, a young man who was dying of grief." Like Arenas, Juan has fled persecution in Cuba in 1980, though he is exactly 20 years younger than Arenas was when he got out. Dreamy, weird, passive and speaking little English, Juan has a hard time holding any of the menial jobs secured for him by a shadowy community of successful Cuban emigres.

As the book opens in 1992, Juan is a doorman at a luxury apartment building in Manhattan. It is as a doorman that Juan finds his niche as an immigrant, his raison as a human being, and the grief that defines and ruins his life:

For suddenly our doorman discovered (or thought he had discovered) that his tasks could not be limited to just opening the door of the building - but that he, the doorman, was the one chosen, elected, singled out (take your pick)

from all mankind to show everyone who lived there a wider door, the door to their own lives, which Juan described as - and we must quote him exactly even though it may seem (and, in fact, be) ridiculous - "the door to true happiness."

The intrusive narrative voice here, the "we," belongs to the one million-member community of Cubans who emigrated at Fulgencio Batista's fall, who have now made American-dream successes of themselves and, for obscure reasons, have had Juan under particular surveillance and protection since his arrival in 1980.

Though the stilted, interpolated commentary that this "we" indulges in can get irritating after a while, Arenas' choice of a whole community to narrate Juan's story ends up being apt, because *The Doorman* is less a disguised autobiography or even a novel than a dark fable about the very possibility of community.

Hence, the fact that each of Juan's building's tenants - characters who are introduced, enter and engage Juan in some bizarre exploitive encounter, one after the other - is a parody of American isolation, fear and obsessive attachment. As Juan tries to proselytize his tenants on the need to find a "wider door" than the glass one he opens, each tenant tries to involve Juan in some monomaniacal focus that the character has decided ensures community and fulfillment.

One tenant believes that giving out candies is the way to make connections between people, and his apartment is a confectioner's warehouse. Another believes that the key to happiness is ultra-white teeth, and he tries to get Juan to trade his own set for some movie-star caps.

There's a senescent playboy whose worship of sex is undercut by his impotence. There's the Ecuadoran founder of the Church of Love Through Friendly and Constant Contact, who espouses a goopy, Buscaglia-type touching as the way to bring people into true relation.

There's a wacky inventor who preaches the virtues of the totally prosthetic body; a former movie star who's such a miser that she's getting ready to live on the streets to cut overhead; a beautiful thanatophile whose suicide attempts keep getting thwarted; two aging gay men desperate for a dream-love; a blowsy alcoholic; a Marxist academic who wants to "rehabilitate" Juan, and so on.

These overtly symbolic caricatures, so privileged, lonely, blinded by narcissism and obsession, so oddly American, enter stagily, subjecting Juan to some diatribe or misadventure, and then disappear. They make the first half of *The Doorman* seem like a slighter version of Kafka's *Amerika* - another dark picaresque with a tortured foreign ingenu adrift amid all the nation's

bright promise and sad reality, Juan as a Karl Rossman defined by questions of freedom and relationship instead of guilt and penance.

It's in *The Doorman*'s second half that the book abandons all pretense of being anything more than an ingenious parable about slavery and freedom, collectivities and outsiders.

Each tenant has a pet - a million-dollar Egyptian dog, a polar bear, a parrot, a goldfish, an orangutan - and the pets, unlike their owners, are keenly interested in Juan's vague ideas of escape and big doors. They can speak. They invite Juan to secret meetings in the building's basement, where they advocate a particular Xanadu to which they can escape.

Juan and the Egyptian dog struggle to get them to transcend their own tastes and prejudices about freedom and submit to the greater chance of freedom that's a function of compromise and community.

Eventually, Juan's pet conspiracy is found out by the tenants; he is committed to an insane asylum (each of whose inmates is a brilliant pathological double of a tenant's neurosis); is liberated by the animals, who tear the bars from his window and carry him off, and is made the leader of a growing army of rebellious animals, who stop squabbling and unite to create their own state somewhere "near the equator."

The reader is struck by the resemblance, for Arenas, between house pets and immigrants, both removed from a "wild" exterior at once crueler and more real than privileged captivity, both objects of either derision or sloppy condescension, both imprisoned by the same promise of freedom and safety that has robbed them of the will to get truly free.

The constant narrative interruptions that apologize for the outlandish plot developments and assure the reader that every word is true do not create realism. But they do help establish the novel's sardonic counterpoint - the hostility between the established Cubans who fled Castro's revolution and the brutalized victims of the revolution who, like Arenas, arrived in Florida's refugee camps 20 years later.

Arenas has the narrators assume a self-congratulatory tone as they assure us that they'd done all they could for Juan when they abandoned him in the asylum: "To go beyond this point would have meant to endanger our hard-earned reputation as a reliable and powerful community in this country." And then he has them claim, contradictorily, that Juan who now presides over an army of liberated pets, is the Cuban community's "secret lethal weapon."

Arenas communicates a marvelous disgust at these old anti-Castroites, who, once through the great door to freedom that America represents, have become more concerned with their own place in the enslaving hierarchy of power and privilege than with helping pull other humans through the same door.

Much of *The Doorman*'s weird moral force concerns Arenas' idea of America as a false door, presenting itself as a utopia for huddled masses who, once they arrive, find either brutal

exploitation, or the "freedom" to start doing their own exploiting . . . which of course is still slavery.

The figure of Juan, vague, driven, nutty, shy, obsessed with a doorway that he admits he can't conceive of, so much like Arenas but so much younger, communicates the author's own idea of happiness in such a poignantly paradoxical way that it manages to avoid seeming trite or sentimental even to Americans for whom so much, today, seems banal.

Arenas ' central idea is a tragic one: that the possibility of happiness exists only for those who cannot be frightened or seduced into settling for substitutes, and that actual happiness consists simply in giving oneself up to a design greater than one's own happiness.

Finding the door, for Juan/ Arenas , is nothing other than helping others to find the door. Happiness equals grief equals the integrity to experience either. The community of doors becomes, resides in, the individual. The end of The Doorman imagines a marvelous system of doors, a different one for each seeker:

And through these doors everyone, finally, will eagerly rush in. That is, all except me, the doorman, who on the outside will watch them disappear forever.

# FROM CONJUNCTIONS

CONJUNCTIONS:17 Fall 1991

## Order and Flux in Northampton

David Foster Wallace

**BARRY DINGLE, CROSS-EYED PURVEYOR** of bean sprouts, harbors for Mymaloy Trask, operator of Xerox and regent of downtown Northampton's most influential bulletin board at Collective Copy, an immoderate love.

Mymaloy Trask, trained Reproduction Technician, unmarried woman, vegetarian, flower-child tinged faintly with wither, overseer and editor of Announcement and Response at the ten-foot-by-ten-foot communicative hub of a dizzying wheel of leftist low-sodium aesthetes, a woman politically correct, active in relevant causes, slatterly but not nerotic, all-weather wearer of frayed denim skirts and wool knee-socks, sexually troubled, ambiguous sexual past, owner of one spectacularly incontinent Setter/Retriever bitch, Nixon, so named by friend Don Megala because of the dog's infrangible habit of shitting where it eats: Mymaloy has eyes only for Don Megala: Don Megala, middle-aged liberal, would-be drifter, maker of antique dulcimers by vocation, by calling a professional student, a haunter of graduate hallways, adrift, holding fractions of Ph.D.'s in everything from Celtic phonetics to the sociobiology of fluids from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, presently at work on his seventh and potentially finest unfinished dissertation, an exhaustive study of Stephen Dedalus's sublimated oedipal necrophilia vis à vis Mrs. D. in *Ulysses*, an essay tentatively titled "The Ineluctable Modality of the Ineluctably Modal."

Add to the above Trask-data the fact that, though Barry Dingle's spotlessly managed franchise, The Whole Thing Health Food Emporium, is located directly next to Collective Copy on Northampton's arterial Great Awakening Avenue, Mymaloy has her nutritional needs addressed at The Whole Thing's out-of-the-way, sawdust-floored competition, Good Things to Eat, Ltd., the proprietor of which, one Adam Baum, is a crony of Megala, and add also that The Whole Thing is in possession of its own Xerox copier, and the following situation comes into narrative focus: Mymaloy Trask has only the sketchiest intuition that Barry Dingle even exists, next door.

For Barry Dingle, though, the love of Mymaloy Trask has become the dominant emotional noisemaker in his quiet life, the flux-ridden state of his heart, a thing as intimately close to Dingle as Mymaloy is forever optically distant or unreal.

Suspend and believe that the consuming, passionate love of Mymaloy Trask has in fact become defined and centered as a small homunculoïd presence inside Barry Dingle, a doll-sized self all its own, with the power of silent speech and undisguised ambitions to independent action. Barry Dingle's love sees itself as the catalyst that can transform Barry Dingle from a neutral to a positive charge in life's delicate equation. It sees itself as having the power to remake, reform, reconstitute Barry Dingle. In fact -- since facts are the commodity at issue, here -- Barry Dingle's love of Mymaloy Trask wants in some ultimate sense to *be* Barry Dingle, and has lately launched an aggressive campaign to assume control of Dingle's life, to divert and even divorce Dingle from his seven-year definition as manager of The Whole Thing, from his hard-learned disposition to passivity and mute fear; in short, for those who know him, from the very Dingle-ness of Barry Dingle.

The birth of Barry Dingle's love for Mymaloy Trask can be fixed generally at a present some two years back, when The Whole Thing, like the rest of the health-food industry, is scrambling wildly to capitalize on the American consumer's growing enthusiasm for bran.

The precise two-year-old moment when the crossed eyes, healthy heart, modest mind and tame history of Barry Dingle consummated their need for intersection at the point of object-choice can be identified as the moment 4:30pm on 15 June 1981, when Dingle, arranging a cunningly enticing display of bran-walnut muffins on the recycled-aluminum shelves of The Whole Thing's display window, finds himself staring, as only the cross-eyed can stare, into the smoke-dark window of a Northampton Public Transit Authority bus, halted on the street outside by one of Northampton's invidious and eternal red lights. In the sunlight off the sienna glass is the muted reflected image of Mymaloy Trask, next door, outside Collective Copy, in her denim skirt and Xerox apron, editorially scanning C.C.'s public-announcement bulletin board's collection of fliers and hand-lettered ads, searching out the irrelevant, the non-progressive, the unclear.

To see and feel anything like what Barry Dingle feels as he stares slack-jawed through his glasses, his store's glass, into the darkly reflecting glass of the frustrated bus, the student of the phenomenon of Barry Dingle must try to imagine the unimaginable richness, range, promise of the community bulletins before which Mymaloy establishes herself as culler and control, the board aflutter with bright announcements, Establishment-opprobrium, introduction -- bids for attention from kyphotic-lesbian support groups, Maoist coffeehouses, organic-garden-plot rentals, dentists who eschew all mercury and alum, obscurely-oriented political parties with titles longer than their petitioned rosters of names, sitar instructors, anorexia crisis lines, Eastern and Mid-Eastern expanders of spiritual consciousness, bulimia crisis lines, M.D.'s in healing with crystals and wheat, troupes of interpretive tap-dancers, holistic masseurs, acupuncturists, chiropractic acupuncturists, Marxist mimes who do *Kapital* in dumbshow, typists, channelers, nutrition consultants, Brecht-only theater companies, Valley literary journals with double-digit circulations, on and on -- a huge, flat, thumbtack- and staple-studded, central affair, sheltered from the apathetic vicissitudes of New England weathers by a special Collective Copy awning. The board is the

area's avant-garde ganglion, a magnet drawing centripetally from the center of town on the diffracted ions of Northampton's vast organizational night, each morning bristling brightly with added claims to existence and efficacy, each late afternoon edited, ordered, wheat-from-chaffed by Mymaloy Trask, who stands now, reflected in the dun shield of the bus glass, snake-haired in the June wind, one nail-bitten finger on a shiny leaflet of debatable value or legitimacy, deciding on the words' right to be; and at this moment, 4:30pm 15 June 1981, she brings up behind herself her left leg – in the bus window a distant right leg – bends it at the pale knee to effect the ascension of an ankle, pulls a sag-laddered wool knee-sock tight up the back of a white calf; and the movement, the unconscious gentle elevation of the thick ankle, is so very demure – reminiscent finally of the demure elevation of Sandra Dee's own sturdy calf as Gidget kissed interchangeable emmetropic young men in the climaxes of all the interchangeable Gidget films that informed so much of Barry Dingle's childhood – the movement so very young, tired, unselfconscious, sad, right, natural, reflected, distant, unsexily sexy, slatternly erotic ...

... so very *whalever*, in short, that off the bus' window and through the TWT display pane and Dingle's thick hot angled glasses the parallaxed leg-image tears, rending Dingle's sense of self and place, plunging with a crackle of sexual ozone into the still surface of the stagnant ankle-deep pond that defines at this moment the Dingleness of Dingle; and through the miraculous manipulations of primal human ontemes too primal and too human even to be contemplated, probably, it gives birth to life: from the clotted silt of the uninterestingness at the center of Barry Dingle there emerges the salamanderial zygote of a robust, animate thing, a life, Barry Dingle's immoderate homunculoïd love, conceived out of the impossibly distant refracted epiphany of Mymaloy Trask, demure in her now-not-fallen socks, a Mymaloy who is as unaware as carbon itself that she has effected the manufacture of life through her role in the interplay of forces probably beyond the comprehension of everything and everyone involved.

Northampton is located on the northern fringe of Massachusetts' Pioneer Valley on the eastern edge of the Berkshire Mountains. To the south lie Amherst and Springfield and Hartford CT. Incorporated 1698, Northampton is the eighth-oldest township in the state. It is the home of Smith College for Women. The college's Congregational Church, still semi-erect, saw the 1711-1717 delivery of the Great-Awakening jeremiads of dentist/theologian Solomon Stoddard, in which the reverend foretold the world's cold and imminent end, characterizing that end as a kind of grim entropic stasis already harbingered by, among other portents: poor nutrition and its attendant moral and dental decay; the increasing infertility of modern woman; the rise of the novel; the Great Awakening itself.

The city grew to economic prominence in the late eighteenth century after more space was cleared for development and commercial intercourse. Space for development and commercial intercourse was cleared all over the Pioneer Valley by the British commander Lord Jeffrey Amherst, who in 1783-84 won a telling victory over the sly, putatively "peace-loving" native population by providing its tribes with free blankets, each carefully preinfected with smallpox.

Northampton today enjoys the nation's second-highest percentage of homosexuals, calculated on a per capita basis, a distinction that has earned the city the designation "The San Francisco of the East." It also enjoys the nation's sixth-highest percentage of homeless persons, again per capita, countless capita to be seen each winter night clustered around the tattered flickers of countless trashcan fires. Most enjoyable of all is the nation's lowest percentage of registered Republicans, with the brow-raising total of exactly zero within the corporations limits. ^1

^1 For much more here see W. Deldrick Sperber, "The Sensitive Community: Nutritive, Sexual and Political Ambiguity in Northampton, MA," *Journal of American Studies in Sensitivity*, v.IX, nos. 2&3, 1983.

[For additional sections of "Order and Flux in Northampton," click here.](#)

# FROM CONJUNCTIONS

CONJUNCTIONS:17 Fall 1991

## Order and Flux in Northampton (cont)

David Foster Wallace

Fact: certain unlucky persons exist as living justifications of those phobias peculiar to mothers. Barry Dingle is such a person. His childhood, his whole life stands darkly informed by Mrs. Dingle's failure ever to be incorrect. Examples range through the history of the man. The tiniest pre-dinner treat does spoil little Barry's appetite. The briefest exposure of his unrubbered Hush Puppies to rain or snow ensures, with mathematical reliability, disease. The dullest of sharp things wounds, the safest of playground games injures, the scantiest inattention to oral hygiene sees the dark time-lapse sprout of an instant caries.

The Barry Dingle who dislikes drinking milk, avoids it at all costs, does fail to grow up big and strong like his sister, a field-hockey prodigy.

Also a fact: certain persons, especially mothers, come in time to resemble more and more closely their automobiles. Mrs. Dingle is outdated, rust-chassis'd, loud, disposed to the emission of fumes; she is wide and rides low and has a poor turning radius; but she is ideally suited for the transport of much baggage, and her mileage is phenomenal.

Picture her, then, entreating the child Barry Dingle never, never ever, to cross his little eyes. She believes, with the complete conviction of the phobic mother, that the child who crosses his eyes Stays That Way. She cajoles, enjoins; the indoctrination's movement is as broad and slow and irresistible as the Dingles' station wagon. The orientation of his eyes becomes for the little Dingle an object of black fascination. He dreams, in the night's dark part, of his eyes crossing by accident, their paths never again to diverge. He avoids sighting on any but the stablest objects. He resists the natural urge of the child to look down at his own nose. With Mrs. Dingle riding herd on their mutual neurosis, Dingle treasures the clean binocular clarity of his sight like a never-miss aggie. He makes it through fifteen years of exquisite temptation without so much as a retinal wobble.

Fact to be feared: the rebelliousness of fearful youth, no matter how momentary, can itself be a fearful thing. On 15 June 1961, Troy, New York, enraged by the imposition of a domestic sanction soon lost to memory, Barry Dingle stands before his mother in the warm checker-tiled Dingle kitchen and gives in to the terrifying, wonderful temptation of the ultimate transgression against natural and maternal law. The cross is delicious; his eyes roll toward each other with the sweet release of catharsis long delayed. Two Mrs. Dingles scream and raise four arms skyward, pleading for intercession against the inevitable....

Cross-eyed Barry is shunted from specialist to specialist. As Mrs. Dingle tearfully predicts, they are powerless to help. For six binary, true-and-false-filled months Dingle weavers, bumbles, bumps his way through the doubled system of pecatum and punishment he has wrought. Finally, December, Buffalo, an optician at technology's cutting edge fits Dingle with an elaborate pair of glasses — thick angled lenses that catch and reorganize the disordered doubleness of things into a unity that fuses at a focused point several yards in front of Barry's own ruined apparatus. Relief is purchased, at a cost: the glasses work, unify, but objects for a bespectacled Barry now appear always twice as far away as they in fact are. Smaller, more distant. So that for twenty years Dingle has chosen minute by minute between doubleness and distance, between there being, for him, exactly twice or exactly half as much as there really is.

The point here being that a key ingredient of Myrma's allure for Barry Dingle, and an irreducible constant in the sensuous half-equation whose sum is the immoderate love that even now makes its move for control of Barry Dingle's present and future, is the fact that Myrma must always remain either fundamentally distant *from* Dingle, or else doubled, and so unreal, *for* him. Meaning that the 'real' Myrma Trask is for Dingle not even a possibility: he is in the (not unenviable?) position of a man able to *want* without the disturbing option of ever truly being able to *have*. Hence a classic, almost classically static romanticism as fundament, primal element, precondition for the very experience of being B. Dingle.

Additional fact: Mrs. Dingle predicts, long ago, over vermouth, that love will someday make Barry Dingle hideously, hideously unhappy. This too is come. Dingle is, as it were, beside himself, in a state of utter emotional flux whereby up and down, good and bad are as indistinguishable as right and left. Here, though, it is necessary to distinguish between the happiness of Barry Dingle and the happiness of his interior homunculoïd love. Barry Dingle's immoderate love is itself happy as a clam. It thrives, grows, gets off on the existence of a telos at once right next door and horizon-distant, at once really one and apparently two in short, of a love-object invested with all the flected ambiguity that makes Romance itself possible.

But one last fact. Barry Dingle's love is nonetheless a human love. With the illogic that defines all autonomous but entombed emotional humunculoïds, Dingle's immoderate love is possessed of a desire for the attainment of the very love-object whose fundamental unattainability is that love's animating breath and bread. It is by nature dissatisfied; and that dissatisfaction is, via the hermeneutic circle of love's illogic, its life and mission. It needs Barry Dingle to appropriate, possess, use and encompass Myrma Trask. It harbors in its still heart a desire for a strong new Dingle shell, the outward instantiation of an immoderate inner force. It envisions Dingle capturing Myrma's heart and fashioning inside her a vermure-calved homunculoïd of her own, a love for Barry Dingle that will, in the union of Dingle and Trask, merge with the homunculoïds themselves and render them complete (i.e., no longer animate, inside). A genuinely human emotional armillary, Dingle's immoderate

love's life strains ever forward toward the death that love's life loves.

Think of it this way, Dingle, says Dingle's love as Dingle inventories herbal teas on a May afternoon, 1983. Think of your love as being by nature an incomplete, questing thing. I was born in you half a love. My end is the unity I am by definition denied.

Dingle is silent over ginseng and camomile.

The homunculoïd taps its foot patiently. The point, it says, is that I've got a nature to be true to, just like you. I'm compelled by this nature to spend my time, therefore our time, questing and striving for my other half. This is so, no matter how much you buck and snort. Think of me as a chivalric knight, you as my dragon. And obversely. Each other's torments, but also our salvations.

Salvations? Dingle says. Dragons?

You give birth to a love in Myrmaaloy Trask; she forms her own half-a-love homunculoïd, curved, gentle, round-faced, doll's eyes that open with the pull of a heartstring, concave where I am convex. You do such a thing. Myrmaaloy gives birth; her half-a-love and I get together; I leave you in peace. Everybody's a winner. *Verstehen-Sie?*

And the toe-problem? whispers Dingle, biting a cracked lip.

Your toes are once again your own psyche's own, says Dingle's love, making its presence felt with a playful twinge in one red Dingle digit.

The fact of the May '83 matter here is that Dingle's love, as of some six weeks past, has decided to play psychic hardball. It has moved to consolidate its authority over Barry Dingle by focusing its attention and influence on Dingle's most vulnerable parts. Here these parts are due south of even the most sensitive dangling chinks in most men's armor. They are the tortured ingrown toenails of Barry Dingle. (Possibly worth noting here that Mrs. Dingle was and is a fanatic on the subject of foot care.) Barry Dingle's love is using the curved culcates of Dingle's nails, together with the tender genital/emotional complex that birthed the immoderate homunculoïd in the first place, to force an intrinsically passive Dingle toward some decisive romantic action.

Love has turned the order of Barry Dingle's life into flux; Dingle is now at war with himself; divided; schism'd; finally wounded, behind the lines.

Yes cross-eyed Barry, thirty-five, perennial wearer of leather sandals, bell-bottoms, and Central American ponchos, high of forehead, long of incisor, thick of spectacle, is in possession of 2 (two) feet presently in torment from the negative-reinforcement regimen of his immoderate love. Since adolescence (specific moment of origin coincident with that of the optical transgression), the toes have detracted from Dingle's quality of life: corticate yellow nails curving in of themselves, sinking into the tender meat of his red toes, the toes taking turns at self-harm, swelling, shining with eruptent infection, to say nothing of pain. Dingle, of routine, takes all possible preventive steps. He trims the nails daily, paring them straight across, leaving perfect planks of protruding cartilage into the corners of which each morning he tucks tiny cotton pellets soaked in camphor and oil of clove. Sandals, affording the toes movement, oxygen, freedom from pressure, are worn at all times. In cold seasons Dingle even forfeits the privilege ever of being taken seriously as a person: he wears sandals with socks.

Now for naught: B. Dingle is literally staggering under the incurring influence of his immoderate love for Myrmaaloy Trask. The love, from its central facility in Dingle's clean red heart, now commutes daily south to an annex in Dingle's clawlike nails, from which annex it makes its presence, wishes and directives acutely known. The campaign is insidiously subtle, the pain carefully gauged to impel cooperation without ever quite causing incapacitation. Barry Dingle's love begins moving against his feet in April 1983. By June, Dingle knows something must be done. Myrmaaloy Trask must somehow be appropriated, Dingle's cherry-colored homunculoïd completed, sated, silenced. The love has worn Dingle down -- two years of flux and now two months of rampant ingrowth: his tortured feet, his keening heart the disorder and disruption of the neutral Dingle equation are driving Dingle quietly toward breakdown and tilted stasis.

Of he has become unable to concentrate at work. He becomes lax, his employees demoralized, intransigent, carbohydrate'd. The owner of the whole The Whole Thing chain pays a personal visit, 2 June, to the Northampton franchise. He takes a significant look at Dingle's blackly circled cross-eyes, his well-chewed lip, his obscenely swollen feet. The owner straightens his suede vest and fingers his Scientology medallion. He advises Dingle in no uncertain terms that he, the owner, knows that things here at the Northampton facility are on the decline. That sales have been slipping, that freshness is on occasion being compromised, that TWT's employees, not to mention Northampton's health-ravid customers, are losing a focus for their nutritional vision. Even the bran, he says pointedly, though not without a smile at his own wit, lately isn't moving like it should. He asks Dingle what he'd do, in the owner's place, here. Dingle's love, from deep inside him, puts in his own two cent's worth -- an electric thrill of pediatric pain. A pale Dingle removes his glasses, sets his jaw. He reassures the twin images of the owner. Things will turn around. The store will soon be back on its feet. Seven years of careful management; passionate devotion to the marketing of health; the dingy Good Things no competition: he waxes briefly eloquent, an aggressive sincerity that surprises the owner and distracts even the bloated TWT employees from their game of rumny. The owner eventually nods, acquiesces, checks his sundial and makes for the glass doors, leaving in his cinnamon-scented wake a system of insinuations that both reaffirm and cast doubt on his faith in Barry Dingle. The store is silent, a halted bus motor can be heard at the traffic light.

For two unprecedented sick-days Dingle stays home, brooding, his feet in hot salt water and eucalyptus. Nigel, the assistant manager, temporarily assumes The Whole Thing's helm. Dingle communes with his love. With himself.

The result of which is the prenominate realization that something must change, coupled with a robust new determination really, truly, finally to act. After two days (date now 6 June 1983), Dingle leaves his bath, returns to TWT's many windows, and resolves, with a coldly febrile set to his tall forehead, to set his unsteady sights on the distant Trask and to bring her, by fair means or otherwise, swimming into his romantic ken. His homunculoïd love smells the metal smell of strength in Dingle's blood, and approves it. It loosens the grip of

Dingle's own nails just a bit. It encourages Dingle, exhorts, plays interior good-cop bad-cop, says it discerns in him a nascent newness, a courage,

*Courage!* says Dingle's homunculoid love, defining the term in Gothic script on Dingle's heart as a willingness to bring the comfortably distant into a unified proximity, to risk stasis as completion. The words pump against the fishwhite skin of Dingle's shallow chest and appear on his body in faint pink calligraphy. Dingle reads himself double in the night's salty bath. Touches the blurred words.

[For more sections of "Order and Flux in Northampton," click here.](#)

# FROM CONJUNCTIONS

CONJUNCTIONS:17 Fall 1991

## Order and Flux in Northampton (cont)

David Foster Wallace

The fly in the emotional ointment here being the initially-mentioned Don Megala, eternal student, dulcimer-*craeftig*, whose connection with Mymaloy Trask, visible through Collective Copy's window via the reflecting amber glass of the ever-halted Northampton bus, is undeniable, though ambiguous — Megala being in his heyday an epic drinker and chaser of skirt, both the denim skirts of Northampton's straight female leftists and the tartan skirts of the aesthetically-inclined Smith College set whose poetry readings, madrigal recitals, and sherry-and-scone mixers Megala haunts, earning himself the designation *Der Dopplebanger* by Smith's artistes-in-the-know — and Mymaloy being shy, withdrawn, clearly inexperienced, and, even more clearly, deeply ambivalent about men.

It is now appropriate to note that Barry Dingle and Don Megala enjoy some slight acquaintance through the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, that Megala had been going through the motions on an abortive sociobiology dissertation while Dingle completed his undergraduate studies in Digestive Science, that they had had in common a mentor and advisor — one W.W. Skeat, a socio-digestive biologist best known for his thesis that the underlying and true cause of cancer is in fact plain old human saliva — and had both done substantial research under and lab-assisting for this mentor, advisor, Skeat. Noted further is the fact that Megala regards Dingle with the jolly condescension reserved for the cross-eyed, buck-toothed and sock-and-sandal-shod, while Dingle, lately under the emotional aegis of his homunculoïd love, harbors for Megala a mute dislike, an active wish to do him harm, from a distance.

Megala being the fly in the ointment of romance vis à vis Mymaloy, it is understandable that Barry Dingle, whenever the opportunity presents itself, arranges to observe Mymaloy and Megala together — not actually following M & M, mind you, given documented eye-and-mobility-troubles, but rather just arranging to be located, inconspicuously, wherever they are likely to appear together.

Opportunities for such observation are not few, Mymaloy and Megala to be seen by Dingle variously: sipping four-dollar espressos at Northampton's Leftward Ho Cafe; strolling hand in hand through any one of the city's fifty-six used-book stores; waving a shared banner at weekly allies of the Northampton Anti-Nuclear And Non-Aligned Nations' And Neighbors' Alliance, Mymaloy having been recording secretary of NANANANANA since its mid-seventies inception; exercising together on the town common's public aerobics palestrae; etc.; and, of course, variously talking, confiding, nuzzling, arguing, being ambiguous, all in the bus-reflected Collective Copy window.

Not to mention patronizing Adam Baum's own Good Things to Eat, Ltd., The Whole Thing's chief sit-down competition, a tiny-windowed establishment which Dingle, incurring substantial professional risk, begins inconspicuously patronizing as well. Picture Dingle, in early '83, hunched, poncho-swaddled, his cotton pellets grimed with the floor's sawdust, in a Good Things booth as M & M establish themselves over a whole-grain dinner at their usual table directly behind him. They are deep in conversation. Barry Dingle and his immoderate love listen. Mymaloy seems just to have finished pouring an ambivalent heart out to Megala on the subject of men and sex. Dingle's ears are aprick, his carrot cake hardening and pepper-mint tea chilling, untouched.

Mymaloy, on the last leg of a redditive narrative journey, is revealing, fragily, with many stuttered pauses, that she is terrified of sex. Thoroughly terrified. She alludes to some shadowy long-ago trauma, some betrayal, the details of which Megala, judging from the sympathetic and reinforcing soft sounds he keeps making as he chews, already knows. Barry Dingle's love gnashes its teeth at Barry's not knowing what Megala knows. Mymaloy's voice is trembling; she is revealing that she is, at thirty-five, flower-child-past and all, still technically maiden. She states that sex holds a great, albeit undefinable, terror for her.

Don Megala gives Mymaloy Trask to understand that he understands, that he regards — nay, *genusfecis* to her attitude as one more than just understandable, don't you know, but as somehow deeply sexually-politically correct. He reveals that he lost his own innocence at fifteen and has been terrified ever since. That he lives in sexual terror. That sex is, by nature, terrifying.

To Dingle's horror he finds himself in significant agreement with Megala.

But what Megala is about here, Barry is roughly told, is clear. Yes Dingle's love smells impending seduction. Dingle searches through his angled glasses for some reflecting surface in the restaurant, anything in which to study Mymaloy's facial reaction to Megala's inevitable upcoming arguments. He imagines her looking down, rouged with self-revelation, dabbing at nothing with a recycled napkin, smiling hesitantly, gratefully, at Megala's understanding, his willingness to share a vulnerability. Yet it's the willingness-to-share gambit. The homunculoïd establishes itself in an orbit of impotent rage around Dingle's carved heart.

Because But wonderful, too, Megala is going on to muse out loud. His voice is pocked with the tiny hesitations of purposeful sincerity. Sex, Megala means. Even the terror of sex is, in fact, wonderful, in a terrible sort of way.

Dingle envisions Megala's delicate white hands covering Mymaloy's delicate white hands. Dingle is pale, helpless, staring into the distant fossil of his dinner.

Because sex also being, let's both be honest with ourselves and admit it, a pretty big thing in this predominantly short and unhappy life, Megala adds. How sad it would be to depart the coil without taking, as it were, a look around at life, to see what's what. Surely sex is one

of the big whats in life, to be at least looked at, no? Or so he tells himself, he tells her, whenever his perfectly appropriate terror threatens to get the best.

Dingle envisions clean binocular eye-contact between M & M.

And it's hard to think of a more *natural* thing in this life, Megala muses out loud, than intimacy between a man and a woman who share mutual concerns and respect and correctness. Who *care*. No? A natural, natural thing. Like the conusating flora of autumn. A cotton Nehru jacket dried on the line. A bird wheeling before a stiff gust. And, irony of ineluctable ironies, are not the very most *natural* things in life often the most terrifying? Does ... *could* Mymaloy share this feeling, this insight? This sad, wonderful, terrifying irony?

Dingle hears Mymaloy make a gentle noise variously indicative of: agreement, gratitude, admiration, the recognition of something unseen that's been recognized *for* her. Dingle's love twirls, staring balefully at its blurred reflection in Dingle's clean pounding courage-scripted heart.

There is the violent sound of Megala vacuuming the bottom of his glass with a straw. Each of Dingle's eyes contemplates its reflection in the other.

An absolute scuttling mink, hisses Barry Dingle's love.

Pardon? whispers Barry Dingle.

This guy is a sterling example of a mink, says the homunculoïd.

A mink?

A technical term for a certain kind of low-rent player in the love game, the love says; 'Mink,' noun, meaning basically someone who's smooth on the outside, but inside still basically just a weasel.

A smooth weasel?

The guy is minkness in motion, says the love, and here we sit, inert. It goes for a shiny metatarsal's tip, in the sawdust.

Megala and Mymaloy exit Good Things. Dingle can finally see them, far away, through the cashier's little round window to which he's half-run, limping. They are detaching the leash of Mymaloy's Nixon from a Good Things leash-hook. Disappearing in a direction opposite that of Collective Copy. Leaving behind a slim trail of Nixon's digestive distress.

The following couples grapple into the wee hours of this early June night: Mymaloy Trask and Don Megala; Barry Dingle and Barry Dingle's love.

Fly-ridden ointment or not, recall that Barry Dingle has, as of 6 June, reoriented himself, that the needle of his emotional compass now points, shakily or not, toward the pole of action. Action number one is taking place right this minute, on the morning of 6 June, as Dingle sits at his fiberboard TWT desk, absent his thick glasses, composing an advertisement for a new line of wheat germ with coconut and date-dust mixed right in. He hand-letters a flier outlining nutritional virtues and introductory discounts. He finishes flier, caps magic marker, submits flier to Nigel for the correction of doubled letters and incongruities of scale, and lets Nigel edit while he, Dingle, drifts pensively through the store's bulk-aisle, past broad side windows, past clean sunwashed plastic trashcans brimming with granolas, past nuts, dried fruit, protein powders, bran-barrels, trowels, degradable baggies, scales, to The Whole Thing's frontal display pane. In the window of the idling bus can be seen Mymaloy, fetchingly distant at the control of her Xerox behind the CC customer counter. The arched-bridge-esque figure of Nixon is to be seen ranging over a spread-out pile of invalidated bulletin-board submissions. Against the CC counter leans Don Megala, flushed and shiny, speaking out of one side of his mouth to Baum, the Good Things proprietor whose fliers enjoy, through the influence of Megala, a consistent place on a Collective Copy board whose facilities Dingle has never had the gumption even to request.

Nigel pronounces the flier clean copy. Dingle finds the thing in his hands, alludes to a vague problem with the copier in The Whole Thing's stock room, and says perhaps he'll just whisk over next door to Collective Copy. Nigel mans the TWT con while Dingle embarks on what is possibly history's slowest whisk, three wide elliptical passes at the copy center's entrance, last-second veerings, sudden reversals of flight at the compulsion of the homunculoïd, who has only to feint at Dingle's sandals to get its point across. The closure of ellipse number three sees Dingle pass under the bulletin board, fumble between the old wooden door's two apparent knobs, glom finally on to the genuine article, hear the *ching* of the customer bell, and enter the lair of M & M. The place is hot, full of the dry chemical wind of roaring copier and rattling automatic collator. Flier in hand, Dingle steps over the tortured figure of Nixon and makes for the customer counter.

Baum having decamped at TWT's approach, here is Megala, alone, under his arm a used copy of Stuart Gilbert's *Ulysses* -guide. Megala greets Dingle with broad enthusiasm, extends a doubled hand. Dingle hopes very much he won't be clapped on the back. Smells of cork and yeast exit Megala's mouth; his eyes are red as certain toes, a fligreed road-guide to the state of post-lunch fermentation he now enjoys. Dingle's tense smiling cheeks spasm as two Mymaloy's leave the copier and approach; Megala has called for a look at this flier of Dingle's, here. Mymaloy Trask is close. Two denim skirts, two workshirts the pale blue of tired laundry, Xerox aprons, four knee-socks. Eyes and forehead framed in tiny dry wrinkles and squeezed in a kind of tight pain against the hot June window-light, but Dingle can see only two milky facial outlines that resist resolution or rapprochement. A customer enters, as does a unit of spring wind, carrying to the counter the rich smell of Nixon. Megala wrinkles his nose, reaches across the pitted counter for what appears to Dingle as the twin-towered facade of a Bass Ale.

Megala, with a flourish, introduces Dingle to Mymaloy. Her hand is white and delicate, a bit unsoft. Dingle's tongue is dry meat in his mouth. Mymaloy acknowledges Dingle as somehow connected with The Whole Thing, next door. Megala outlines Dingle's curriculum vitae for Mymaloy. Dingle brandishes the advertisement, requests copies. Costs are negotiated, specifications specified; Mymaloy retreats to her machines. Nixon sniffs with ominous interest at Dingle's sandals.

Megala comments on the weather, the bus, the lager, the Laffer Curve's impact on the whole-grain and dulcimer trades. Largely without punctuation. At least two of his three sheets are flapping. Dingle can tell, standing here at the counter, fingering the collar of his poncho, that Mymaloy is still within earshot, despite the roar of Xeroxes, from the unmistakable way Megala directs his voice to the wide empty parqueted space between Dingle and Trask. There are twine-gnarled subtexts here to which Barry is not privy: Megala's loud voice is making Mymaloy strangely tight-lipped; Dingle watches her face expand at the sides. His love tightens the screws on a digit, shrieking silently at Dingle to act, to speak, reveal something of himself before this woman and her mink of a beau.

So I see you have at least one Stuart Gilbert, there, under your arm, Dingle says to Megala. I guess I'll assume, he says, that the Stuart Gilbert you have there under your arm is material for a dissertation.

Assume away, says Megala, who's been counting heavily on the source in question and is now disappointed, to say nothing of pissed, to find that Gilbert's work on what Megala keeps calling The Big U is just a reference guide, not an analysis — original, as opposed to recapitulatory, scholarship is not a Megala-strength.

Assume away, he says; worthless, though, the man vastly overrated, important implications overlooked, mere surfaces scratched, Dedalus's oedipal psyche stands unrevealed, the metamorphosis from young artist to Telemachoid heir a blank, his dead love-object a scholastic deletion.

So a challenge, then, says Dingle.

Or a study in futility, smiles Megala, less wryly than he means to, eyeing a red triangle on the Bass bottle in some sort of thousand-yard expectation.

At this point Dingle finds himself staring at the images of Mymaloy Trask bent reproductively over the photographic strobe of the copier. He makes certain observations — mute, internal, lyrical about her breasts, which happen to be budding almost geologically against her worn work-shirt; about the hip-induced swells in her denim skirt; about the bristly shine of her white legs above the socks' wool. Standard metaphors are invoked. Now, in a gesture of thoroughly unconscious cooperation, Mymaloy brings her right ankle up behind her and tends to the top of a tired sock. Dingle perspires freely. His eyes stare into each other over the bridge of his nose. There is a sinister protrusion near the hem of a certain poncho. Dingle shifts closer to the protective counter. Megala drinks at his bottle. Nixon diddles on a box of Hammernull bond.

Megala, soaring on the wings of futility's study, waxes nostalgic, collegial. He asks after Skeat. Dingle has not seen Skeat for years, believes him to be out West, living on grants. Mymaloy glances through the flash of photocopy at the post-prandial foot-traffic on the sidewalk outside. Megala calls to her, jolly, regarding a Dingle-aneccdot, set in the UMass research laboratory of W.W. Skeat, an incident dated 1968. He says the incident concerns Dingle. Dingle's immoderate love whispers encouragement. Mymaloy's eyes register what could be called interest. Dingle clears his throat. Two Mymaloy's move through blinking mists toward the counter, the copier on automatic pilot. Dingle tells.

Picture this. It is 1968. Barry Dingle, burning the midnight fluorescence in the basement laboratory of Skeat, is bent over the special microscope he, Dingle, requires to fuse a slide studied into unified, eyelash-free focus. He wears a white lab-coat and thongs. He is using the microscope to observe the activities of some routine germs, paramecia, in a droplet of saliva from the mouth of a melanoma patient. The germs swim aimlessly around, engage in activities. Dingle observes them. Then, on a whim,

On a whim, mind you, he says,

he removes the slide from its clips, turns it around, reinserts it, and again bends to observe. He notes something curious in the movements of the germs at issue.

Megala belches, incurring the empathy of Nixon. Mymaloy betrays distaste, looks back again at Dingle, who's still crowding the counter.

Dingle, in the past, in the lab, becomes excited. He turns the scope's slide again. Looks. Sure enough. The germs are swimming north. Not aimless. Not just around. North. Only aimless if seen from one angle. Turn the slide, the wily germs take sharp lefts and rights, head due north again.

Megala chuckles. Mymaloy's four eyes are on Dingle, perplexed. North? she says.

Not just around, Megala says. The aimlessness only apparent.

North, Dingle says. They swim north. Sense the ephemeral pull of some deep geologic magnet. Heed its call.

North for the summer, says Megala.

Dingle manipulates the hood of his poncho. And the whole on-a-whim insight a matter of perspective, was what excites, he says. See? Look from just one angle: things seem aimless, disordered. Flux reigns. Change the angle: illumination. Pattern. Order.

His love whips a checkered flag downward.

Look at a thing from some variety of perspectives, Dingle says; input from let's say even just two completely different angles: see matters in a whole new light, potentially.

Northern expedition, ruminates Megala.

It was exciting, Dingle says quietly.

Except it was Skeat was the one who wrote it up, Megala says. Got himself a Guggenheim<sup>2</sup> out of it. Dingle here got no credit. Skeat gave him the academic shaft. The big femur.

<sup>2</sup> See W.W. Skeat, "The Intrinsic Northern Orientation of the Paramecium in Neoplastic Human Saliva," *Principium Salvato*, v.2, nos 2&3, 1970.

Dingle smiles shyly. Credit not important. The insight itself important. Epiphany under cold lights. Beside myself with joy, that night.

The homunculoïd thumbs-ups its approval, reclines on a shiny ventricle, polishing its fingernails against the front of its tunic.

Mymaloy: And now you manage The Whole Thing?

Yes. Problems in terms of medical-school applications. Finances. Vision.  
The Skeat thesis, laughs Megala. Watch what you swallow, Myrmalove.  
The relevant Xerox grinds into automatic shut-off. Myrmalove retrieves Dingle's original,  
hands him a stack of warm noisome copy.

Fine, fine copies, Dingle says, flipping through, willing himself not to squint. Myrmalove  
punches up his bill.

Megala gestures over at the register. Why not let Dingle put one upon the old board,  
Myrmalove, he suggests, grinning. A quo for his quid.

Really a first-rate new product, Dingle stammers, gratitude and resentment toward  
Megala swirling together oily in his heart, which pounds. Excited about the chance to be part  
of, he says; happy to arrange a complimentary.

Why not, Myrmalove says tightly, figuring tax.

Dingle's immoderate love senses tension between tight Myrmalove and scabrous Don.

I sense tension here, it says. It takes care of Dingle's potentially disastrous  
poncho-protrusion so that he's free at last to leave the pelvic shelter of the store's counter.

Thanks, mutters a relieved Dingle.

No problem, says Megala. The inevitable dreaded back-clap descends; Dingle's small  
coughing fit is also quashed. Megala and Nixon head for the restroom. Myrmalove removes  
tools from a double-locked drawer marked BOARD, heads for the door, Dingle and Dingle's  
love in emotional tow.

Dingle stands in sunlight before the complicatedly-colored bulletin board with Myrmalove  
Trask. He is dizzy from the ripe distinctively feminine fragrance that surrounds this  
slatternly woman who is not unerotic.

Really a well-edited board, he says; admired it in passing on countless.

Myrmalove says nothing. With practiced tweezes of a staple-claw she amputates a slick  
proclamation for a trampoline-a-thon benefitting the Quebecois Separatist Party, the final  
gymnast having succumbed June 4. Dingle's wheat-germ-and-dust notice inherits its position,  
is staple-gunned into place.

Dingle's own personal notice has been attracted by two professionally typeset,  
black-and-white notices that sit dead center on the board's prized eye-level row. The images  
almost focus. He squints, covers an eye, reads slowly, transfixed by the following flier's text:

**WANTED: MALE DOG, SETTER/RETRIEVER MIX,  
FOR MATING W/ 1-YR.-OLD SETTER/RETRIEVER BITCH.  
OBJECT: LITTER.  
PICK OF LITTER TO SUPPLIER, MALE DOG.  
ESTIMATED TIME NEXT HEAT, BITCH: c. JUNE 15, 1983.  
INQUIRE WITHIN, MS. M. TRASK, COLLECTIVE COPY**

That okay? Myrmalove asks, stepping critically back from the TWT flier.  
Appreciate it, croaks Dingle, half-strangled by an inspired homunculoid's sudden  
appearance in his throat.

I'll try to get over sometime, try some of the germ.

Please do. On the house.

Myrmalove goes for the doors. Dingle contemplates the boards.

Myrmalove has paused at both knobs. She is looking at Dingle. Dingle sees her. She is a  
hydra, her dirty-blond hair a mess of muted light. Her faces assume an expression. Germs  
really know where north is? she says; swim there?

Dingle's smile is unforced, though complexly motivated. It turns out they do, he says.

I find that pretty interesting.

Me too.

And it was just an accident.

Pure whim.

She looks past him at the street.

I'll hope to be seeing you around the store should you at some; the new wheat.

She both nods and smiles absently, disappearing back inside, Dingle trying to thank her  
through the glass.

The board rustles in a sweet wind, a system of circled squares around a bullseyed  
invitation to mate. The bus revs at the traffic light. Myrmalove's outline reappears on the  
other side of the CC machines. Dingle flops back to The Whole Thing, his bell-bottoms  
swirling. He is clutching the warm copies to a lettered chest heaving with the implications of  
what has passed before him.

[For additional sections of "Order and Flux in Northampton", click here.](#)

## Order and Flux in Northampton (cont)

David Foster Wallace

An abridged history of the dog Dingle is now buying, late afternoon, 9 June 1983:

This dog, a three-year-old Setter/Retriever male currently in residence at Pets And More Pets, Northampton, is a fine-looking animal ...

Fine-looking animal here or what? says the toupee'd Pets And More Pets salesman.

Looks good from here, says a bespectacled Barry Dingle.

... and a potentially first-rate pet; with, though 2 (two) features that cry out for classification as Flaw. The first is an advanced case of ocular venerean substarnus,<sup>3</sup> a progressive atrophy in the ocular cavity's web of muscle that causes one of the dog's eyeballs to roll chaotically in its socket, making the dog look, more often than not, cross-eyed.

See, for instance, photographs E. Dickinson, B. Streisand, J.C. Oates.

I sense an affinity between you and this dog, sir, says the salesman, dapper in a checked sportcoat and white leather loafers. He fingers a flea collar speculatively. Am I off-base? You feel some sort of affinity here by any chance?

Dingle considers the distant dog through his angled lenses. His homunculoïd love lays low, chewing its own knuckle.

Think maybe I do, Dingle is saying. The dog, a veteran of uncountable near-purchases, scratches endearingly with one tentative paw at the bars of its cramped cage.

The second flaw represents the reason why the dog was originally let loose at rush hour along the Valley's busy Route 9 by his original owner, a scholar of Korean funeral pottery at nearby Amherst College. Information regarding this flaw is being withheld from Dingle at the professional discretion of the pet salesman, who is even now working at the lock of the dog's receptacle, flashing an uneasy smile at Dingle as the dog, freed, immediately lunges slavering at a Smith student who stands nearby, tapping on the glass tank of a comatose terrapin. The understandably withheld information: this three-year-old male Setter/Retriever suffers from a disastrous enthusiasm for the special scents unique to the privates of the human female; has proved untrainable, unbreakable in this regard; leaps without hesitation, snuffling wetly, up the skirt of any woman unfortunate enough to enter the unfortunate orientalist's home.

(Imagine your own embarrassment as, say, cocktail host of a colleague and his wife, seated on divans, over gin, surrounded by somber dynastic thanography, trying to make polite conversation as the dog steadily disappears ever farther into the colleague's wife's nether regions, she and you and the colleague all too mortified to pull the dog away, since any such move would signify acknowledgment of what is going on, while what is going on signifies that the colleague's wife possesses genitals, with a scent, a reality the suppression of which is absolutely key to maintaining the thin veneer of civilization that separates the behavior of, say, you and the colleague from that of, say, the dog.) A more complete history would countenance the dog's repeated olfactory advances at the orientalist's

feminist-ideogram-theorist fiancée, who eventually realizes, not without horror, that she is coming to prefer them to the pottery-scholar's own caresses, and today belongs to no fewer than three support groups. 1982: the dog is finally the object of abandonment, is found and saved, at rush hour by a cruising abandonee-scout for Pets And More Pets, rather a more high-pressure pet shop than Barry Dingle would have preferred, but the only present possessor of a male S/R in the whole Pioneer Valley phonebook.

Also frisky, the salesman says, getting a headlock on the frantic animal, whose toenails scabble on tile as the Smith student drifts off toward the venomous-reptile aisle. No shortage of *joy de vive* in this animal, the salesman says.

Definite Setter/Retriever mix? asks Barry Dingle. He eyes the distant, dull-gold dog writhing under a tiny salesman.

Word of honor.

Sexually mature? intact? Inclined?

As the day is long, sir.

Name?

No name. A nameless dog. Be creative.

The dog barks.

Price? Dingle asks.

Highly negotiable. Plus necessary canine paraphernalia thrown in, as well.

Done, then.

Thank you, God.

Excuse me?

The salesman is making for a cage-lined back room, dragging the dog by the scruff. Right back, he promises. Vaccination-checks, paperwork. . . Price-negotiations moments away. He shuts a heavy door.

Moments later Dingle departs Pets And More Pets with: one flea collar; one reinforced military leash; one bag food; one plastic crater of a dish; one set vaccination papers; one surprisingly cheap, covertly (in the back room) tranquilized dog, which trots grinning, stoned, next to Dingle, one eye on Great Awakening's sidewalk and one on his owner. Dingle heads for home, sandals and pants flapping.

Good man, exhorts Dingle's immoderate homunculoïd love for Mymaloy Trask.

Thank God, the salesman repeats for the benefit of Pets And More Pets' cashier, who uses violet talons to remove a hair from his checked lapel.

Fine-looking animal, the love says.

The purchase by Dingle of a dog, 9 June, represents part of a whole broad homuncloid-inspired plan. The plan unfolds ideally thus: One day next week, Mymaloy Trask, accompanied by Nixon, leaves Collective Copy at lunchtime, as is her wont. She heads south on Great Awakening, toward the town common, where her lunch is picked and eaten while Nixon is encouraged to make complete use of the limitless facilities. As M. heads south down the broad Northampton sidewalk, Barry Dingle, down the street, theoretically emerges from a convenient vantage point and moves north on same sidewalk, holding the leash of one well-rested, libidinous, pep-talked male Setter/Retriever. As he and Mymaloy begin to converge, Dingle contrives something clever — tripping, bumping into the odd passing spike-haired pedestrian — to render his hand plausibly absent one leash-handle. Dingle's dog, driven to erotic frenzy by its time in confinement and the proximity of a premenstrual female S/R, is on Nixon like a shot. Etc., but ideally not too much etc., because Barry Dingle suddenly flops onto the scene and extracts upright dog from hunched bitch before any uninvited indiscretions are committed.

The plan having the ideally three-fold result that: (a) Dingle is able to meet and reestablish social ties w/ Mymaloy Trask w/o the oppressive fly-in-ointment atmosphere that attends the presence of Don Megala, who devotes his pre-prandial hours to his antique dulcimer craft; (b) Dingle appears sensitive, conscientious, possibly chivalric, in rescuing Mymaloy's dog from drooling amorous assault right there on the main thoroughfare's sidewalk; (c) Mymaloy sees that the sensitive, chivalric, etc., Dingle is in possession of 1 (one) male dog of just the right lineage and enthusiasm for the bulletin board's published assignment.

The above results, then, according to the projections of Dingle's homuncloid love, lead with arithmetic inevitability to the mating of the two pets, the symbolism of which vis à vis Dingle and the increasingly Megala-dissatisfied Mymaloy Trask escapes neither party; thus to a Megala-free connection between Dingle and Mymaloy, one based on mutual anxieties, shared dietary concerns, and the common offspring of their lives' closest companions (Dingle figures he better come up with a name pretty quick: he's acquired a catalogue for parents-to-be, and pores nightly); thus to nature taking its natural, terrifying course. Yes Dingle appropriates the heart, soul, moderate love of Mymaloy Trask of Collective Copy. Megala is kicked in the emotional ass. A new Barry Dingle emerges from the cracked chrysalis of chastity and clotted hankie — complete, of the world, fulfilled, requited, ordered of heart and head, sound of mind and toe. A unified Mymaloy/Dingle homunculus moves stately and plumply away, heading possibly north, disappearing into a cadet-blue horizon that darkens to a gloam of unity, eternity, immoderate love's good night.

So, 9 June, Dingle maneuvers his dog, rattling with Dalmane, listing ever so slightly to port or starboard at female's passage, home without major incident. The dog eats three plastic bowls of Purina, sleeps for seventy-two hours, and establishes itself in front of the television. Dingle's love bides its time.

Nighttime, 14 June 1983, Troy, New York, Mrs. Dingle lies next to Mr. Dingle and dreams the following dream:

Nighttime, 14 June 1983 B.C., Kingdom of Ithaca, the King of Ithaca, played in the dream by Nelson Eddy, has a dream. He dreams that a ship carrying a virulent plague from the Ionian Sea's south enters the port of Ithaca the following day. He dreams that, soon thereafter, plague erupts in the kingdom, and ravages it. He dreams that the plague eventually carries off his devoted Queen of a wife, played by Mrs. Dingle, and his handsome Prince of a son, played by the straight-eyed young Barry D. on whom Attic sandals had looked so darn dapper.

The King of Ithaca awakens 15 June 1983 B.C. and is so distressed by his dream that he brushes aside his Queen's advice and neglects to eat a good Mediterranean breakfast. He summons his Royal Advisor, played here by Don Megala, which is passing strange, since Mrs. Dingle has never met Don Megala. The Advisor listens to the distressed King's dream. He strokes his well-groomed beard. Like the King, like all prehistoric pagan-types, the Advisor takes dreams very seriously. He reflects. After substantial reflection, a flaming torch of inspiration appears over his head: he advises the King simply to stop, on this day, any ship approaching from the south before such ship can enter the port of Ithaca, to keep such ship far out to sea, south, downwind, and to quarantine it, in order to ensure that whatever is on this theoretical ship, plague-wise, stays out there, far far away.

Sure enough. By lunchtime, a ship, tacking chaotically, sporting an ominous obsidian sail, manned by a moaning, bubo-studded crew, appears on the southern Ionian horizon. The King sends his most formidable Man O' War out to halt the ship, has the ship quarantined, and then just to be on the safe side has the formidable Man O' War itself quarantined, all far far out to sea, downwind.

Sure enough. The black-sailed ship turns out to be a veritable petri dish of plague germs. The Advisor's advice to keep it out of the port looks to be sound. The King, the Queen, and the big and strong and emmetropic Prince all rejoice over a lavish supper rich in high-density lipids.

Except a few days later (represented in Mrs. Dingle's dream by the fluttering palimpsests of a Hellenistic daily planner) yes a few days later, plague erupts in the kingdom of Ithaca. It ravages even the more respectable neighborhoods of the capital city. It eventually carries off the devoted Mrs. Dingle and the binocular, fine-sandaled Barry D.

Nelson Eddy plunges into well-coiffed despair, not to mention rage. He summons Don Megala. The two men are to be seen facing each other, perfumed hankies fastened over their mouths and noses, in a linen-draped castle chamber festooned with garlands of olive leaves, roses, garlic, various herbal propitiations to big-biceped gods.

The King sketches for his Advisor his despair, rage. Thanks to the Advisor's advice, he says, the dream-foretold plague-ship was stopped, isolated, kept at a big-time distance. And yet here, in Ithaca, as the dream foretold, is some pretty goddamn clear evidence of plague.

The King demands an explanation, hinting that the continued connection between the Advisor's well-bearded head and toga'd body could well depend on the force of that explanation.

There is a long silence while both Nelson Eddy and Don Megala utilize the filmy June sunlight through the windows' woven linen to present profiles, respectively agonized and pensive, to Mrs. Dingle's dreamvision. Really long silence. Then the Advisor changes expression below the tattered torch-flame of a tardy but near-epiphanic realization. He smiles a slow smile, one of sadness as at the inevitable, taking the King by the elbow and guiding him confidentially to the chamber's corner, even though no one else is around. The King, looking about, impatiently clears his throat while the Advisor feels delicately at his own.

He advises the King: it was, unfortunately, nothing other than the King's dream itself that has brought plague to Ithaca, the kingdom.

The interval 11:50 to 11:57am EDT, 15 June 1983, finds a tiny percentage of the planet's persons involved in a tiny percentage of the planet's various and ineluctably modal situations.

8:50am PDT, Dr. W.W. Skeat, Fullerton, California, driving north on the Brea Highway toward an Osco to obtain an esoteric brand of peroxide mouthwash, finds himself, in his car, afflicted with an enormous jumping muscle in his right buttock. The muscle jumps, bouncing him around in his seat. Skeat whimpers; his car begins to weave.

11:50am EDT, Myrnaloy Trask, Collective Copy, concludes a pain-racked and I-should-have-known-flavored conversation with Don Megala, professional student, re the issue of her having entered his loft last night to find a nude Smith post-graduate (actually one Pamela Drax, 25, Ithaca, NY) astride Megala's doubly-bearded face. Megala, at his dulcimer work-table, perspiring over a little brown forest of blunt Bass bottles, claims that it had not been as it appeared. Myrnaloy responds with a shrill expanded variant of Oh sure. Megala, looking about him, launches into something about a contact lens lost under circumstances so bizarre he guesses he couldn't expect anyone to believe him about it outside an environment of very special sharing and trust. Myrnaloy laughs, cries, invests. Running his hand through the memory of his hair, Megala alludes with transparent patience to Myrnaloy's still-narratively-shadowy personal troubles regarding sexuality and men. From here things deteriorate faster than clinkers in fists. Myrnaloy hangs up and crumples onto the form-feeder of her Xerox. The form-feeder coldly continues to form-feed.

6:51am MT, Patricia Dingle of Rock Springs, Wyoming, Hypo-Arctic Correspondent for Geo Magazine, wakes alone in a mummy-shaped bag by a dead fire on the northern shore of Coronation Gulf, North-Northwest Territories, Canada, to discover that the fingers of her right hand have escaped the bag's faulty zipper and are frostbitten solid. An odd windy June snow is falling, flakes skittering like mad insects over the solid crust of the shore. She looks at the dark remains of her campfire and the bright polkadots of frozen blood in her hand's lyan.

11:51am EDT, Mrs. Dingle, Troy, New York, sits over a corn toastie and peach tea and tries to articulate an unspeakable fear to Mr. Dingle, who is arranging leaders and flies on a tackle box's second tier.

11:51am EDT, Barry Dingle, Northampton, Massachusetts, sans glasses, avec best poncho and conic cotton slacks, lurks in the recessed doorway of the Leftward Ho Cafe, just south on Great Awakening from The Whole Thing and Collective Copy. His ominously frisky dog held tight between his knees, Dingle is awaiting the public appearance of Nixon and Trask. Courage defined glows bright along his ribs, illuminating the glazed doll's-eyes of an im-moderate love, sitting lotus on Dingle's heart, staring straight ahead beneath the steady sixty-watt glow of a plan's fruition. The last of a shelf of spring rain-clouds is moving away east, carrying with it the drepanoid nub of a descending rainbow.

11:53am EDT, K.K. McFadden, Stenographer to the Assistant Press Secretary to the President of the United States, Washington, D.C., makes a stenographic error, asserting, in a pre-summit statement to be read to the Cyrillic media by Press Secretary Speakes, that the President is, as he's iterated time and again, willing to go the extra diplomatic mile to ensure that the terrible possibility of unclear war never becomes a reality.

11:54am EDT, Mrs. Dingle is at the telephone, dialing the Northampton number of The Whole Thing, her heart ridden with a nameless angst.

11:54am EDT, Myrnaloy Trask, an automaton of distress, takes her zucchini bread and mineral water and dog and exits Collective Copy, moving south into the lunchtime sidewalk crowd's spectrum of hair and Kabuki paint. She feels humidity, sees a thoroughfare's rising steam, hears the brief rustle of her sheltered board, smells ozone and the sweet diesel of the idling public bus.

6:54pm ADT, Aristotle Onassis, on his yacht, four degrees west and six north of Lord Howe Island in the Tasmanian Sea, ruminates over a celery juice at his yacht's wet bar. He sits on a teakwood barstool. The seat of the stool and the wet bar's top are covered in an exquisite cyan leather processed from the scrotums of sperm whales under Mrs. O's personal supervision. Onassis twirls his icecubes with a thick finger.

8:54am PDT, W.W. Skeat narrowly avoids contact with a Trailways bus in the Highway's left lane. He shifts on his bottom, raising the offending ham off the driver's seat. The Trailways bus falls in behind him, the driver honking at Skeat's inclined-to-port image through two layers of thick glass.

11:54am EDT, Don Megala redials Collective Copy, is informed that a very upset Ms. Trask has left for lunch. Megala peels at the triangular label of a moist bottle, staring at a half-strung instrument.

6:55am MT, Patricia Dingle, eyes rimed with ice, palate hanging with the oystery starlight of extreme outdoor fear, makes a clumsy incision in the first finger of her frozen hand with a camp knife. The incision is a deep one just beneath the nail. She begins squeezing her finger with her left hand, moving the frozen blood up the finger and out the incision. The

blood leaves the finger in a bright solid mass, protrudes in an arc into the snow-skittered and very cold air. Patricia Dingle remembers her covert passion for sweet cherry Freezer-Pops as a milk-drinking child and is suddenly unwell onto the royal gulfs sloped shore.

11:55am EDT, Barry Dingle emerges from the doorway of the Leftward Ho and moves north on the broad sidewalk toward the tiny, divergent, dual images of Myrmaloy Trask and her life's companion. The sidewalk before him, asworn with mohawked women, weak men in leather, children in dyed smocks, branches in his sight into two vivid columns. Dingle makes for the distant root where the columns converge, where two Myrmaloys and two incontinent dogs will come together. His sandals slap the wet pavement. Dingle tastes the material of his heart on his tongue. His white knuckles are redly dotted with clench on his dog's heavy leash; he's numb; he does not feel the dog's abortive lunges at the crewcut Sapphoids passing just outside Dingle's crossed-inward ken as they whirl on spurred boots, most of them, glaring at the male animal and either saluting as in Rome or assuming martial-arts postures. Dingle is blind to what passes; he stares straight ahead; his immoderate love's eyes roll over white beneath its lit bulb.

11:55am EDT, Mrs. Dingle exchanges terse greetings with Nigel, temporary helmsman of The Whole Thing, lunchtime. She asks for Dingle.

8:50-8:57am MT, the Eskew brothers, Ronnie and Boone, both remanded to the custody of the Arizona Department of Corrections for terms not to exceed twelve years, attach a centerfold to the back of new inmate Dean-Paul Doyle, age 18, and sodomize him repeatedly on the floor of a crowded dormitory in Cell Block D, Arizona State Correctional Facility, Florence, AZ.

11:56am EDT, Myrmaloy Trask moves south on the sidewalk, seeing little past her curtain of hot tears but a miasma of colored hair, khaki pants, the twinkle of emergent sun on single earrings. Her past and present whirl together and yield a tornado of pain. Nixon trots cheerfully beside her.

11:56am EDT, Mrs. Dingle, on the phone, finds herself weeping for no good reason. Nigel tries to soothe her with a recipe for gazpacho.

6:56pm EDT, Aristotle Onassis, on his barstool, on his yacht, sees on the radar dish monitor behind him the videotaped face of Cliff Robertson, speaking on behalf of AT&T, which Aristotle owns. Robertson looks tan and fit. Onassis can see both their faces' reflections in his polished mirror over his wet bar, on his yacht.

11:56am EDT, Don Megala, waiting for the special Weather-That-Wood brand shellac to dry on a soon-to-be-antique dulcimer, smokes a Dunhill, looking out his workshop window at the whitewashed New England brick wall the window faces.

8:56am MT, ten-week-old Shauna Doyle, Olney, Arizona, lies on the carpet of her absent mother's trailer. She sees the sun shine faint pink through the upright ear of the white Husky puppy standing guard over her as Barry Dingle moves forward into convergence. His white-eyed love chants prayers for the living. The teams close. Nixon, in new heat, strains at the approach of Dingle's restrained male. The clouds, a dark eastern blight on an immoderate blue sky, rumble as their commalike nubbin of rainbow hangs there, indecisive. Myrmaloy is blind. Dingle smiles wildly as he reaches the columns' union, smiling, poorly feigning a shock of recognition. He goes into a rehearsed stumble of ideal surprise — this time, though, unideally stubbing a swollen toe on the pole of the bus stop's tall sign — loosening his grip on the length of chain. Dingle's dog is uninterested in Nixon; its rolling eyes lock on a point just below the denim waistline of Myrmaloy Trask, upwind. Dingle goes all too convincingly for his hurt toe, howling, his right foot brought up and held with both white hands; the Retriever is set free, its military chain a suitor's jewelry. It clears a bright puddle in one horny bound. From below, the puddle reflects upward the not-pretty, bright-red arousal of one male dog. Myrmaloy stops. Dingle stops. Dingle's dog hangs in mid-air, entombed in color, fixed and fused in an unutterable focus.

November 24, 1991, Sunday, Home Edition

SECTION: Book Review; Page 1; Book Review Desk

HEADLINE: PRESLEY AS PARADIGM;

DEAD ELVIS: A CHRONICLE OF A CULTURAL OBSESSION, BY GREIL MARCUS (DOUBLEDAY: \$25; 35 PP., ILLUSTRATED)

BYLINE: By David Foster Wallace, Wallace writes fiction and is the co-author of *Signifying Rappers: Rap and Race in the Urban Present*.

BODY: This review may well be subjective to the point of ickiness, because this reviewer has believed Greil Marcus is a genius ever since I first read the essay on Elvis in his 1975 "Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music." That book, like all Marcus' best work, is a study in social aesthetics, an enterprise concerned not so much with why certain artworks are entitled to certain predicates, but with just how and why some very few artists are able to move audiences, move them radically, terribly, redemptively and forever. Because he is interested in art that is jacked pretty much directly into people's emotions, Marcus writes about music, and because he is interested in these transferences of feeling and value on a large scale (and because he is an American), he specializes in popular music, rock and its progenitors.

The central concern of Marcus' work -- why some pop music moves audiences and has meaning for them -- devolves into two big questions. The first is why certain seminal rock 'n' roll performers are able to change the way whole groups of people feel about themselves in the world. Marcus' 1975 "Elvis: Presliad," one of the greatest essays ever written about music, traces the career and appeal of Elvis Presley as a synecdoche of America itself. Rather than just being the lucky white guy who first discovered how to breed Negroid blues with Caucasian country, Marcus' Elvis illustrated the American tension between the confirming community of white pop and the dangerous adrenaline of delta blues. Marcus locates Elvis' early genius in his ability to focus tension rather than resolve it, and in all seriousness and with impressive argumentation, Marcus portrays Elvis as no less an enveloping American symbol than Melville's whale or Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha.

What was brilliant in the "Presliad" was Marcus' ability to present Elvis as emblematic of American popular culture and then pop culture itself as America's deepest self-perception writ large and bright. If pop is the argument between sub-culture (as conceived by the cultural outsider when that outsider happens to be a genius) and the redemptive, relentlessly consuming appetite of the community, then the arc of Elvis' career, from starving white trash to musical insurgent to heartthrob to B-movie mainstay to corpulent Vegas schmaltz-king "performing a kind of enormous victory rather than winning it" ("Mystery Train"), limns also the living and fatal paradox of all popular U.S. art: that this art, which is produced via raw difference, the special fecund anguish of non-inclusion, attacks, seduces and is devoured by a mass-art market that redeems and even deifies the artist while it drains his productions of the denial and pain that is its voice.

The Elvis of the years before his death, for Marcus, was the transcendent purveyor of America's Empty Yes, an artist who didn't so much fall into as thrive on the pop trap of satisfying the audience's surface craving for confirmation instead of its deeper, more ragged need to be moved -- "He sings with such a complete absence of musical personality that none of the old songs matter at all, because he has not committed himself to them; it could be anyone singing, or no one. It is in this sense, finally, that an audience

is confirmed, that an America comes into being; lacking any real fear or joy, it is a throw-away America where nothing is at stake. The divisions America shares are simply smoothed away" ("Mystery Train").

Since so many of the awesome and hideous public phenomena that have attended the death of Elvis Presley in 1977 were predicted and explained in Marcus' "Presliad," I approached "Dead Elvis" feeling simultaneously that there was no one more qualified to write about "the ubiquity, the playfulness, the perversity, the terror, and the fun of this, of Elvis Presley's second life," and that Marcus' virtuoso dissection of the living King in the earlier book makes any present post-mortem kind of redundant.

But "Dead Elvis" isn't otiose at all. It's different from the "Presliad," less rhetorical, more a travelogue than an argument, but no less precious, since it carves out and addresses the second of Marcus' great informing questions: What is it about the audience that is America that makes it receptive to the combination of art and junk and appearance and reality and devotion and repulsion an idea like Elvis purveys?

Marcus observes -- sometimes analyzing, but mostly observing, raptly, in pellucid prose -- the culture that has risen around the unrisen Elvis Presley, his image's persistence in black velvet, ashtrays and liquor bottles, films, night-club impersonations, novels, McDonald's commercials, poetry, tabloids, the jagged spirituality that still defines the margins Elvis came from, avant-garde art, the Whole Elvis Thing, "a great common art project, the work of scores of people operating independently of each other, linked only by their determination to solve the same problem: Who was he, and why do I still care?" Thus, like the "Presliad," "Dead Elvis" is less about Elvis than it is about our popular culture, "the culture he inherited, the culture he made, and the culture that then to such a great degree remade itself according to these promises, complexities, contradictions, and defeats."

"Dead Elvis" is a collection of Elvis-related pieces Marcus has written from 1977 to 1990. There are "Presliad"-esque essays like 1981's "Elvis: The Ashtray" and 1990's "Still Dead: Elvis Presley Without Music." There are sharp, dark reviews of books about Elvis and rock music, schlock and otherwise. There are parodic screenplays, discussions of William Eggleston's photographs of a very empty Graceland, illustrations, lavish photos of Elvis with German whores in 1959, Elvis as usurped and abstracted by contemporary artists, in underground conceptual archetripptychs -- Elvis Hitler, Elvis Christ -- Elvis in underground comics, Elvis as sung about by nihilist punks who love the King too well for betraying all he'd been consigned to stand for.

A lot of "Dead Elvis" is just listening to a huge national conversation. Greil Marcus is a great listener. 1989's "The Last Breakfast" describes a San Francisco morning DJ's Breakfast With Elvis show, in which listeners call in each weekday morning with menus -- from the exotic to the troubling -- for feeding a King "as he dropped dead on 16 August 1977: a glutton bloated beyond memory." The piece is hilarious and moving, then scary when counterpointed by 1990's "A Corpse in Your Mouth," a weird discussion of cartoons, postcards, album covers and underground fanzine jokes about eating Elvis, Elvis-burgers, Sid-Vicious-patties, the ultimate consumption of what celebrity offers. We could go on. This is a marvelous and I think profound book about a cultural symbol of cultural symbol-making. The critical acuity of the "Presliad" has, in "Dead Elvis," become emotional genius. Marcus acknowledges that the cults that have "oozed from the fissures of culture" since Elvis' death could easily be reduced and explained in terms of

"working-class bad taste or upper-class camp." Maybe they should be, but Marcus offers eloquent testimony to the contrary. He chases and witnesses the spasms of love, hatred, devotion, betrayal, lust and art that Elvis Presley's explosion has sent raining out and down, witnesses with neither Warholian fake-hip credulity nor ironic fake-hip condescension. He writes for two glass-clear pages about a woman who divorced her husband after seeing "Blue Hawaii" on her honeymoon. She now lives in Memphis, a professional pilgrim. A sort of priestess. She is known as the Button Lady -- "She wears so many Elvis badges she clinks when she walks. . . . You can't laugh at her; you can't even blink."

Marcus' rapt attention to what Elvis continues to mean is both transmitted and justified in a splendid piece of critical art.

P

THE B · E · S · T

AMERICAN

S · H · O · R · T

STORIES

1 · 9 · 9 · 2

ROBERT STONE

E · D · I · T · O · R

KATRINA KENISON

S · E · R · I · E · S · E · D · I · T · O · R

I joined my friends at the bar I nearly burst into tears. "It's come to this," I said.

Another year my longtime companion Bill Kittredge and I danced at the Turah Pines bar in what would be one of Ernest Tubbs's last concerts. Still later we saw a rainbow at midnight over the Clark's Fork River near its juncture with Rock Creek, where my young family once lived in a bungalow owned by a woman named Mary-Dell, who was in love with horses. When I started to write a story about Mary-Dell and the old drunken cowboy, all these elements came together, along with a great imaginary logger-lover named Frank.

CHRISTOPHER TILGHMAN's first collection of stories, *In a Father's Place*, appeared in 1990. He is at work on a novella and a new story collection.

▪ I composed "The Way People Run" as a collage of visual images I had collected on the northern Plains. It was satisfying to write, but when I finished I had no idea what it meant. I started adding characters and scenes, hoping that I'd get some direction, some meaning. When I succeeded in destroying everything that I liked, I put the whole mess in the filing cabinet. About a year later I was driving through the boarded-up towns of rural Virginia (it could have been anywhere in the U.S.A., of course), and my character Barry came back to me as a simple image of economic decline and moral exhaustion. I realized my story was not about the West, where it is set, but about the coasts, from which Barry has run. The fact of decay seemed to offer its own sufficient reason, so I polished up the first draft and sent it off. I don't like describing things that are falling apart — it's the shape of the story that bothers me more than the pessimism — but I'm afraid we'd all better get used to it.

DAVID FOSTER WALLACE is the author of a novel, *The Broom of the System*; a story collection, *Girl with Curious Hair*; and, with Mark Costello, a book-length essay on race and music called *Signifying Rappers*. He lives in Boston and is at this very moment restructuring his whole c.v. around inclusion in this anthology.

▪ This is a bit embarrassing, and I'd rather not discuss it, but will, since certain authorities have been polite but firm about these little post-story discussions being strongly encouraged, and I'd probably submit with cheer to way more embarrassing requirements if it meant getting the old snout into the *B.A.S.S.* trough.

The embarrassing issue here is I'm not all that crazy about this story. It's one of very few autobiographically implicated things I've ever tried. I did, like probably lots of kids, have a high-dive trauma. My real trauma

was much more plain-old-sphincter-loosening-fear-based than the existential conundra this story's kid encounters. I basically got to the top, with a long line of jaded souls behind me, and changed my mind about going off. It was excruciatingly shaming, but in no way deeply or exceptionally shaming. I think it wasn't the memory of the shame so much as current shame that allowed so pedestrian a shame still to haunt my esteem-centers, prompting me to make the story so heavy, meditative, image-laden, swinging for the fence on just about every pitch. The thing seems to me a performative index of every weakness I have as a writer and as a person. And God knows why I let my desire for an Alienated Narrative Persona lead me to use the second-person point of view; now I'm scared people will read this and think I'm just a McInerney imitator in a black turtleneck, a copy of Kierkegaard under my arm.

The thing went through dozens of drafts, the first of which still sits in the pages of my undergraduate "Stories That'll Prove I'm a Genius" notebook. I went to grad school in Tucson, which is where I guess the thing picked up its setting: you can't spit in Tucson without hitting a pool, though darn few are public like this one is public.

I completely deny ever once kissing any part of my sister's feet at any time whatsoever.

I'm noticing that, with respect to any piece of fiction, my dissatisfaction with the final draft is directly proportional to the excitement that precedes the first draft. I remember doing the tortured artist thing back in school, all ego and caffeine, and thinking I had a genuine Big Idea for this story here, and seeing it finished, Big, published, lauded as Important by bearded titans. This was before I even bothered to start to try writing the thing. I preconceived it as deeply moving and imposingly cerebral at the same time, at once tender-psyche'd and tough-minded, just the sort of thing Eminences would pluck out of the glabrous herd by choosing for a prestigious anthology. By the second draft, my head was more or less permanently attached to the wall I'd been pounding it on. In black-lit contrast to the timeless Big thing I'd preconceived, the actual ink-on-paper story seemed pretentious and trendy and jejune and any number of bad things: it seemed like the product of a young writer who was ashamed of a personal trauma and who was straining with every fast-twitch fiber to make that trauma sound way deeper and prettier and Big than anything true could ever really be. And here I mean "true" both artistically and historically.

I don't know why I kept putting the thing through drafts. I kept getting late-night twinges of that original preconceptual excitement. I kept seeing the thing as maybe just one image or two epiphanies away from blossoming, from honoring its entelechy of Bigness. Six years and many

other completed projects later, I sent this story out in the old brown envelope. I sent it out for the same reason most young writers I know send stuff out: to have an excuse to quit thinking about it. My surprise when *Fiction International* took the thing was nothing compared to my feelings about the august endorsement that occasions this wordy little confession. Do not get me wrong: qualms about the story's failure to be anything more than a lumpy ghost of what I remain convinced was its initial promise of Bigness have not inhibited me from calling pretty much everybody I know and casually working in the *B.A.S.S.*-selection news. I'm extremely and yet of course also humbly grateful and moved and etc. I'm just coming to realize that I have very little personal clue about whether the stuff I do is good or bad or successful or not successful\* which like most bits of self-knowledge is both mortifying and kind of a relief. It makes me glad I have opinionated critical friends and politely firm editors, not necessarily in that order.

\*Is "successful" the same as "good," here? Does inclusion in *B.A.S.S.* render a story de facto "good" the way a human reverend's pronouncement effects a legally binding union?

KATE WHEELER has won the O. Henry and Pushcart prizes and has published half a dozen short stories and essays in literary journals. She grew up in South America and has traveled widely.

• I might still be a nun in Rangoon had there not, in August 1988, been riots attempting to overthrow the military government. I wrote "Under the Roof" after disrobing and returning to the West, during a gloomy winter in Boston. Having surrendered as entirely as possible to Burmese Theravadin Buddhism, and, even more narrowly, to my monastery's meditation style, which was highly precise and technical, based on a fifth-century Sri Lankan text, I found I had my being in several different, internally consistent, mutually contradictory modes. This is surely true for anyone, but since I grew up "overseas" — "overseas" from the U.S., which is "overseas" from "overseas" — my personal history emphasizes this point: I live simultaneously; and must, at times, try to discover what is universal.

I'd like to say "I met those people," but I'd have to add that I started meeting them as a child, and will continue to meet them until I die. Traveling in Buddhist Asia, I did come to know women of superhuman energy, generosity, and devotion. Monasteries could not exist without them. Some of my friends and I might not have survived Rangoon without their shipments of powdered milk, Nescafé, and antibiotics. The American monk, of course, represents me and all my Western com-

I'm hoping that for anybody who tries to evaluate and articulate the valuable qualities of the fiction s/he likes to read, some authors present the thorny problem of possessing value without displaying much quality. For me, at least, there are certain fiction writers I feel like I have to admit are literarily important but whose stuff I don't think is very good. How can this be? Do you have this problem, sometimes? If so, can you account for the discrepancy between importance and apparent low quality without ending up at a grim disjunction whereby either you're a hypocrite and a literary camp-follower or you're a Philistine who just can't appreciate certain worthwhile kinds of stories? For me, it's no escape to say it's just a matter of vibrating sympathetically with one school of fiction and not with another: I run into this problem with U.S. authors who are as wildly different from each other as Robert Coover, Gore Vidal, Joyce Carol Oates, Norman Mailer, Joseph McElroy, and Kathy Acker.

*Portrait of an Eye* comprises Kathy Acker's first three novels from the early 1970s, all short, all terribly abstract, and all first self-published in limited editions that earned Ms. Acker a reputation among the outerest fringes of the Greenwich Village and Bay Area avant-gardes, a reputation she cannily, Robert Frostishly nurtured by expatriating herself to England, establishing herself in London as the major literary voice of a Punk movement with which she had real affinities. Her very high profile as an Angry American on the London art scene led to the Picador/Grove publications in the 1980s of her four big novels: Marxist-feminist reworkings of *Great Expectations* and *Don Quixote* in '83 and '86, *Blood and Guts in High School* in '84, and *Empire of the Senseless* in '88. Back in the States, she's now literarily important enough for Pantheon to collect and reissue her earliest productions, "together for the first time for a larger audience" [back jacket].

Pantheon has done both Ms. Acker and a larger audience an ambivalent favor, here. The book's novels are *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula by the Black Tarantula, I Dreamt I Was a Nymphomaniac: Imagining*, and *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec by Henri Toulouse Lautrec*. All of them are at once critically pretty interesting and artistically pretty crummy and actually no fun at all to read. *Tarantula* opens with "Intention: I become a murderess by repeating in words the lives of other murderesses," and then proceeds to juxtapose bits of faked historical autobiography from oppressed, repressed, horny women who end up murdering men, with snippets of actual autobiography from an oppressed, repressed, horny Kathy Acker who seems to get relentlessly victimized by men. *Nymphomaniac* is about a hornily repressed androgynous woman who's victimized and oppressed by a congenitally evil androgynous guy—who's pronominated throughout the thing as "she"—until she (?) eventually kills her (?) in a scene that's plagiarized verbatim from the last page of Poe's "William Wilson," and they're both sent to prison. *Lautrec* is about Lautrec as a horny, oppressed, deformed woman who's abused and rejected by several unpleasant people of indeterminate name and gender, all of whom are confusingly involved in a sex-killing that nobody seems to care about. I've made these novels sound just as comprehensible and interesting as I could.

Among the reasons Ms. Acker is indisputably important to contemporary U.S. literature is that she was employing postmodern fictional techniques long before most American writers understood "post-" as anything more than a cereal concern. She is certainly the first bona fide female U.S. postmodernist, and the first American writer to see the implications of European poststructuralism (Foucault, Barthes, Baudrillard, Deleuze) for the creation of a radically feminist fictional texts. Among the stuff she was up to before any other U.S. woman: questioning aesthetic hierarchies by incorporating materials from popular culture in self-consciously "serious" fiction; questioning the linearity of narrative time by disdaining the cause-and-effect sequences of realist fiction; questioning the notions of fixed identity and static sexuality by undermining the unity and gender of the narrative subject; questioning the

notion of originality by rewriting or outright "appropriating" the words of other writers; promulgating a Derridian, feminist-friendly "metaphysics of absence" by portraying characters as passive objects instead of active agents; and exploiting the poststructural triad of political power, sexuality and language by making all her main characters oppressed, repressed, horny women whose narrative utterances fight a holding action against erasure by a malignant, phallogocentric, capitalistic Society. Ms. Acker's especially and deservedly important now because now the U.S. Academy has a working post-structuralist terminology that lets critics publish impressive-sounding lists of po-mo strategies like the list just *supra*.

My trouble with Ms. Acker is that the same intensely theoretical aim and ground of her work that lets contemporary critics knock themselves out writing long panegyrics to like her "deconstruction of the phallo-capitalist logos" also empties that work of all but the most abstract and cerebral resonance. Since it's the easiest to unpack, *Tarantula* will be my example. *Tarantula*'s entire interest for the reader lies in the theoretical justifications for its form. In this novel, theme is replaced by strategy, and an involvement with the characters is here replaced with a solicited interest in what the author herself is up to. (It's maybe interesting that Acker's books, all of which have impressive Mapplethorpe photos of Acker striking poses on the covers, are every bit as narcissistic as those of a Mailer who simply must be Acker's arch-foe.) In sum, *Tarantula* is less a fiction than a theory-vector, pointing not at an imagined world but at certain rarified critical conceptions of political and literary identity. Just as *Nymphomaniac* and *Lautrec* point like hunting dogs at Foucault's doctrine of sexual fascism and Deleuze and Guattari's (Acker should have to hand over 15% of every royalty-dollar to the authors of *Anti-Oedipus*: Deleuze and Guattari are all over her stuff like white on rice) notion of "n sexes" or "androgyny in the molecular unconscious," so *Tarantula* is clearly a fictional half-gainer off the Laing-MacMurray springboards of "schizophrenic disintegration" and "the decentralized 'I'" ("I," at 400+ appearances, is Acker's favorite word in *Portrait of an Eye*, far out-distancing the 2nd and 3rd place "fuck" and "cunt," which appear 211 and 136 times respectively.)

The intellectual twist at *Tarantula*'s heart is slick. R.D. Laing, back in 1960-something, developed the thesis that schizophrenia is to be located existentially in the enforced diffraction of the ego, thus that both true *Dasein* and social adjustment depend on the development of an integrated self, a "centralized 'I'" Acker, taking as self-evident the fact that phallogocentric Society schizophrenizes women by denying them both subjectivity and active sexual expression, seeks to demonstrate and dramatize a Laingian psychosis by systematically working to decentralize (I simply refuse to say "deconstruct") the narrative's subject. "Subject" here is a double-entendre. She both bifurcates the novel's plot and dis-integrates the "I" of the novel's narrative voice. She constructs a series of false autobiographies of historically real women who are about as different from Acker as any woman could be—meek, demure, passive 18th- and 19th-Century ladies who are pushed and pushed by Society until they snap and kill people in hideous ways—and juxtaposes them with contextless bits of actual (and you're supposed to know it's actual because it's so petty and banal) Kathy Acker autobio. The point—exclusively theoretical—is that to be female in a phallogocentric Society is to be existentially vivisected, bodi- and voice-less, with all the rage and anxiety and free-floating Continental guilt attendant on that state.

*Tarantula*'s political point is ably demonstrated—i.e., made baldly obvious, assuming you're willing to go check out Laing's *The Divided Self*—but it is inadequately dramatized, because in voluntarily sacrificing any univocal representation of character, relation or plot, Acker also sacrifices any quality of *story* that would allow the pathetic conflicts of the subjects to be felt or even comprehended by the reader. I'm sure some really cutting-edge Ph.D. dissertations could be written about *Tarantula*, but the poor old regular reader ends up having to endure stuff like:

I'll show them. This time I'll revenge myself. I tell my gardener to ask the Lanagans to lend me two dollars. My gardener's thinking of killing me I ask the Lanagans myself for the two

bucks they don't have any money they're starving I know exactly what's happening. (I dream I return to New York I'm going to miss an important meeting of radicals in the middle of St. Mark's Place I sit in an uptown apartment stare out a window of course I miss the meeting I wander into the church when it's empty night.) (p.8)

which is intellectually confusing in a way that can be resolved by reading Laing and David Cooper and Gilles Deleuze, but is artistically cold and dead and arbitrary in a way you really can't resolve at all.

Maybe a reader's numb spanked distant confusion is just the effect Ms. Acker is after. An interview with her, published in the *Mississippi Review* last year, not only contains some hilariously pretentious questions about the three novels that compose *Portrait of an Eye*; it's got some disingenuous but illuminating responses:

INTERVIEWER: Those early books like *Tarantula* and *I Dreamt I Was a Nymphomaniac* seem like they're using some of this semiotic slippage of textual transformations to literalize the notion that identity is unfixed. . .

ACKER: I honestly did not understand why I was doing what I was doing. I knew I was very angry. I knew I didn't want any centralized meaning. . . [and] my way to escape that male, centralized meaning was to keep my interest in writing as purely conceptual as I could. So I wasn't interested in "saying" anything in my work. The only thing I could use my works to say is "I don't want to say things!" I couldn't say anything beyond that. I didn't give a damn if one character was another or not—I couldn't even remember who my characters were! And I couldn't understand why anyone would read me. I honestly thought I was writing the most unreadable stuff around.

Maybe I'm best off claiming that Ms. Acker's three early novels are valuable for academic critics but low-quality for readers who like fiction that makes some attempt to communicate, or mean, or live. *W/t* the important-writer-but-crummy-writing problem Ms. Acker presents, it may be that it's the conundrum's implications for academic criticism itself that turn out to be grim. *Caveat emptor* all around.

**A Feast in the Garden** by George Konrád, translated from the Hungarian by Imre Goldstein. Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1992. \$23.95 ISBN 0-15-130548-X

**Reviewed by Helen Fremont**

"What you see here," writes George Konrád, "is an endlessly teeming mind facing the finiteness of a book." And, in fact, *The Feast in the Garden* has the feel of boundless creative energy squeezed into the confines of a novel; characters and events seem to burst from the frame. Konrád excels at this—using outside pressures to accentuate and give shape to the energy of his characters. The surface tension of their lives is heightened by political events and social limitations beyond their control.

The result is a remarkably rich and powerful book celebrating the lives of survivors, exposing the indomitable human spirit in the face of violence and political oppression.

David Kobra, one of the central characters and a writer, is the son of a wealthy Jewish businessman in Hungary. In 1944, when Kobra is eleven, his parents are deported by the Nazis. He and his sister escape to Budapest, where they survive the war living in a "protected house."

Konrád portrays the routine execution of the Jews with an almost serene tone of self-restraint, an utter lack of sentimentality or self-pity. "Just as a farm animal grows accustomed to the slaughter of its mates, man grows accustomed to the slaughter of his fellow human beings," David Kobra writes. "You cannot be shocked every half hour." Later he adds, "In the shadow of our doom, bread was more like bread, jam was more like jam, and I took pleasure in making firewood out of furniture."

Returning to his hometown after the war, Kobra begins a new life under an oppressive communist regime, along with friends and relatives who have also managed to survive. A new set of limitations is imposed; a new set of rules and restrictions must be learned. The political machinery of post-war Hungary seems to concentrate the lives of these friends and relatives into brilliant flashes of rebellion, sensuality and creativity.

They are seeking not merely to survive, but to thrive, to soar, to dance. "The moment

"I'm not hungry," Kobra's friend János Dragomán says, "I want to be entertained." János escapes to freedom by swimming from Kopar to Trieste, where he is imprisoned by the Italian police. He is later released and travels through Italy and France, moving across Europe from lover to lover, with an insatiable passion for life. He eventually settles in New York, where he becomes a university professor, before finally returning to his native Hungary, to his childhood friends and memories.

"With a great hunger we sally forth into the wide world," János says, "and return to hide. Coming back, I was surprised to find that everything was normal size. The suburb was a real suburb, bread was real bread. In a blue enchanted evening I rode a yellow streetcar. All one really needs is a comfortable bed."

And so, Konrád casts out his line, and reels in a richness of characters and continents. He casts out again, and brings in their lovers, their dreams, and their losses. The book is shaped less by clear motive than by the pure accident of discovery:

Here comes the story, the great family novel that lasts a lifetime. We are doing the same thing children do on the floor of their room, using dolls and figurines. I close the door behind me, and now we chatter away for a few hundred more pages, until the text breaks loose. This is not a novelistic novel, because guests keep arriving; there are more and more of us. So many, in fact, that not everyone knows everyone else, and—behold—we experience in these pages what we do in life: We don't know what will happen next. Because one thing is just as possible as another. Not the arc but the intersection is our structural pattern. We intersect at this garden, this table, this evening. Tonight every player sees things more clearly. Shadow roam the garden, pondering, meditating, dredging their memories. They listen to one another then excuse themselves and walk on.

Konrád has brought us into his world, and for the duration of the book, and long afterward, we take part in the feast in the garden, flanked not only by him, but by his creations

I have many acquaintances on Liberation Square. A whole cityful, a whole cattle careful. Our dead live in this square, which is sometimes a garden, or a balcony, or a cafe. The scene is constantly shifting. The guests take seats at the table. For a fleeting moment we seem to understand one another. We are familiar with the many ways in which body and soul friendship and memory dissolve. We raise our glasses to this city that has brought us together. To the judges in the other world we will show the list of our friends.

Konrád's novel is a tribute to his homeland, and to his people. He has created a circle of friends who enrich us, and whom we feel honored to join.

**Success, New and Selected Stories** by Hilary Masters. St. Martin's, 1992. \$17.95

**Reviewed by Susan Dodd**

For decades Hilary Masters has been writing some of the most elegant, intelligent and inventive prose in American literature. In six novels, a previous collection of short fiction and the incomparable memoir *Last Stands* (Godine, 1982), Masters has practiced a kind of alchemy. Mixing a mysterious concoction of rich language, deep insight, subtle wit, and vast experience, he has produced a body of work that illuminates the American landscape, renews the language, and broadens our understanding of human motivation. It seems a sorrowful mystery that a writer of such magnanimous gifts should remain known by so few.

Now, however, with *Success, New and Selected Stories*, we are offered another chance to stop, look, and listen to all Hilary Masters has been up to while our fickle literary attentions were elsewhere. Here are sixteen cagey, lucid, and rock-solid tales to engage, challenge, instruct, and delight. Hilary Masters writes, with a kind of inevitability, of travel and moving, uprooting and resettling. His characters seem trapped in the frail webs of their own yearning. But these stories and those who populate them are far from helpless. His people are lonely, but not alone. They may wonder where they are going, but they know very well where they have been. And they take close, unflinching looks at where they stand. For all their craving, Master's characters are beings intimately acquainted with, if not quite at home in, the world.

In the title story, "Success," a man recalls his last meeting with his half-brother, years

PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER  
IRIS' STORY: AN INVERSION OF PHILOSOPHICAL SKEPTICISM  
May 24, 1992

Reviewed by David Foster Wallace

THE BLINDFOLD

By Siri Hustvedt

The Poseidon Press. 221 pp. \$20

What is it to be a woman?  
To be contained, to be a vessel?  
To prefer a window to a door?  
A pool to a river? . . .

- Theodore Roethke

The point of this review is going to be that *The Blindfold* is a really good book.

The first neat thing about it is that the jacket copy and blurbs are interesting. Don DeLillo is arguably the best living fiction writer in the United States, and he rarely blurbs anybody except his good friend Paul Auster, and so DeLillo's endorsement carries weight, and on the back cover he calls this novel "completely urban and modern but working at the reader's emotions with the undistanced intimacy of a traditional tale." What's cunning about this blurb is that Siri Hustvedt's "tale," which is really four interconnected novellas, is "traditional" only in a very specific sense.

Though features of *The Blindfold* will remind readers of any number of novelistic touchstones - Beckett's *Molloy*, Sartre's *Nausea* and Camus' *The Fall*, Fowles' *The Magus* and Auster's *New York Trilogy* - Hustvedt's accomplishment is hard to appreciate fully without reference to a loopy philosophical tradition that runs from Descartes to R.D. Laing and then back to Bishop Berkeley. Because the most impressive thing about this novel is its ingenious distaff inversion of that most haunting preoccupation of modern art-fiction, the problem of philosophical skepticism.

The problem of skepticism is Cartesian and phallogocentric and presumes the ontological priority of the Subject: I know I exist OK, but how can I trust my perceptions enough to be equally sure that any of the non-me Objective stuff I seem to see around me exists, etc. Since your thinking man avoids solipsism at just about any cost, this skeptical Subjective insecurity - in which the integrity of the self depends on an efferent relation between the Subject as active perceiver and world as reliable Object - sits brooding astride the whole canon of Anglo-American 20th-century lit, from Eliot and Joyce to Bellow and Larkin.

A defining characteristic of this century's important feminist fictions, though, has been its obversion of the skeptical dilemma. The best feminist lit has co-opted ideas such as quantum theory's axiom that any observation affects its object, post-structuralism's revolt against the

"metaphysics of presence," and existentialism's (Heidegger's, Sartre's, Laing's) idea that the really significant ontological insecurity is that of the self about itself, all to alter the skeptical angst-dynamic in their best fictions from Subject-ive to Object-ive.

Instead of a secure Subject brooding Cartesianly over the reliability of an Exterior's appearance, most interesting feminist novels involve the ontological insecurity of a female whose sense of her own authentic existence is bound up with how she herself is perceived by other (male) Subjects. The philosophical touchstone of important novels such as Jean Rhys' *Good Morning, Midnight* or Kathy Acker's *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula* is not Descartes but Bishop Berkeley, whose ultra-empiricist tenet that existence consists all and only in being perceived is way more congenial to a gender whose sense of authenticity has for a long time been dependent on an afferent relation between the self as alluring Object and the world as a male Subject whose attention defines her sexual (the equivalent, for these feminists, of ontological) security.

*The Blindfold* is the best novel I've ever read in this Berkeley/Laing mode. In contrast to Rhys, whose portraits of disintegrating female selves were prescient but sort of simplistic and freighted with a passive self-pity, and Acker, who's up on all kinds of cutting-edge French theory but is crippled by easy anger and a penchant for cute, easy formal tricks like rendering her females' ontological fragmentation through sharp juxtapositions of different narratives and enraged autobiography, Hustvedt's protagonist Iris (her name both an inversion of the author's "Siri" and, literally, a perceiving eye) struggles to establish an actual self - literally to make herself up - in the face of relentless and surreal objectification by the males she's drawn to. Here the book's jacket copy is not only accurate but incisive: It describes *The Blindfold* as "a story particular to our time, when a woman no longer expects to move from parents to husband but must forge a separate identity to hold at bay that which others impose upon her."

Written in self-consciously simple English, this intricate novel's best complexity is the neurasthenic Iris' ambivalence about her objectification by Others - all of whom both attract and repel her - so that she's split not only existentially but emotionally. This seems real. And her ambivalence is justified by the hypnotic power with which Hustvedt constructs Iris' manipulative Others: the weird old hack writer who hires Iris to compose descriptions of a murdered girl's personal effects; the demented, "disintegrated" old woman who sees in an invalidated Iris a reflection of her own shattered identity; the gifted photographer whose truncated portrait of Iris becomes a triangular third character and destroys her relation with a lover who prefers the photo to the real woman; the academic superstar whose translation of a fake (?) novella called *The Brutal Boy* plunges Iris into a schizoid transsexual identification with the story's sadistic protagonist.

None of these synopses does the jeweler-fine complexity of the four narratives' plots justice. It's not surprising that a couple of them won great praise and Best-Of anthologizing when they were published as short stories in literary magazines: each of the novellas ends up a moving, troubling story about metaphysical erasure: In her struggle to construct a self in a relationship with males and elders (rather than in some cruder, Ackerish opposition to them), Iris ends up dismantling others' psyches to the precise extent that she preserves the integrity of her own.

What is remarkable is the haunting effect of these novellas' combination. Hustvedt has created in *Iris* both a stunning synecdoche of female skepticism - a fecund, symbolic exploration of the question whether a distinctively female character is even possible - and a compelling, utterly three-dimensional fictional character, a heroine in every old and some new senses of the world.

The *Blindfold* both intrigues and annoys in its efforts to align itself with another tradition, too. It's not surprising that Don DeLillo's praise adorns the jacket, because *The Blindfold* is clearly a feminist reworking of some of the central themes of DeLillo and his literary compadre, Paul Auster. Lines like "What you've forgotten is that some things are unspeakable. . . . Words may cover it up for a while, but then it comes howling back" and "There is no end to such discussions. They wind in on themselves" sound almost straight out of Great Jones Street or *White Noise*.

Hustvedt's preoccupation with silence and the untellable, inanimate objects and their spatial arrangement, the modal potency of names, the geometric expansion of images, even the urban-blighted surrealism of the novel's setting are overwhelmingly reminiscent of DeLillo and Auster. And so are her prose rhythms, developed carefully via short sentences and oblique repetitions. A problem is that *The Blindfold's* prose lacks both DeLillo's wit and ear for speech and Auster's lapidary compression and lucidity.

Blurbers praise this novel's "brainwave-altering prose," but I think they confuse style here with tone. The narrative tone is masterly - at once flat and sharp, disassociated and intimate - but the prose itself is sometimes so clunky it seems as if it has been poorly translated from some foreign language. Besides dialogue that often sounds stilted and written, *The Blindfold* is also pocked with ponderous bits of exposition like "The connection seemed rife with meaning, and yet it spawned nothing inside me but a feeling akin to guilt" and "I didn't know what the words meant, but they seemed to identify an amorphous truth."

It seems fair to point out the ways Hustvedt is inferior to DeLillo and Auster, since she seems to try so hard to associate her work with theirs. Besides the DeLilloish meditations, *The Blindfold* is dedicated to Auster, has characters eating in restaurants named after Auster novels like *Moon Palace*, and is studded with weird throw-aways like "I heard someone shout the name Paul. I waited for an answer. None came." Since Hustvedt is Auster's spouse, I guess some of these are at least explainable. But a little of this stuff goes a long way. At certain points the reader gets the sense that *The Blindfold* is in some ways a roman a clef, except a cozy inter-author roman a clef, with inside jokes and references from which those outside a small circle are consciously excluded.

I am giving these flaws so much attention because they're just about the only ones I could find. I don't know that I'd call this novel fun to read, but it's very powerful, and awfully smart and well-crafted, a clear bright sign that the feminist and post-modern traditions in America are far from exhausted. For its sensitive, surreal illumination of the Objectified psyche, *The Blindfold* is likely to end up recognized as one of the more important first novels to appear in this decade.

TO BE CONTINUED... Once the exclusive province of action-adventure movies, the sequel has arrived in the world of literature. Encouraged by the success of *Scarlett* (over 2 million copies sold), the sequel to *Gone With the Wind*, book editors everywhere have been scrambling to find literary "properties" suitable for extension. Ever wonder what happened to Heathcliff? Now you can read *H: The Story of Heathcliff's Journey Back to Wuthering Heights*, published last month by Pocket Books. Did Huck make it to the territories? An answer can be found in *Mister Grey*, the further adventures of Huckleberry Finn, which Four Walls Eight Windows published last May. *Lara's Child*, a sequel to *Dr. Zhivago*, is due out from Doubleday next year. Occupying a dubious place in the culture, these sequels are literary piecemeal, created to order and calculated to ride on the success of their illustrious progenitors. But what if a gifted writer reversed the order of the publisher's priority and depended on an inspiration more aesthetic than commercial? What if the basis for a sequel was merely the pleasure of the literary imagination? With these questions in mind, the editors of *Harper's Magazine* invited six distinguished authors to write a sequel to a favorite work of literature.

#### RABBIT RESURRECTED ~~~~~ By David Foster Wallace

In this sequel to *Rabbit at Rest*, which ended with the hero on his deathbed, beset with transmural infarctions and the consequences of his own appetites, Rabbit Angstrom, ambivalent hero of four Really Big Novels, athlete, adulterer, Republican, duly designated observer of the U.S. scene, and synecdoche of a generation's pathos, negotiates the pitfalls of post-life America in his own erratic way, and learns some very special truths he'd suspected all along...

The bright bed of happy unfeeling from which his son's straining face recedes has not deserted him, Rabbit Angstrom feels. The bed merely tilts at the foot and erects itself, rising, Rabbit with it. Behind his eyes the red cave he had thought was the exit reveals itself to have been his brain's own color, its red music; darkness now flows like spilled ink in at all sides until the color shrinks to the frozen star of a television's last point of light, then out. Not darkness but whatever is its absence. Rabbit hears earlessly the blank whine of the heart monitor and his family's Kabuki cries of self-concerned grief, the chud of defibrillation paddles trying to stun what is no longer his. He is not his body--can I keep my prick in heaven? is his first wild thought, and on its heels the toothier question of heaven itself, of just where is he off to, floating.

Instead of the cacophony of his big body's constant reminders, Rabbit's sense of himself is now merely as huge and clean, a white idea, untethered, rising like a red balloon whose red is less the color of candy apples than of a squat, solid Amish barn in the oblique light of a Pennsylvania mid-to-late afternoon. As beneath him the slate roofs of the DeLeon hospital complex first form a pattern of tile with other roofs and then melt into the blue and green gem the Atlantic wears, Rabbit finds the star expanding, his inner vision restored but altered. As an astringent light the same bleached blue as the DeLeon ICU yawns out from both sides of a gassy pink warmth he screams at leaving, as a slap's sharp sting on his tiny plum of a bottom meets the inverted face of the obstetrician who holds him by a heel, replaced immediately by the moon of his mother's face rising and breaking into crescents over the edge of a crib, then the sight of the nubby rug rushing up to slap him as his first fat steps fail, Rabbit realizes all those fags in sandals had been right, and he was about to re-experience, in time lapse, every sensuous experience he'd ever had. Here

they all are, each minutely described:

## ILLUSTRATION:

. . . in air tinged the bloody lavender of a sunrise over an Ipswich dune, Rabbit was heartsore. How quickly, in the dim Cineplex of recall, the associations rose and passed! How little the lyrical metaphors his head conjured for everything he saw, the poetic analogies that had bloomed beside milk boxes and damp screens, pubic hair and Toyotas, plumber's helpers and Janice's poor slotted mouth, images hovering palsied like the faint UHF ghosts that shadowed televised images before everybody all of a sudden had to have those cable hookups, or like the odd clover's fourth leaf, jutting so vainly with its Valentine creases between what was complete in itself . . . or maybe more like the echo of a yodel in a void, because how damned little they added up to, these unlikely observations of a self-centered clod, these locations of literary meaning in the angle of light on prefab siding in the smooth hiss of a public fart, these strings of pedestrian epiphanies that he had presumed lifted him above the herd of all other self-centered pedestrian clods to become the distillate of an American generation. All ghosts, gone the moment seen.

He is alone, rising erect in the cerulean space above the dazzling frozen gauze of the clouds--boiling, radiant, motionless, terrible, silent, and clumped. He is by himself. No voice booms off his skull or plucks at his gown's sleeve. Rabbit dislikes being by himself. Will there be no one to guide him on a flight that has become less upward than stolidly out, expanding? No one to banter with? To hear his opinions, views? Would there be perhaps some way to get laid, maybe? If disembodied, is he unmanned? His idea of heaven is not wings' flutter or robes' flow. Rabbit's heaven, as ecumenical in its spirituality as Tertullian's hell, comprises an infinity of snatch. He rises, erect, meditative. Would there be vaginas where he was going, vaginas finally freed from the shrill silly vessels around them, bodiless, pungent, and rubicund, swaddled in angelic linen or straining plump around some Unitarian G-string? The odd breast or two, detached, obliging? Arabs saw heaven as for men, the accredited dead enjoying the spicy favors of black-eyed virgins for all eternity. Was it too late to convert? Would a lapsed Episcopalian who slapped the bottoms of ministers' wives stand a chance at bliss at the top of this rise? Rabbit asks of the airless blue: to Whom will he be held accountable? The well-dressed, sad-smelling God of the Springer's airless church? Some Catholic intercessor with an infant at her tit? Weedy, beaming Eastern gods with hookahs and pelican bellies? Some stem Dutch Reform personage with the black coat and pale dour face of a Hals oil?

And he begins to wonder, as he rises, weightless and squeezed into the navy blue dome, rising like a bubble in beer, less pushed by any pressure than drawn by pressure's absence, rising it seems to some surface where he fears he will, as in life, merely spread, refract light for a while, and disappear with a thin pop, what he will be held to answer for. How stood his accounts? Surely Whoever decided must make allowances for a character damned at conception to act out all America's narcissistic, grimly prurient drama. And surely Rabbit's balance sheet is written in two inks. The sun fills the cone of his upward sight, expands without heat. Surely each late afternoon a Hassy riding a squealing Mim on his handlebars canceled out an occasion on which he'd seen a woman and wondered how she would do instead of who she was. Surely his exasperated kindness toward Nelson the child appeared opposite such snafus as a dead Jill or the

briefest of just-once slips with a daughter-in-law who'd been asking for it for years. Only human, after all. Surely Rabbit is headed for a heaven he's never left.

Much bolstered, Rabbit is able to close his eyes; color blooms behind his lids. How sweet to see stars clotted around a lit sun. The stars bum bright and cold as lit ice, and as what is left of him leaves the rest behind, Rabbit sees the stars, and the stars behind the stars, coalesce into the image of a tree. The tree is a rood, and does not visually or metaphorically resemble any other tree, or any other thing, which for obvious reasons disturbs Rabbit a lot. But hung aloft the schematized branches, and subtending the light-spike roots like leafy brachts, hanging and sitting, like baubles, objects for Rabbit's observation and (though not connection) pleasure, is everyone he's ever known who died and rose: Mom, Pop, baby Becky in her tomb of gray water, Skeeter, Jill, old man Springer, Thelma with her rash-covered arms out, poor walleyed Peggy Gring, Mr. Abendroth the postman who went house to house like doctors used to, the obstetrician who'd yanked him from the infinity he dreamed of and spanked him awake, all the rest, more than anyone could ever count: shades: pale wisps of images, as yet insubstantial as lit gauze, as mist off a dawn Susquehanna. It's a solipsist's heaven, full of his own dead perceptions.

Here they all are, Rabbit's tree's decorations, crying out to the white animal who twists upward toward them in an erect bed, crying out to Rabbit to be resurrected, reseen, by He whose attention had made them. And Rabbit dispenses mercy, in a heaven he's never left, to these supplicant ghosts of his life's sight. Here they all are: minutely described. Each.

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PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER  
TRACY AUSTIN SERVES UP A BUBBLY LIFE STORY  
Aug 30, 1992

Reviewed by David Foster Wallace

BEYOND CENTER COURT  
My Story  
By Tracy Austin with Christine Brennan

William Morrow. 288 pp. \$20

I am a longtime rabid fan of tennis and life stories in general, and of Tracy Austin in particular. I've rarely looked forward to reading a new book I was supposed to criticize as I looked forward to *Beyond Center Court: My Story*. And I don't think I've ever felt as down and disillusioned and cheated by a book.

Here's Tracy Austin on the first set of her final against Chris Evert at the 1979 U.S. Open: "At 2-3, I broke Chris, then she broke me, and I broke her again, so we were at 4-4."

And Tracy Austin's epiphany after winning that final: "I immediately knew what I had done, which was to win the U.S. Open, and I was thrilled."

Tracy Austin on the psychic challenge of pro competition: "Every professional athlete has to be so fine-tuned mentally." Tracy Austin on her parents: "My mother and father never, ever pushed me."

On Robin Williams: "What an intelligent man."

Meditating on excellence: "There is that little bit extra that some of us are willing to give and some of us aren't. Why is that? I think it's the challenge to be the best."

I guess this breathtakingly insipid book has helped me understand why the whole genre of ghostwritten athletic bios is so disappointing. Uniformly rotten and yet ubiquitous, these sports memoirs sell because they seem to promise something more than the regular old name-dropping celebrity autobiography.

But these corporate-PR sports bios, chock-full of truisms, never deliver, and *Beyond Center Court: My Story* is especially appalling. It fails not just because it's poorly written, which it is. (I don't know what ghostwriting sportswriter Christine Brennan's enhancing function was supposed to be here, but I don't see how Austin herself could have done any worse than 200-plus deadening pages of "Tennis took me like a magic carpet to all kinds of places and all kinds of people," enlivened only by howlers like "Injuries - the signature of the rest of my career - were about to take hold of me.") It fails, too, because it manages to commit what any high school senior knows is the capital crime in expository prose: It forgets its audience.

Quite simply, the first loyalty of a successful autobiography has to be to the reader. Austin has allegiances aplenty in *Beyond Center Court*, but none are to the poor paying customer. This author's first loyalty seems to be to her family and friends. Whole pages are given over to retinal-numbing, Academy-Award-style tributes to parents, siblings, coaches, trainers and agents, plus glowing little burbles of praise for pretty much every athlete and celebrity she's ever encountered. Martina Navratilova:

"She is a wonderful person, very sensitive and caring"; Dick Enberg: "Dick is such a professional"; Liz Taylor: "She was exquisite"; ad nauseam.

Austin is also loyal in her service to her own public image, her endorsement-lucrative position as a media Role Model: "Even with all this early success, I still considered school more important than tennis"; "I have never, ever tried drugs of any kind, marijuana, anything."

There's also a weird loyalty here to the very biographic cliches by which we tend to mythologize sports stars. One such cliché-myth is of course that the person who's an extraordinary athlete on the field is really just plain folks off the field. *Beyond Center Court* devotes much of its space to showing that the off-the-court Tracy Austin was just a normal American teenager. The obvious problem is that, since normal American teenagers tend to be rather shallow and uninteresting creatures, we're flooded with data such as that Austin enjoyed watching television ("Charlie's Angels, Happy Days and Welcome Back Kotter, especially"), and that she got her braces removed at age 15 - "What a feeling!"

Sometimes her fondness for press-release-type truisms forces Austin to adopt an almost surreal narrative naivete. She protests with great energy that her tennis-fan mother never forced her into tennis at age 2, apparently never considering the fact that someone who's 2 doesn't have sufficient awareness of choices to require any sort of "forcing."

But the biggest reason *Beyond Center Court* is especially disappointing is that it could have been so much better than the average I-was-born-to-volley memoir.

The raw facts of Austin's life and rise and fall are almost classically tragic. She was the first of pro tennis' now-ubiquitous nymphet prodigies, and her rise was meteoric. Picked out of the crowd by coaching guru Vic Braden as a toddler, Austin was on the cover of *World Tennis* magazine at age 4. She played her first junior tournament at 7; by the time she was 10 she had won the national girls' 12-and-under championship both indoors and out, and was being invited to play public exhibitions. At 13, she had won national titles in most age groups, been drafted as a professional by World Team Tennis, and appeared on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* under the legend "A Star Is Born."

At 14, having chewed up every American female under 19, she entered the qualifiers for her first professional tournament, and won not only the qualifiers but the whole tournament, which is roughly equivalent to someone who's ineligible for a learner's permit winning the Indy 500. She played Wimbledon at 14, turned professional as a ninth grader, won the U.S. Open at 16, and was ranked No. 1 in the world at 17, in 1980, the same year her body started to fall apart.

She spent the next four years effectively crippled by injuries and bizarre accidents, playing sporadically and watching her ranking plummet, and was pretty much retired from tennis at age 21. Her only serious attempt at a real comeback, in 1989, ended on the way to the U.S. Open - literally on the way, driving to the stadium - when a van ran a light and nearly killed her.

The basic problem, of course, is that top athletes turn out not to be articulate about just those qualities and experiences that constitute their attraction and our compulsion. The basic question is why this fact is so bitterly disappointing. The answer might be that products like these PR-memoirs seem to promise precisely what they can't deliver: personal communicative access to an essentially public performative genius.

But U.S. audiences aren't stupid; we'd catch on after a while, and it wouldn't be so profitable for the publishers to keep churning these things out.

Maybe what keeps us obsessed and buying is the persistent desire both to experience genius in the concrete and to universalize genius in the abstract. And maybe our disappointment at the vacuousness of their memoirs is our own fault. Maybe the truth is that we wrongly expect geniuses in motion to be also geniuses in reflection, and their failure to be that is no more cruelly disillusioning than Eliot's inability to hit the curve ball or Kant's glass jaw.



## Hail the Returning Dragon, Clothed in New Fire

**Y**ou know this love story. A gallant knight espies a fair maiden in the distant window of a forbidding-type castle. Their eyes meet—smokily—across the withered heath. Instant chemistry. And so good Sir Knight comes tear-assing toward the castle, brandishing his lance. Can he just gallop up and carry the fair maiden off? Not quite. First he's got to get past the dragon, right? There's always a particularly nasty dragon guarding the castle, and the knight's always got to face and slay the dragon if there's to be any carrying off. But and so, like any loyal knight in the service of passion, the knight battles the dragon, all for the sake of the fair maiden. "Fair maiden" means "good-looking virgin," by the way. And so let's not be naive about what the knight's really fighting for. You can bet he's going to expect more than a breathy "My hero" from the maiden once that dragon's slain. In fact, the way the story always goes, good Sir Knight risks life and lance against the dragon not to "rescue" the good-looking virgin, but to "win" her. And any knight, from any era, can tell you what "win" means here.

Some of my own knightly friends see the specter of heterosexual AIDS

as nothing less than a sexual Armageddon—a violent end to the casual carnalopia of the last three decades. Some others, grim but more upbeat, regard HIV as a sort of test of our generation's sexual mettle; these guys now applaud their own casual sport-fucking as a kind of medical daredevilry that affirms the indomitability of the erotic spirit. I cite, e.g., an upbeat friend's recent letter on AIDS: "...So now nature had invented another impediment to human relations, and yet the romantic urge lives. It defies all efforts—human, moral, and viral—to extinguish it. And that's a wonderful thing. It is, in fact, possible to be encouraged by the human will to fuck, which persists despite all sorts of impediments. We shall overcome, so to speak."

Cavalier sentiments, etc. But I can't help thinking some of today's knights still underestimate both AIDS's dangers and its advantages. They fail to see that HIV could well be the salvation of sexuality in the 1990s. They don't see it, I think, because they tend to misread the eternal story of what erotic passion's all about.

The erotic will exists "despite impediments"? Let's go back to that knight and fair maiden exchanging lascivious looks. And here comes the knight, galloping castleward, mammoth lance at the ready. Except imagine this time that there is no danger, no dragon to fear, face, fight, slay. Imagine the knight's pursuit of the maiden is wholly unimpeded—there's no dragon; the castle's unlocked; the drawbridge even lowers automatically, like a suburban garage door. And here's the maiden inside, wearing a Victoria's Secret teddy and crooking her finger. Does anyone else here detect a shadow of disappointment in Sir Knight's face, a slight anticlimactic droop to his lance? Does this version of the story have anything like the other's passionate, erotic edge?

"The human will to fuck"? Any animal can fuck. But only humans can experience sexual passion, something wholly different from the biological urge to mate. And sexual passion's endured for millennia as a vital psychic force in human life—not despite impediments but because of them. Plain old coitus becomes erotically charged and spiritually potent at just those moments where impediments, conflicts, taboos and consequences lend it a double-edged character—meaningful sex is both an overcoming and a succumbing, a transcendence and a transgression, triumphant and terrible and ecstatic and sad. Turtles and gnats can mate, but only the human will can defy, transgress, overcome, love: Choose.

History-wise, both nature and culture have been ingenious at erecting impediments that give the choice of passion its price and value; religious proscriptions; penalty for adultery and divorce; chivalric chastity and courtly decorum; the stigma of illegitimate birth; chaperonage; madon-

na/whore complexes; syphilis; back-alley abortions; a set of "moral" codes that put sensuality on a taboo-level with defecation and apostasy... from the Victorians' dread of the body to early TV's one-foot-on-the-floor-at-all-times rule; from the automatic ruin of "fallen" women to back-seat ruses in which girlfriends struggled to deny boyfriends what they begged for in order to preserve their respect. Granted, from 1996's perspective, most of the old sexual dragons look stupid and cruel. But we need to realize that they had something big in their favor: as long as the dragons reigned, sex wasn't casual, not ever. Historically, human sexuality has been a deadly serious business—and the fiercer its dragons, the seriouser sex got; and the higher the price of choice, the higher the erotic voltage surrounding what people chose.

And then, what must have seemed suddenly, the dragons all keeled over and died. This was just around when I was born, the '60s "Revolution" in sexuality. Sci-fi type advances in prophylactics and anti-venereals, feminism as a political force, TV as institution, the rise of a culture of youth and its gland-intensive art and music, Civil Rights, rebellion as fashion, inhibition-killing drugs, the moral castration of churches and censors. Bikinis, miniskirts. "Free Love." The castle's doors weren't so much unlocked as blown off their hinges. Sex could finally be unconstrained, "Hang-Up"-free, just another appetite: casual. I was toothless and incontinent through most of the Revolution, but it must have seemed like instant paradise. For a while.

I was pre-conscious for the Revolution's big party, but I got to experience fully the hangover that followed—the erotic malaise of the '70s, as sex, divorced from most price and consequence, reached a kind of saturation-point in the culture—swinging couples and meat-market bars, hot tubs and EST, Hustler's gynecological spreads, *Charlie's Angels*, herpes, kiddie-porn, mood rings, teenage pregnancy, Plato's Retreat, disco. I remember *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* all too well, its grim account of the emptiness and self-loathing that a decade of rampant casual fucking had brought on. Looking back, I realize that I came of sexual age in a culture that was starting to miss the very dragons whose deaths had supposedly freed it.

If I've got this right, then the casual knights of my own bland generation might well come to regard AIDS as a blessing, a gift perhaps bestowed by nature to restore some critical balance, maybe summoned unconsciously out of the collective erotic despair of the post-'60s glut. Because the dragon is back, and clothed in a fire that can't be ignored.

I mean no offense. Nobody would claim that a lethal epidemic is a good thing. Nothing from nature is good or bad. Natural things just are; the only good and bad are people's various choices in the face of what is. But

our own history shows that—for whatever reasons—an erotically charged human existence requires impediments to passion, prices for choices. That hundreds of thousands of people are dying horribly of AIDS seems like a cruel and unfair price to pay for a new erotic impediment. But it's not obviously more unfair than the millions who have died of syphilis, incompetent abortions, and "crimes of passion," nor obviously more cruel than that people used routinely to have their lives wrecked by "falling," "fornicating," sinning, having "illegitimate" children, or getting trapped by inane religious codes in loveless and abusive marriages. At least it's not obvious to me.

There's a new dragon to face. But facing a dragon doesn't mean swaggering up to it unarmed and insulting its mom. And the erotic charge of hazard surrounding sex and HIV doesn't mean we can continue to engage in sport-fucking in the name of "courage" or romantic "will." In fact, 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. This has been what's "bad" about casual sex from the beginning: sex is never bad, but it's also never casual.

Our sexual recognition of what is can start with the conscientious use of protection as a gesture of love toward ourselves and our partners. But a deeper, far braver recognition of just what kind of dragon we're facing is now starting to take hold, and—far from Armageddon—is doing much to increase the erotic voltage of contemporary life. Thanks to AIDS, we're expanding our imaginations with respect to what is "sexual." Deep down, we all know that the real allure of sexuality has about as much to do with copulation as the appeal of food does with metabolic combustion. Trite though it (used to) sound, real sexuality is about our struggles to connect with one another, to erect bridges across the chasms that separate selves. Sexuality is, finally, about imagination. Thanks to brave people's recognition of AIDS as a fact of life, we are beginning to realize that highly charged sex can take place in all sorts of ways we'd forgotten or neglected—through non-genital touching, or over the phone, or via the mail; in a conversational nuance; in a body's posture, a certain pressure in a held hand. Sex can be everywhere we are, all the time. All we need to do is really face this dragon, yielding neither to hysterical terror nor to childish denial. In return, the dragon can help us relearn what it means to be truly sexual. This is not a small thing, or optional. Fire is lethal, but we need it. The key is how we come to fire. It's not just other people you have to respect. ■

## *Quo Vadis—Introduction*

David Foster Wallace

HI. I'VE NEVER REALLY edited anything before, but I'm the one who's edited this "Quo Vadis" number of *RCF*. This job involved sending out a letter about a year and a half ago inviting a number of writers and editors under c. forty-five to write whatever they wanted on the topic of where they thought literary art\* was heading in the next century. I'll spare you a reproduction of this letter. Plus the job involved interfacing with the Dalkey Archive Press people about whom to invite to contribute, and then reinterfacing with them when some of the original people on the list said no or said yes and then bailed out and then other people who hadn't been on the list heard about the list and thought maybe they'd like to write a Quo-Vadisish essay and were added to the list. The final list is about 50 percent Dalkey and 50 percent me. Then the job involved reading the essays as they came in and copyediting them—I'm a good copy editor, and this has been the only really comfortable part of the whole process as far as I'm concerned.

So here are twelve essays. If you flip one page back you can see for yourself who they're by. I won't try to sum up any of the essays or do some discursive thing about what the overall gist of the collective seems to be—the pieces themselves are mostly pretty discursive, and I don't feel like anybody wants to hear me discoursing about discursion. In a way, the essays already summarize themselves pretty well. Some of them are really dark. More than a few are pissed off about various things. Some of the essays are funny, and a couple have really pretty prose. Some take an attitude toward contemporary culture and government that I think is self-pitying and beetle-spirited. A couple of the essays are kind of inspiring. I find about three-quarters of them interesting, finally.

I have observed in myself a kind of sine-wavelike cycle of interest and boredom and interest in riding herd on a project like this. In a way it's sort of like my cycle of feelings about religion. To me, religion is incredibly fascinating as a general abstract object of thought—it might be the most interesting thing there is. But when it gets to the point of trying to communicate specific or persuasive stuff about religion, I find I always get frustrated and bored. I think this is because the stuff that's truly interesting

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\*(literary art in general, or literary art in relation to culture, or all of these, or none)

about religion is inarticulable.\*\* Plus the truth is that there's nothing about it I really *know*, and nothing about it that anybody, I don't think, really *knows*; and so when I hear some person try to articulate or persuade me of some specific point about religious stuff I find myself looking at my watch or shifting my feet, immediately and deeply bored. But—each time—this boredom always lasts exactly as long as it takes me to realize that what this person who's trying to talk about religion is really talking about is herself. This happens each time. I'm glazed and scanning for the exit until I get the real gist: though these heartfelt utterances present themselves as assuasive or argumentative, what they really are are—truly, deeply—*expressive*—*expressive* of a self's heart's special tangle, of a knowing and verbal self's particular tortured relation to what is unknow- and -sayable. Then it gets interesting again.

I know that each of the contributors to this number of *RCF* has a deep-felt stake in literary art and its future. I also know that not one of them is "right" in any argumentative or predictive sense.\*\*\* Nobody knows where anything important is going, really. And the deeper the stake a writer has in something, I think, the less reliable a diagnostician or forecaster she's going to be. But I think this is OK. I myself ended up reading these essays more like diary entries than anything else—the only real object of revelation is the writers themselves. I suppose this is S.O.P. for all essays, in a way.

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\*\* (Which of course paradoxically is a big part of what makes it so interesting, so it all gets really tangled.)

\*\*\* (I think Jon Franzen's very, very close to being right, but this is because he and I are friends, and sort of rivals, and we argue about all this stuff, and from the way I read his piece here it seems to me that I've won and convinced him I'm right, so in general I'm just real pleased with Jon's essay.)

# DEMOCRACY AND COMMERCE AT THE U.S. OPEN

By DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

Our correspondent labored on Labor Day weekend at last year's U.S. Open: He noted--and footnoted--beauty on court and rampant free enterprise everywhere else

Right now it's 1530h. on 3 September, the Sunday of Labor Day Weekend, the holiday that's come to represent the American summer's right bracket. But L.D.W. always falls in the middle of the U.S. Open;<sup>1</sup> it's the time of the third and fourth rounds, the tournament's meat, the time of trench warfare and polysyllabic names. Right now, in the National Tennis Center's special Stadium--a towering hexagon<sup>2</sup> whose N, S, E, and W sides have exterior banners saying "WELCOME TO THE 1995 U.S. OPEN--A USTA Event"--right now a whole inland sea of sunglasses and hats in the Stadium is rising to applaud as Pete Sampras and the Australian Mark Philippoussis are coming out on court, as scheduled, to labor. The two are coming out with their big bright athletic bags and their grim-looking Security escorts. The applause-acoustics are deafening. From down here near the court, looking up, the Stadium looks to be shaped like a huge wedding cake, and once past the gentler foothills of the box seats the aluminum stands seem to rise away on all sides almost vertically, so vertiginously steep that a misstep on any of the upper stairs looks like it would be certain and hideous death. The umpire sits in what looks like a lifeguard chair with little metal stirrups out front for his shoes,<sup>3</sup> wearing a headset-mike and Ray-Bans and holding what's either a clipboard or a laptop. The DecoTurf court is a rectangle of off-green marked out by the well-known configuration of very white lines inside a bigger rectangle of off-green; and as the players cross the whole thing E-W to their canvas chairs, photographers and cameramen converge and cluster on them like flies clustering on what flies like--the players ignore them in the way that only people who are very used to cameras can ignore cameras. The crowd is still up and applauding, a pastel mass of 20,000+. A woman in a floppy straw hat three seats over from me is talking on a cellular phone; the man next to her is trying to applaud while holding a box of popcorn and is losing a lot of popcorn over the box's starboard side. The scoreboards up over the Stadium's N and S rims are flashing pointillist-neon ads for Evian water. Sampras, poor-postured and chestless, smiling shyly at the ground, his powder-blue shorts swimming down around his knees, looks a little like a kid wearing his

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<sup>1</sup>"A USTA Event."

<sup>2</sup>Actually, if you count the Grandstand Court's annex, the whole thing looks more like an ablated head w/ neck-stump.

<sup>3</sup>There's always something extremely delicate and precarious and vulnerable-looking about the umpire's shoes projecting out over the court from a height in little metal stirrups--the blend of authority and precarious vulnerability is just one of the things that makes an umpire such a compelling part of the whole show.

father's clothes.<sup>4</sup> Philippoussis, who chronologically really is a kid, is 6'4" and 200+ and is crossing the court with the pigeon-toed gait of a large man who's trying not to lumber, wearing the red-and-white candy-stripe Fila shirt so many of the younger Australians favor. The PM sun is overhead to the W-SW in a sky with air so clear you can almost hear the sun combusting, and the tiny heads of the spectators way up at the top of the W bleachers are close enough to the sun's round bottom to look to be almost on fire. The players dump their long bags and begin to root through them. Their racquets are in plastic they have to unwrap. They sit in their little chairs hitting racquet faces together and cocking their heads to listen for pitch. The cameramen around them disperse at the umpire's command, some trailing snakes of cord. Ball boys take crumpled bits of racquet plastic from under the players' chairs.

A lady making her way in that sideways-processional way past seats in the row right beneath me wears a shirt advising all onlookers that they ought to Play Hard because Life Is Short. The man on her arm wears a (too-large) designer T-shirt decorated with images of U.S. currency. A firm/pleasant usher stops them halfway across the row to check their tickets. 1,500 citizens of the borough of Queens are employed at the Open today. Weekend labor. The ushers are at their fat chains stretched across the Stadium tunnels, all wearing chinos and but-ton-down shirts. The Security guys (all large and male, not a neck or a smile in sight) wear lemon-yellow knit shirts that do not flatter their guts. Chewing gum seems to be part of Security's issued equipment. The ball boys<sup>5</sup> are in blue-and-white Fila, while the line judges and umpires are in (Fila) shirts of vertical red-black stripes that make them look like very hip major-sport refs. The Stadium's capacity is supposedly 20,000 and there are at least 23,000 people here, mostly to see Pete. If there were rafters people would be hanging from them, and I will be shocked if there isn't some major screaming fall-down-the-steps- or topple-backwards-over-the-rim-of-the-wall-type disaster before the match is done. The crowd down here near the court is for the most part adult-looking, businessish--in the Box Seats and pricey lower stands are neckties, sockless loafers, natty slacks, sweaters w/ arms tied across chests, straw boaters, L.L. Bean fishing hats, white caps with corporate names, jewelled bandeaux, high heels and resplendent feminine sunhats--with a certain very gradual casualizing as the fashion-eye travels up (and up) past the progressively cheaper seats, until the vertiginous top sections of the bleachers feature a NYC sporting event's more typical fishnet shirts and beer hats and coolers and makeshift spittoons, halter tops and fluorescent nail polish and rubber thongs, w/ attendant coarse NYC-crowd noises sometimes

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<sup>4</sup>The tentish tops and near-Bermuda-length shorts of M. Jordan and the NBA have clearly infiltrated tennis. Nearly half the men in the 128 draw are wearing clothes that seem several sizes too big, and on players as fundamentally skinny and woebegone-looking as Sampras the effect is more waifish than stylish--though I have to say that weirdly oversized clothes aren't near the visual disaster that Agassi's new clunky black sneakers (also imported from basketball fashion) are.

<sup>5</sup>(looking more like hall grad students, here, actually--several have earrings and leg hair, and one on the S side's got a big ginger beard)

drifting down from way up high overhead.<sup>6</sup> But apparently over 50% of tickets for this year's Open were pre-sold to corporations, who like to use them for the cultivation of clients and the entertainment of their own executives, and there is indeed about the Stadium crowd down here something indefinable that strongly suggests Connecticut license plates and very green lawns. In sum, the socioeconomic aura here for the day's headline match is one of management rather than labor.

The players' umbrellas and chairs and big EVIAN-labeled barrels of drinks are on either side of the umpire's chair at the base of the Stadium's western cliff face, in a long thin patch of shade that ripples when the heads of the people way overhead move, and it's cool in that shade--it's cool for me, as well, in the shade of the very large man next to me, who's wearing a gorgeous blue cord three-piecer and what seems to be a kind of huge sombrero--but the sunlight is summery, the sun (as mentioned) explosive, seeming to swell as it lowers, at 1535h. positioned about 40 degrees above the Stadium's W battlements; and the Grandstand Court, attached to the Stadium's E flank, is knife-sliced by the well-known PM Grandstand shadow that Jim Courier is even now using to vivisect Kenneth Carlsen in full view of diners at Racquets (the impossible-to-get-into glass restaurant built into the wall that separates the Grandstand's W flank from the Stadium's E) and the 6,000+ crowd in there, a lot of whose nationalistic whistles and applause intrude into the Stadium's sonic fold and lend a kind of surreally incongruous soundtrack to Sampras's and Philippoussis's exchanges as they warm up. Sampras is hitting with the casual economy that all the really top pros seem to warm up with, the serene nonchalance of a creature at the very top of the food chain. The Wimbledon champion's presence aside, this third-rounder has a particular romance about it because it features two Greeks neither of whom are in fact from Greece, a kind of postmodern Peloponnesian War. Philippoussis, just 18, Patrick Rafter's doubles partner, ranked in the top 100 in this his first year on tour, potential superstar and actual heartthrob,<sup>7</sup> resembles Sampras, somewhat--same one-handed backhand and slight loop on the forehand's backswing, same cafe-au-lait coloring and Groucho eyebrows and very black hair that gets glossy with sweat--but the Australian is slower afoot, and in contrast to Sampras's weird boneless grace he looks almost awkward, perilously large, his shoulders square the way heavy guys with bad backs' shoulders are square. Plus he seems to have aggression-issues that need resolving: He's hitting the ball as hard as he can even in warm-up. He seems brutish, Philippoussis does,

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<sup>6</sup>The Open's crowds, I know, are legendary for being loud and vulgar and generally psycho, but I've got to say that most of the audiences for most of L.D.W.'s matches seem like people you'd be proud to take home and introduce to the folks. The odd hit of audible nastiness does sometimes issue from way up top in the Stadium's bleachers, but then usually only when there's been some flagrant injustice.

<sup>7</sup>Females in the crowds of this year's Australian Open apparently screamed and fainted and made with Beatlemania-like histrionics whenever Rafter or Philippoussis appeared, and it's true that on the court they are both extremely handsome guys; but it's also true that Mark Philippoussis, close up, looks amazingly like Gaby Sabatini--I mean amazingly, right down to the walk and the jawline and the existentially affronted facial expression.

Spartan, a big slow mechanical power-baseliner<sup>8</sup> with chilly malice in his eyes; and against him, Sampras, who is not exactly a moonballer, seems almost frail, cerebral, a poet, both wise and sad, tired the way only democracies get tired, his expression freighted with the same odd post-Wimbledon melancholy that's dogged him all summer through Montreal, Cincinnati, etc. Thomas Enqvist's epic 2-6, 6-2, 4-6, 6-3, 7-6 first-rounder against Rios and Agassi's second-round squeaker against Corretja notwithstanding, it's tempting to see this upcoming match as the climax of the Open so far: two ethnically agnate and archetypally distinct foes, an opposition not just of styles of play but of fundamental orientations toward life, imagination, the uses of power . . . plus of course economic interests.

Covering the four walls down around the Stadium Court is a kind of tarp, chlorine-blue,<sup>9</sup> and on it, surrounding the court, are the white proper nouns FUJI-FILM, REDBOOK MAGAZINE, MASSMUTUAL, U.S. OPEN '95--A USTA Event, CAFE de COLOMBIA (complete w/a dotted white outline of Juan Valdez and devoted burro), INFINITI, TAMPAX, and so on.<sup>10</sup> Professional tennis always gets called an international sport, but it would be more accurate to call it a multinational sport: Fiscally speaking, it exists largely as a marketing subdivision of very large corporations, and not merely of the huge Tour-underwriting conglomerates like IBM and Corel.

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<sup>8</sup>The Open's slow DecoTurf, which various rumors allege has had some kind of extra abrasive mixed in to make it even slower, favors the power-baseline game of Agassi, Courier et al.--even netophiles like Edberg and Krajicek have been staying back and whaling through the first two rounds.

<sup>9</sup>The Open's administration is smart about providing the right visual backdrop for world-class play. The Stadium Court at the du Maurier Ltd. in Montreal this July had yellow bleachers at the north end that, according to players, made it tough to track balls coming from that end, whereas the N.T.C.'s Stadium's got blue tarps and white chairs and gray chairs, and even the bleachers are high-contrast red--there's nothing even close to the YG part of the spectrum unless you count the pale-yellow shirts of the Security guys who stand court-side with the crossed arms and beady eyes of Secret Servicemen.

<sup>10</sup>The tarp ads around pro tennis courts function like ads on subways, I think. Ads on subways exploit the fact that subway rides present both a lot of mental downtime and a problem with what to look at--the windows are mostly dark, and looking directly at other people on the subway is an action that the looker can interpret in a number of ways, some of which are uncomfortable or even hazardous--and the ads up over the windows are someplace neutral and advertising to rest the eye, and so they usually get a lot of attention. And tennis is also full of down-time--periods between points, changeovers between odd games--where the eye needs diverting. Plus, during play, the tarp acts as the immediate visual background to the players, and the eyes and cameras always follow the players--including TV--so that having your company's name hovering behind Sampras as the camera tracks him is a way both to get serious visual exposure for your company and to have that name associated, even on a subliminal level, with Sampras and tennis and excellence in general, etc. It all seems tremendously sophisticated and shrewd, psychologically speaking.

The hard core of most professional players' earnings comes from product endorsement. Absolutely every venue and piece of equipment associated with pro events has some kind of ad on it. Even the official names of most pro tournaments are those of companies that have bid to be a "title sponsor": The Canadian Open this year was the "du Maurier Ltd. Open" (for a Canadian cigarette company), Munich was the "BMW Open," New Haven was the "Volvo International" (in '96 it's to be the "Pilot Pen International"), Cincinnati the "Thriftway ATP Championship," and so on. The U.S. Open,<sup>11</sup> being a Slam and a national championship, doesn't have a title sponsor like Munich or Montreal; but instead of decommercializing the event, the tournament's Slam-status just makes the number of different commercial subsidizations more dizzying. The Open has an official sponsor not just for the tournament but for each of the tournament's various individual events: Infiniti sponsors the Men's Singles, Redbook the Women's Singles, MassMutual the Junior Boys, and so on.<sup>12</sup>

Now the umpire has ordered Play and Sampras is getting ready to serve, lifting the toe of his front foot on the toss's upswing in that distinctive way he has. I've never gotten to see Sampras play live before, and he's far more beautiful an athlete than he appears to be on TV. He's not particularly tall or muscley, but his serve is near-Wagnerian in its effect, and from this close up you can see that it's because Sampras has got some magic blend of flexibility and timing that lets him release his whole back and trunk into the serve--his whole body can snap the way normally just a wrist can snap--and that this has something to do with the hunched, coiled way he starts his service motion, lifting just the toe of his front foot and sighting over the racquet like a man with a crossbow, a set of motions that looks ticcy and eccentric on TV but in person makes his whole body look like one big length of muscle, a kind of angry eel getting ready to writhe. Philippoussis, who likes between points to dance a little in place, awaits service without facial affect. His headband matches his candy-stripe shirt. The scoreboards' displays are now set for

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<sup>11</sup>See FN1 again--the strong sense I got was that you are never to say "The U.S. Open" in any kind of public way without also saying "A USTA Event." Let's let the USTA's promotional appendix be implicit from now on; I don't feel like saying it over and over. The USTA gets something like 75% of its yearly operating revenues from the U.S. Open, and it's probably understandable that it would want to attach its name like a remora to the tournament's flank, but the constant imposition of "A USTA Event" all over the place got a little tiresome, I found, overtaxing the way relentless self-promotion is overtaxing, and I got a kind of unkind thrill out by the Main Gate's turnstiles when so many people coming in for the evening session of matches pointed up at the big sign over the Main Gate and asked each other what the hell "USTA" was, making it rhyme with a Boston pronunciation of "buster" or "Custer."

<sup>12</sup>The names of all the various sponsors are on a big (very big) blue board just inside the National Tennis Center's Main Gate, with the bigger events' "presenting sponsors" on the left in huge caps, and in smaller caps on the right the names of pres. spons. of smaller events--Men's 35s Doubles, Mixed Doubles Masters--as well as other sponsors whose role is unclear beyond having paid a fee to sell concessions where appropriate and/or to have a PR booth on the grounds and a venue to call their own inside the Corporate Hospitality Areas (plus of course having their name on the v.b. blue board).

keeping score instead of flashing ads. Philippoussis's name eats up a large horizontal section of each board. The wall between Stadium and Grandstand (so on our E) is topped by the press box, which runs along the wall's whole length and basically looks like the world's largest mobile home, all its windows' tinted shades now pulled against the PM sun. Three points have now yielded an ace, a service-return winner, and a long rally that ends when Philippoussis comes in on an approach that's not quite in the exact backhand corner and Sampras hits an incredibly top-heavy short angle past him into the ad service court. The fierceness of Sampras's backhand is something else that TV doesn't communicate well, his racquet-head control more like that of one of those stocky clay-courtiers with forearms like joints of mutton, the top-spin so heavy it distorts the ball's shape as the pass dips like a dropped thing. The malevolent but cyborgian Philippoussis hasn't betrayed anything like an actual facial expression yet. He also doesn't seem to perspire.<sup>13</sup> Two older guys in the row right behind me are exhorting Sampras in low tones, addressing him as "Petey," and I can't help thinking they're friends of the family or something. And propped up over the press box--so at about the height of a radio station's aerial--is the 1995 U.S. Open's own ad for itself. It's an enormous pointillist pastel print of an N.T.C. Stadium's crowd around an outsized court, the perspective weirdly foreshortened, and then with the well-known Manhattan skyline ballooning in the immediate background in a way it decidedly does not in the real Flushing, Queens; and then above and beyond the billboard is the big zucchini of the Fuji Inc. blimp floating slowly against the cerulean of far and away the best summer sky I have ever seen around New York City. Not only is the '95 Open's L.D.W. air unhumid and in the 80s, the sunshine astringent and the breeze feathery and the sky the overvid blue of a colorized film, but the sky's air is clean, the air smells fine and keen and sweet the way line-dried laundry smells, the result not only of a month without rain but also this weekend of a freak high-pressure front that's spiraled SW out of Nova Scotia's upper air and is blowing the oxides and odors that are NYC's deserved own out over New Jersey. The Stadium's bowl of air gets finer and keener the higher up in the stands you go, until, standing on top of somebody's smuggled Michelob cooler in the top row of bleachers<sup>14</sup> and peering over the wall due E past the edge of the press box, looking down

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<sup>13</sup>Another sort of endearing thing about Sampras is the way he always sweats through his baby-blue shorts in an embarrassing way that suggests incontinence and lets the world see just where his athletic supporter's straps are. This even TV's crude pictures can capture, and I think I like it so much because it humanizes Sampras and lets me identify with him in a way that the sheer preternatural beauty of his game does not. For me similar humanizing foibles in transcendent players were McEnroe's irrational fits of pique, Lendl and Navratilova's habit of every once in a while getting so nervous and choking so badly on a point that they looked almost spastic and the ball would actually hit the ground before it reached the net, and Connors's compulsive on-court touching and adjustment of his testes within his jock, as if he needed to know just where they were at all times.

<sup>14</sup>Ascending in the Stadium goes like this: past 10 rows of dark-blue seats--actual plastic chairs, the Box Seats--then 15 rows of light-blue seats, then 18 of noticeably less comfortable gray, molded-plastic seats, then (the steps by now so steep they feel the way staircases feel to a small child) uncountable rows of plain red bleachers, the land of backwards Mets caps and tattoos and hightop sneakers w/ laces untied, the thick honk of Brooklyn accents, a great mass

over the big sign that says you can see them, Them, coming, an enormous serpentine mass, the crowd, still at 1615h. coming, what looks from this distance like everybody in the city who hasn't retreated to the Hamptons for the long summer weekend. The U.S. Open is a big deal for NYC. Mayor Dinkins is gone--the Dinkins who used to reroute landing patterns at LaGuardia just for the Open--but even under Rudy Giuliani, for a fortnight a city that ordinarily couldn't give two chomps of its gum for a sport as patricianly non-contact as tennis is into the game in a very big way. 30-year-old arbitrageurs in nonrented tuxes at the Bowery Bar dissect matches and speculate on how Seles's hiatus from the game will affect her endorsement contracts now that she's back. Croatian doormen bemoan Ivanisevic's early departure. On the subway, a set of tough chicks in leather and fluorescent hair concur that even though Graf and Seles and that Spanish what's-her-face with the hymen<sup>15</sup> in her name might rule let's don't for a second count out the U.S.'s Zina G. who this is her swan-song before, like, the bow-out. Or e.g., Friday, 1 September, the day after Agassi's five-set comeback against Corretja, a Lebanese driver on the Grey Line bus in from LaGuardia and a cigar-chewing old passenger he doesn't know from Adam bond over their shared assessments of Agassi's rehabilitation as a man:

"It is like he used to be brat, arrogant--you know what I am saying?"

"He grew up. Now he's got balls."

"Last night, this was a great game he played. This is what I am saying."

"He used to just be this hairball. Now he's grown up. Now he's a person."<sup>16</sup>

But so they're coming, 40,000 yesterday and 41,000 today, ready to shell out \$25-\$30 for a ticket if they can even get one.<sup>17</sup> They come by infernal and Stygian IRT subway out to the end of the #7 line, the Shea-Willets stop. They converge on NE Queens via the Van Wyck and L.I. and

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clicking of empty breeze-blown Liquor Bar cups on the cement of the bleachers' aisles . . . it's a climb during which the ears actually pop and the O2 gets thin and the perspective on the court below becomes horrific, like a skyscraper's, the players looking insectile and the crowd moving and heaving in a nauseous way that makes the place's whole structure seem slightly to heave and sway.

<sup>15</sup>(sic--no kidding)

<sup>16</sup>Agassi's new cybercrewcut, black sneakers, and weird new French-Resistance-fighter-style shirts have, at this year's Open, made him way more popular with male fans and only slightly less fascinatingly sexy for female fans. (Agassi's sex-symbolism's a phenomenon of deep mystery to most of the males I know, since we agree that we can all see clearly that Agassi's actually a runty, squishy-faced guy with a weird-shaped skull [which the crewcut's now made even more conspicuous] and the tiny-strided pigeon-toed walk of a schoolkid whose underwear's ridden up; and it remains completely inexplicable to us, Agassi's pull and hold on women.)

<sup>17</sup>The National Tennis Center Box Office opens at 1000h., and people start lining up as early as 0600 hoping to get one of the day's Grounds Passes, and the various incentives and dramas in this AM line of street-savvy New Yorkers are a whole other story in themselves.

Whitestone Expressways, the Interborough, the Grand Central Parkway, the Cross Bay, bringing much ready cash and whatever religious medals apply to parking spaces. City dwellers navigate by limo, cab or bus the empty canyons of L.D.W.'s Manhattan, bound for 36th St. and the Tunnel or 59th and the Queensborough Bridge, then travel forever up Northern Boulevard, bringing coolers and blankets and racquets and butt-cushions with GIANTS and JETS on them and sunscreen and souvenir hats from last year's Open, up Northern Blvd. under circling air traffic until the landmarks start emerging--the squat neutron-blue ring of nearby Shea Stadium; the huge steel armillary sphere and Tinkertoy-shaped tower of the '39 World's Fairgrounds that adjoin the National Tennis Center in Flushing Meadow Corona Park.<sup>18</sup>

The N.T.C.'s Main Gate is on the grounds' NE side, connected to the #7 train's subway stop and parking lots by a broad concrete promenade that leads from the commuter stations S past Park Rangers' offices and a couple of big open communitarian circles--the kind of open urban venues that look like they ought to have spurting fountains in the center, though these don't--with green benches and complex skateboarding and vigorous sinister underground commerce. At some point the promenade curves sharply W so that the Open's moving crowds pass within sight of rampant picnicking and soccer in F.M.C. Park (the "Meadow" part, apparently); then the walk-way's final blacktop straightaway's enclosed by high fences topped with flags of all nations as you head for the parallel lines for actual entry at the tournament's Main Gate, the Gate's own tall fencing black iron and almost mediievally secure-looking and itself topped only by good old U.S. flags, with the Open's/USTA's familiar greeting and self-assertion in bright brave 160-point caps on a banner hanging over the turnstiles, of which turnstiles there are six total but never more than three in actual operation. The turnstiles are only for those who already have tickets<sup>19</sup>--the East-Bloc-length line for AM tickets at the Box Office evaporates every day by around 1100h., when stern megaphones announce the day's sellout.

Besides the Stadium/Grandstand, there are three other N.T.C. "Show Courts," i.e., courts with serious bleachers. At 1640h., Court 16 is running men's doubles with Eltingh-Haarhuis, the world's #1 team, and its little wedge of aluminum stands isn't even full. American tennis crowds seem decisively singles-oriented. Court 17 has Korda and Kulti against the Mad Bahamian Mark Knowles and his 1995 partner Daniel Nestor, the Canadian who's fun to watch because he looks

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<sup>18</sup>This is the actual name of the park that the USTA's National Tennis Center is in, a name almost perfect in its unconscious capture of NE Queens's summertime essence, connoting as it does equal parts urban sewage, suburban pastora, and bludgeoning sun.

<sup>19</sup>Scalpers are asking and getting \$125 for a Grounds Pass and (in at least one case) twice that for an 11th-row Stadium seat for the afternoon's matches. The last straightaway of the walkway to the Gate has its healthy share of scalpers making their elliptical pitches from the grassy edge, but (weirdly) there are just as many furtive-looking parties standing at the edges asking loudly whether anyone passing by has an extra ticket for sale, or would like perhaps to sell their own, as there are scalpers. The scalpers and weird people asking to be scalped seem not even to notice one another, all of them calling softly at once, and this makes the last pre-Gate stretch of the promenade kind of surreally sad, a study in missed connection.

so much like an anorectic Mick Jagger. Court 18 has women's doubles with four players whose names I don't recognize and exactly 31 people in the stands. (All four of the females on 18 have bigger forearms than I do.) Natasha Zvereva, looking incomplete without Gigi, is warming up against Amy Frazier in the Grandstand. In the Stadium, Philippoussis and Sampras have split the first two sets, 6 and 5. What a big match sounds like outside the Stadium is brief strut-rattling explosions of applause and whistles and then the odd flat amplification of the umpire speaking into the abrupt silence his speaking has created. Daniel Nestor's last name, while also Hellenistic, is Homeric,<sup>20</sup> thus allusive to a wartime way before Athens v. Sparta. The fact that Sampras has won so many Grand Slam titles may have a lot to do with the fact that Slams' males' matches are the best-of-five sets. Best-of-fives require not just physical endurance but a special kind of emotional flexibility: in best-of-fives you can't play with full-bore intensity the whole time; you have to know when to kind of turn it on and when to lay back and conserve your psychic resources.<sup>21</sup> Philippoussis won the tie-break of a first set in which you got the impression that Sampras was sort of adjusting the idle on his game, trying to find the exact level he needed to reach. The suspense of the match isn't so much whether Sampras will win but how hard he'll have to play and how long it'll take him to find this out. Philippoussis hits very hard but has no imagination and even less flexibility. He's like a machine with just one gear: Unless forced out of his rhythm by a wide-angle shot, he moves exclusively in forward-backward vectors. Sampras, on the other hand, seems to float like dander all over the court.<sup>22</sup> Philippoussis is like a great and terrible land army; Sampras is more naval, more of the drift-and-encircle school. Philippoussis is oligarchic: He has a will and seeks to impose it. Sampras is more democratic, i.e., more chaotic but also more human: His real job seems to be figuring out what his will exactly is. Not a lot of people remember that Athens actually lost the Peloponnesian War--it took 30 years, but Sparta finally ground them down. Nor do most people know that Athens in fact started the whole bloody thing in the first place by picking on maritime allies of Sparta who were cutting into Athens's sea trade. Athens's clean-cut nice-guy image is a bit overdone--the whole exhausting affair was about commerce right from the beginning.

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<sup>20</sup>(wise king of Pylos and all that)

<sup>21</sup>In 1979 I once played two best-of-five matches in one day in a weird non-USTA junior thing in suburban Chicago, and one match went five sets and the other four, and even though I was just 17 I walked like a very old man for days afterward. And since emotional flexibility is almost impossible for a jr., I remember noticing that all of us who'd played 3/5's left the site looking utterly wrung-out emotionally, hollow-eyed, with the 1,000-yard stare of pogrom-survivors. I've had a special empathic compassion for male players in Slam events ever since, when I watch.

<sup>22</sup>Sampras has a way of making it look like he hits a shot and dematerializes and then rematerializes someplace else in perfect position for the next shot. I have no theories about how he does this. Ken Rosewall is the only other male player in my memory who could seem to flicker in and out of existence like this. (Evyonne Goolagong could do it, too, but not consistently.)

What's fun about having a U.S. Open '95 Media Pass is that you can go in and out of the Main Gate as often as you want. For paying customers there's no such luck: a sign by the turnstiles says ALL EXITS FINAL with multiple exclamation points. And the lines for entry at the three active turnstiles resemble those grim photos of trampling crowds at Third World soccer matches. Wizenized little old men are paid by the tournament to stand by the turnstiles and take people's tickets--the same sort of wizenized little old men you see at sporting-event turnstiles everywhere, the kind who always look like they should be wearing Shriners hats. Going through one turnstile right now at 1738h. is a handsome bald black man in an extremely snazzy Dries Van Noten camelhair suit. Pushing hip-first through the next turnstile<sup>23</sup> is a woman in an electric-blue pantsuit of either silk or really good rayon. At the third active turnstile, a young foreignish-looking guy in an expensive flannel shirt w/ Ray-Bans and a cellular phone is in an argument with the turnstile's ticket-taker. The guy is claiming that he bought tickets for 9/3 but has mistakenly left them at home in Rye and will be damned if he is going to be forced by a minimum-wage little wizenized ticket-taker into going all the way back to Rye to get them and then coming all the way back down here. He has his cellular phone in his hand, leaning over the ticket-taker: Surely, he insists, there's some way to verify his ticket-holding status without his going and coming all the way back to produce the actual stupid cardboard rectangles themselves. The ticket-taker, in a blue suit that makes him look a bit like a train's conductor, is shaking his gnarled little head and has his arms raised in that simultaneously helpless but firm gesture of Can't Help You, Mac. The young man in flannel from Rye keeps flipping his cellular open and starting to dial it in a menacing way, as if threatening to get the ticket-taker in Dutch with some shadowy figures from the Open's Olympian management heights; but the stolid little attendant's resolve stays firm, his face stony and his arms raised,<sup>24</sup> until crowd pressure from customers at

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<sup>23</sup>NYC being one of the most turnstile-intensive cities in the world, New Yorkers push through turnstiles with the same sort of elegantly casual elan that really top players evince when warming up.

<sup>24</sup>This ticket-taker, who emerged as without a doubt my favorite character at the whole '95 Open, agreed to a brief interview but wanted his name withheld--the tournament apparently really does have shadowy Olympian upper-management figures whose wrath the employees fear. This ticket-taker is 61, has worked the "stiles" (as he calls them) at every U.S. Open since Ashe's stirring five-set defeats of both Graebner and Okker at Forest Hills in '68, thinks the Flushing Meadow N.T.C. inferior in every conceivable respect to good old Forest Hills, claims that the new half-built Stadium looming over the southern horizon is grotesque and pointless since its size will place the cheap seats at the very outer limits of human eyesight and a match seen from there will look like something seen from an incoming Boeing, plus that the new Stadium's been a boon-doggle from the get-go and is lousy with corruption and malfeasance and general administrative rot the guy is incredibly articulate and anecdotal and downright moving in his fierce attachment to a game he apparently has never once personally played, and he definitely in my opinion deserves a whole separate TENNIS magazine profile next year. His stint at the Open each year is his two-week vacation from his regular job as a toll-taker at the infamous Throgs Neck Bridge between Queens and the southern Bronx, which fact may account for his flinty resolve in the face of intimidating tactics like somebody brandishing a cellular phone at him.

the flannel man's rear and flank force him to withdraw the field.

The first thing you see when you come inside the Main Gate is teams of extremely attractive young people giving away free foil packets of Colombian Coffee from big plastic barrels with outlines of Juan Valdez & devoted burro on them. The young people, none of whom are of Colombian extraction, are cheery and outgoing but don't seem to be terribly alert, because they keep giving me new free samples every time I go out and then come in again, so that my bookbag is now stuffed with them and I'm not going to have to buy coffee for months. The next thing you see is a barker on a raised dais urging you to purchase a Daily Drawsheet for \$2.00<sup>25</sup> and a Program+Drawsheet for a bargain \$8.00. Right near the barker is a gorgeous spanking-new Infiniti automobile on a complicated stand that places the car at a kind of dramatic plunging angle. It's not clear what the relation between a fine new automobile and professional tennis is supposed to be, but the visual conjunction of car and plunging angle is extremely impressive and compelling, and there's always a dense ring of spectators around the Infiniti, looking at it but not touching it. Then, over the Daily Drawsheet pitchman's right shoulder and situated suspiciously close to the Advance Ticket Window, is what has to be one of the largest free-standing autotellers in the Western world, with its own shade-awning and three separate cash stations with controls of NASA-like sophistication and complexity and enormous signs that say the autoteller's provided through the generosity of CHASE and that it is equipped to disgorge cash via the NYCE, PLUS, VISA, CIRRUS and MASTERCARD networks of auto-withdrawal. The lines for the autoteller are so long that they braid complexly into the lines for the nearest concession stands. These concession stands seem to have undergone a kind of metastasis since the year before: They now are absolutely everywhere on the N.T.C. grounds. One strongly suspects that the inside story, on how a concession at the U.S. Open is acquired would turn out to involve levels of intrigue and gamesmanship that make the tournament's on-court dramas look pallid, because it's clear that the really serious separation of spectator from his cash takes place at the N.T.C.'s concession venues, all of which are doing business on the sort of scale enjoyed by coastal grocery and hardware stores during a Hurricane Warning. The free-standing little umbrella'd venues for Evian and Haagen-Dazs are small potatoes: There are entire miniature strip-malls of refreshment stands gauntletting almost every sidewalk and walkway and easement on the grounds--even the annular ground-level tunnel of the Stadium/Grandstand--offering sodapop for \$2.50-\$3.50, \$3.00 water, \$3.00 little paper troughs of nachos or crosshatched disk-shaped French fries whose oil immediately soaks through the trough, \$3.50 beer, \$2.50

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<sup>25</sup>The Daily Drawsheet has the distinction of being the single cheapest concession at the 1995 U.S. Open. A small and ice-intensive sodapop comes in second at \$2.50.

popcorn,<sup>26</sup> etc.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>(This popcorn being the deep-yellow, highly salty kind that makes an accompanying beverage all but mandatory--same deal with the concessions' big hot doughy pretzels, Manhattan-street-corner-type pretzels glazed with those nuggets of salt so big that they just about have to be bitten off and chewed separately. U.S. Open pretzels are \$3.00 except in the International Food Village on the Stadium's south side, a kind of compressed orgy of concession and crowded eating, where pretzel prices are slashed to \$2.50 per.)

<sup>27</sup>Take, e.g., a skinny little Haagen-Dazs bar--really skinny, a five-biter at most--which goes for a felonious \$3.00, and as with most of the food-concessions here you feel gouged and outraged about the price right up until you bite in and discover it's a seriously good Haagen-Dazs bar. The fact is that when you're hungry from the sunshine and fresh air and match-watching and gushing sympathetic saliva from watching everybody else in the crowds chow down, the Haagen-Dazs bars aren't worth \$3.00 but are worth about \$2.50. I should also add that Colombian Coffee was FREE at all concession stands on the N.T.C. grounds over Labor Day Weekend--part of this year's wildly aggressive Juan Valdez-marketing blitz at Flushing Meadow. This seemed like a really good deal until it turned out that 90% of the time the concession stands would claim to be mysteriously "temporarily out" of Colombian Coffee, so that you ended up forking over \$2.50 for an overiced cup of Diet Coke instead, having at this point spent way too much time in the concession line to be able to leave empty-handed. It is not inconceivable that the concession stands really were out of coffee--"FREE" representing the price at which the demand curve reaches its most extreme point, as any marketer knows--but the hardened U.S. consumer in me still strongly suspected that a coffee-related bait-and-switch was in operation at some of these stands, at which the guys behind the counter managed to give the impression that they were on some kind of Rikers Island work-release program or were moonlighting from their real occupation as late-night threatening-type lurkers at Port Authority and Penn Station. Nevertheless, the point is that every concession stand in the N.T.C. had constant long lines in front of it and that a good 66% of the crowds in the Stadium and Grandstand and at the Show Courts could be seen ingesting some sort of concession-stand item at any given time.

Now a huge roar that makes the whole Stadium's superstructure wobble signifies that the forces of democracy and human freedom have won the third set.<sup>28</sup> It's quite clear that Sampras has found his cruising altitude and that Philippoussis is going to take the first set he won and treasure it and go home to do more bench-presses in preparation for the ATP's indoor season.

I do not know who a certain Ms. or Mr. Feron is, but s/he must be a fearsomely powerful figure in the New York sports-concession industry, because a good 80% of all concession booths at the '95 Open have signs that say FERON'S on them. This goes not only for the edible concessions--whose stands have various names but all of whose workers seem to have pale-blue FERON'S shirts on--but also for the endless rows of souvenir-and tennis-related-product booths that flank whatever of the grounds' Hellsports aren't flanked by food booths already. The really hard-core, big-ticket souvenirs are sold on the Stadium's E side, in an area between the plunging Infiniti and the IBM Match-In-Progress Board. There's racquetry and footwear and gear bags and warm-ups and T-shirts for sale at separate booths for Yonex, Fila, Nike,<sup>29</sup> Head and William Serbin. There's a USTA booth offering free USTA T-shirts with a paid membership. But any item with a "U.S.

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<sup>28</sup>And in order to be properly impressed by the volume of concessions consumption, you need to keep in mind what a hassle it is to go get concessions when you're watching a pro match. Take the Stadium for example. You can leave your seat only during the 90-second break after odd games, then you have to sort of slalom down crowded Stadium ramps to the nearest concession stand, hold your place in a long and Hobbesian line, hand over a gouge-scale sum, and then schlep back up the ramp, bobbing and weaving to keep people's elbows from knocking your dearly bought concessions out of your hands and adding them to the crunchy organic substratum of spilled concessions you're walking on . . . and of course by the time you find the ramp back to your section of seats the original 90-second break in the action is long over--as, usually, is the next one after that, so you've now missed at least two games--and play is again under way, and the ushers at the fat chains prevent re-entry, and you have to stand there in an unventilated cement corridor with a sticky and acclivated floor, mashed in with a whole lot of other people who also left to get concessions and are now waiting until the next break to get back to their seats, all of you huddled there with your ice melting and kraut congealing and trying to stand on tip-toe and peer ahead to the tiny chained arch of light at the end of the tunnel and maybe catch a green glimpse of ball or some surreal fragment of Philippoussis's left thigh as he thunders in toward the net or something . . . New Yorkers' patience w/ respect to crowds and lines and gouging and waiting is extraordinarily impressive if you're not used to it; they can all stand quiescent in airless venues for extended periods, their eyes' expressions that unique NYC combination of Zen meditation and clinical depression, clearly unhappy but never complaining.

<sup>29</sup>The single most popular souvenir at the '95 Open seems to be a plain white bandanna with that little disembodied Nike trademark wing that goes right on your forehead if you wrap the thing just right over your head. A fashion accessory made popular by you know whom. Just about every little kid I spotted at Flushing Meadow was sporting one of these white Nike bandannas, and a fairly common sight on Sunday was a harried parent trying to tie a bandanna just right to position the Nike wing over a junior forehead while his kid stood on first one foot and then the other in impatience. (You do not want to know the retail price of these bandannas.)

OPEN '95"-mention on it is sold exclusively out of a FERON'S booth. Of these booths there are "0/40 at FERON'S," "FERON'S U.S. Open Silks," and "FERON'S U.S. Open Specials." It's not at all clear what the term "Specials" is meant to signify in terms of price: U.S. Open '95 T-shirts are \$22 and \$25. Tank-tops even more. Visors \$18 and up. Sweatshirts are \$49 and \$54, depending on whether they're the dusty, acid-washed autumn colors so popular in '95.

It's also clear that the sea-lanes of trade between FERON'S itself and the good old United States Tennis Association are wide open, because no official FERON'S souvenir says "U.S. Open '95" without also saying "A USTA Event" right underneath.

The grounds don't exactly empty out between the end of the afternoon's slate of matches and the start of the evening's,<sup>30</sup> but the crowds do thin a bit. Flushing Meadow gets chilly and pretty as the twilight starts. It's about 1900h., that time when the sun hasn't gone down yet but everything seems to be in something else's shadow. The ticket-takers at the Main Gate's turnstiles change shifts, and the consumers coming down the promenade are now dressed more in jeans and sweaters than shorts and thongs. Lights over all the N.T.C. courts go on together with an enormous thunk. The courtlight gives the underbelly of the hanging Fuji Blimp a weird ghostly glow. There's more serious, 5-Food-Group, dinnerish eating now going on at the International Food Village and in the Corporate Hospitality Areas. Sampras and Philippoussis have quit the field in the Stadium, Sampras bearing his shield and the Australian carried out upon his own (as it were). Arantxa Sanchez Vicario and Mary Joe Fernandez are now warming up on the Stadium Court while people in the bleachers try to stagger very carefully down the steps to get out, lugging their coolers and cushions, looking simultaneously sunburned and cold. Coming up on the Grandstand Court is a mixed-doubles match I'm looking forward to because one of the teams on the program has the marvelous name "Boogert-Oosting." Various tangential singles matches are under way on Courts 16-18, and something that's fun is to go over to these Show Courts and not to go all the way in and sit in the little sets of stands but to stand on the path outside the heavy green windscreens around the Show Courts and watch the little stripe of bare fence near the bottom for the movement of feet and to try to extrapolate from the feet's movement what's going on in each point. One unbelievably huge pair of sneakers under the screen on Court 16 turns out--sure enough--to belong to Richard Krajicek, the 6'6" Dutchman who plays like a mad crane. These shoes have to be 16EEEs at least; you wouldn't believe it. I am holding a \$4.00 kraut-dog and sodapop I would very much like to find someplace isolated and quiet to consume.

It is not at all quiet outside the Main Gate as true evening falls. Not only does the combined em- and immigration of crowds for the different Sessions make the whole promenade from Gate to subway stop and parking lots resemble the fall of Saigon. It's especially unquiet out here economically. I don't know whether this magazine will run an apercu of what all's going on out here as the sun falls, but I don't see why not, because it's not all that surprising. Since the 1995 U.S. Open is primarily--unabashedly--about commerce, and since commerce is by its nature

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<sup>30</sup>Tickets are sold separately for the day and evening sessions, and there are very complicated mechanisms in place to keep people with day-session tickets from lurking past 2000h. and mooching free evening spectation.

uncontainable, it shouldn't be at all surprising that the most vigorous crepuscular commerce is taking place out here, outside the tournament's fence and Gate, in markets of all shade and hue. I have, e.g., in the last 20 minutes received three separate solicitations to buy pot (all wildly overpriced). The sweet burnt-pine smell of reefer is in the air all over out here, and one young guy in oversized fatigue pants is smoking a bone on a bench right next to a very neat and dapper old gentleman who's sitting with his hands folded primly and not giving any indication he smells anything untoward.<sup>31</sup> Scalpers have upped the pressure of their pitches in the lengthening shadows and are practically applying half-nelsons to anybody on the promenade who seems even possibly to be looking for something, even if that something is just a quiet isolated place to eat a kraut-dog.<sup>32</sup> As mentioned supra, I'm the proud possessor of a U.S. Open '95 Media Pass--which consists of a necklace of nylon cord from which hangs a large plastic card w/a direly unflattering little photo of me that hangs against my chest at about the level of a sommelier's tasting cup--and twice this evening outside the Main Gate I've been approached by somebody wanting to borrow the Media Pass and then slip it back to me through the black fence once they've strolled inside.

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<sup>31</sup>New Yorkers also have an amazing ability to mind their own business and attend to themselves and not notice anything untoward going on, an ability that impresses me every time I come here and that always seems to lie somewhere on the continuum between Stoicism and catatonia.

<sup>32</sup>You'll doubtless by the way be happy to know that I did, over half an hour later, find a quiet place to hunch and gnaw supper. One of the gratuitously cool things the '95 Open does is open up a few of the minor N.T.C. courts to regular public play once the sun's gone down. This is why some of the people in the Stadium crowd had racquets, I bet. Anyway, it seems decent of them, and you can imagine what a thrill it must be for a couple of little kids to play on a court with vestigial rubber from an afternoon of pro sneakers still on it--the civilians playing clearly feel important, and they get a lot of attention from passersby on the paths who are now conditioned to watch intently whenever they hear ball sounds, and it's interesting to watch the passersby's faces change after two or three seconds when they realize who and what they're watching. The little sets of bleachers for these minor public-play courts are, understandably, empty; and it was on one such little set of stands that I ate. A 30ish guy and his wife were playing, the wife wearing a sun visor that looked a little gratuitous, the husband overhitting the way an afternoon of watching pros whale the hell out of the ball will make a man overhit. The only other person in the stands was one of the attractive young P.R. people who'd given me so much free coffee all day out by the M.G., sitting in her Valdez-outline T-shirt and eating something steamy out of a partitioned Styrofoam tray whose attached lid was folded back, Her professional smile and eye-twinkles were gone, so that she looked now more like the tough young New Yorker she was. As she ate she stared impassively at the husband whaling balls at his wife. She was clearly there for the same reason I was, to have some space and quiet while she ate, plus some downtime in which to rest her face from its cheery marketing expression. I felt a kind of bond between us, and from the opposite end of the bleachers where I was eating I cleared my throat and said, "Boy, it's good to find a place to be alone for a minute, isn't it?" The lady never looked around from the court as she cleared her mouth and said, "It was until a second ago."

One offer was a straight-out bribe, but the other involved a distinguished and corporate-looking gray-haired guy in green golfer's slacks who had a complex tale of woe about a tubercular niece or something who'd paid a surprise long-distance visit to NYC and whose fondest wish was to get in to the U.S. Open and that tickets were sold out, etc.<sup>33</sup> I observed at least one turnstile's ticket-taker (not the flinty-eyed Throgs Neck ticket-taker) receive some sort of subtle maitre-d'ish payment for allowing somebody to bring in something spectators were by no stretch of the imagination allowed to bring into the N.T.C. If you don't have a Stadium ticket but have the NYC savvy and financial resources, certain Stadium ushers are said (by two separate reliable sources) to be willing to place you in a vacant seat--sometimes a really up-close and desirable seat--for a sub-rosa fee, and a percentage of this fee is then apparently kicked back to a certain enterprising person or persons in the National Tennis Center who know of seats that for one reason or another aren't going to be occupied during a certain interval and relay this information to ushers (for a price). Part of the beauty of the tennis here is the way the artistry and energy are bounded by specific lines on court, but the beauty of the commerce is the way it's un- and never bounded. It's all sort of hypnotic at night. The plunging Infiniti's leather interior gets somehow mysteriously illuminated when the sun goes down, so that from a distance the car seems like a beacon. Trash-can fires appear in F.M.C. Park's distance, and the #7 train's interior's also alit as it pulls into the overground Shea stop to the north. At about 2015h. there's a fracas near the I.F. Village involving some unscrupulous/enterprising employee of whatever company actually makes the " '95 Open"--emblazoned T-shirts and hats and c. for the souvenir booths, who's apparently diverted boxes and boxes of the shirts and stuff and is going around the grounds selling them on the sly at prices way below the booths' prices,<sup>34</sup> and N.T.C. Security's involved, as well as--incongruously--what look like two Fire Department guys in slickers and fireman hats. It's on the whole kind of a younger and rowdier and more potentially sinister crowd that's coming in for the evening session. Their faces are stonier; eye contact seems hazardous the way eye contact on subways can be hazardous.

Plus food: the various extracurricular food scares haven't yet been mentioned. Imagine the opportunities--not only the all-cash concession stands but the enormous tented kitchens for the Corporate Hospitality Areas and the "U.S. Open Club" for V.I.P.'s and so on, the massive sizzle and clatter of high-volume prep from these kitchens off along the south parts of the Main Gate. Let's not even get into the little easements behind the strips of food stands, the furtive and on the whole unauthorized-looking deliveries and removals of large boxes, the various transactions and scurrings. Forget examples of that. Here's a different incident. Let's close L.D.W. with this:

Some of the time it's hard even to know what it is you're watching take place. In one of the big communitarian fountainless circles that the promenade opens into as it leads to the Main Gate--

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<sup>33</sup>(Both these solicitations had their appeal--the straight-out-bribe one especially--and only a fear of getting caught and of having to inform TENNIS magazine that my Media Pass had been revoked because I'd been nabbed renting it out on the black market kept me from making my own stab at '95 Open free enterprise.)

<sup>34</sup>(more power to him, on my view)

the circle closest to the Gate, this one is--one of the circle's green benches is controlled by gypsy-cab and -limo drivers waiting for anybody exiting who needs a gypsy-type ride back to Rye or Rockaway or wherever. Half a dozen of these guys sit on this bench in their cabbies' berets, waiting around, smoking cigars, talking s - - t, etc. I'm on the next bench trying to organize my notes. This is at about 2100h., late. From this circle you can see the rear flaps of some of the tented high-volume kitchens. Through one of these flaps now emerges a stocky young guy in the unmistakable tall hat and whites of a kitchen worker (though on his feet are \$200 Air Jordans so new they glow in the N.T.C.'s ambient light, so he looks like he's floating). The kitchen worker's carrying a broad low cardboard box through the employee- and Media Pass-entrance in the Gate and down the promenade and across the circle, making for the bench with the cabbies. The cabbies are making gestures like: Finally, thank God. One of the cabbies rises and moves out and meets the kitchen worker; something subtle occurs between their hands that indicates a transfer of funds; and now the cabbie bears the box back to the bench, where the rest of the drivers circle and grab and reveal that the box is full of supper--burgers, chicken legs, wieners, etc. Vague contented noises from the cabbies on the bench as they dig in.

"Goddamn rip-off," says a well-dressed Italian man next to me on my bench. I say, "Pardon me?" "Ripping the f - - ing place off," the well-dressed Italian man says, indicating with a hand gesture the kitchen worker, who's now making his way quickly back to the kitchen tent, hand in his pocket. The Italian man has a small filtered cigar in his mouth and a disgusted look and is sitting back with his legs crossed and his elbows up on the bench's back's top in that insouciant way savvy New Yorkers sit on park benches. He has heavy brows and shoes with spats and a Eurocut silk pinstripe suit of the type that Cagney-era gangsters wore. You half expect him to have a white fedora and violin case. But it turns out, when he gives me his card, that he's a legit businessman, a concessioner, here to labor instead of recreate/consume; he's here scouting out possibilities for opening a couple of stands here at the '97 Open, when the new Stadium will be up and even more vigorous attendance and commerce can be foreseen. The stands he wants to open'll sell gyros, he says. He's not Italian after all.

one of my students. After working with him daily for months, I had noticed nothing about his behavior to indicate that he had any sort of attention disorder, learning disability, or behavioral problem. He was courteous, witty, and engaged with the class. He did his homework regularly and acceptably. But some of his teachers reported that his grades were slipping, and his parents seemed eager to believe that the problem was chemical.

The evaluation form asked me to consider whether he "often fails to give close attention to details or is reluctant to engage in tasks that require sustained mental effort, such as school work." What teenage boy doesn't? But my Luddite objections were brushed aside, and after a thirty-minute diagnostic conference my student returned to school on Ritalin. Indefinitely. The dark hand of Victorian behavior modification is all over schemes like this one, and the enormous potential profit makes the process all the more suspect.

Ron Charles  
St. Louis

I'm a "treatment-resistant" or "refractory" depressive like Greg Critser, but I'm not losing any sleep over how rich Eli Lilly is getting. I feel about Eli Lilly rather like I'd feel about a paramedic who pulled me out of an automobile about to explode. I'm just too grateful to be critical. And it does not disturb me in the slightest to learn that drug companies are offering my doctor discount coupons, desk accessories, nice lunches—what-have-you—to introduce me to their drugs.

I am well and functional because depression is widespread and therefore warrants a lucrative treatment industry. Imagine how much trouble Critser and I would be in if depression were instead so rare that drug research just wouldn't be cost-effective. Imagine if, instead of pouring huge amounts of research money into drugs to assuage my illness, these companies did nothing. That, to my mind, would be a drug industry worthy of critique.

The fact is, all of Critser's questions are posed from a position of lux-

ury: the luxury of a mind well enough to engage complex thoughts in clear, sound prose. And this is what confuses me most. Critser claims to know the ravages of depressive illness firsthand, yet he waxes nostalgic about his ancestor, an author of sad poetry in some rich, pure age before psychoactive drugs. Critser then wonders if the drugs he is taking exclude him from the vibrant, tragic vision of life that his ancestor enjoyed. One of my most painful and indelible memories is of a woman writer I met on a psychiatric ward where we were both waiting out bad depressions. This woman actually did get a little writing done, but her stuff was clunky and repetitive. She just kept working the same sentence over and over: "Must organize self." She never got much further than that. Presumably the vibrant muses were visiting another ward.

Gina Gionfriddo  
Providence, R.I.

As a practicing psychiatrist, I appreciate Greg Critser's willingness to point out how the pharmaceutical industry is shaping our treatment of depression and to share his ambivalence about his own predicament, to wit: life is unbearable without the medication, but when he takes it, his whole identity becomes a question mark. This dilemma is shared by a large and growing proportion of the population.

We have created a society in which to survive in the mainstream, ever more people are forced to resort to antidepressant drugs, which override our brain's natural neurophysiological reaction to overstress. Luckily, the drugs often work, and since most people don't have the option of dropping out and moving to a teepee in New Mexico, I have few moral qualms, on the individual level, about offering my patients something that helps them endure. But we need to face the fact that this "epidemic," while very real and clearly evidenced by derangements in brain chemistry, is a consequence of the atomized society we live in. Our proffered cures do not address the urgent need for social change

but instead divert our energies toward the treatment of illness on the plane of individual "mental health." In doing so we are merely treating the symptoms; it is the culture at large that is sick.

Paul Genova  
Portland, Me.

## God Bless You, Mr. Franzen

Kurt Vonnegut (Letters, July), writing in response to Jonathan Franzen's April Folio on American novelists, "Perchance to Dream," claims that "Novelists are people who have discovered that they can dampen their neuroses by writing make-believe. We will keep on doing that no matter what, while offering loftier explanations." This makes Vonnegut look humble and lovable, but as a response to the stuff Franzen was talking about it is total horseshit. If Vonnegut's sound bite were the whole truth, nobody at all would read novels—who would want to devote hours of brain work to something somebody had written just to dampen his own neuroses?

Good art is a kind of magic. It does magical things for both artist and audience. We can have long polysyllabic arguments about how to describe the way this magic works, but the plain fact is that good art is magical and precious and cool. It's hard to try to make good art, and it seems to me wholly reasonable that good artists should be concerned with their work's cultural reception. I thought it was brave of Franzen to offer not only "lofty explanations" but honest and intimate descriptions of how it feels to try to make good, serious art in a culture that doesn't seem to value it very much. And I was disappointed that the *Harper's* Letters editor chose to run only sneery, disparaging letters about the essay. I've spoken with way too many readers and writers who admired Franzen's piece to believe disparaging letters were all *Harper's* got. I suppose one reason it was brave of Franzen to publish his essay is that it made it easy for other writers to look humble and adorable at his expense.

David Foster Wallace  
Bloomington, Ill.



## John Updike, Champion Literary Phallocrat, Drops One; Is This Finally the End for Magnificent Narcissists?

by David Foster Wallace

*The New York Observer*  
October 13, 1997

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"Of nothing but me I sing, lacking another song."

-- John Updike, *Midpoint*, 1969

Mailer, Updike, Roth -- the Great Male Narcissists\* who've dominated postwar realist fiction are now in their senescence, and it must seem to them no coincidence that the prospect of their own deaths appears backlit by the approaching millennium and on-line predictions of the death of the novel as we know it. When a solipsist dies, after all, everything goes with him. And no U.S. novelist has mapped the solipsist's terrain better than John Updike, whose rise in the 60s and 70s established him as both chronicler and voice of probably the single most self-absorbed generation since Louis XIV. As were Freud's, Mr. Updike's big preoccupations have always been with death and sex (not necessarily in that order), and the fact that the mood of his books has gotten more wintry in recent years is understandable -- Mr. Updike has always written largely about himself, and since the surprisingly moving *Rabbit at Rest* he's been exploring, more and more overtly, the apocalyptic prospect of his own death.

*Toward the End of Time* concerns an incredibly erudite, articulate, successful, narcissistic and sex-obsessed retired guy who's keeping a one-year journal in which he explores the apocalyptic prospect of his own death. It is, of the total 25 Updike books I've read, far and away the worst, a novel so mind-bendingly clunky and self-indulgent that it's hard to believe the author let it be published in this kind of shape.

I'm afraid the preceding sentence is this review's upshot, and most of the balance here will consist of presenting evidence/ justification for such a disrespectful assessment. First, though, if I may poke the critical head into the frame for just one moment, I'd like to offer assurances that your reviewer is not one of these spleen-venting, spittle-spattering Updike-haters one encounters among literary readers under 40. The fact is that I am probably classifiable as one of very few

actual sub-40 Updike fans. Not as rabid a fan as, say, Nicholson Baker, but I do think that *The Poorhouse Fair*, *Of the Farm* and *The Centaur* are all great books, maybe classics. And even since *Rabbit Is Rich* -- as his characters seemed to become more and more repellent, and without any corresponding indication that the author understood that they were repellent -- I've continued to read Mr. Updike's novels and to admire the sheer gorgeoussness of his descriptive prose.

Most of the literary readers I know personally are under 40, and a fair number are female, and none of them are big admirers of the postwar G.M.N.'s. But it's Mr. Updike in particular they seem to hate. And not merely his books, for some reason -- mention the poor man himself and you have to jump back:

"Just a penis with a thesaurus."

"Has the son of a bitch ever had one unpublished thought?"

"Makes misogyny seem literary the same way Limbaugh makes fascism seem funny."

These are actual -- trust me -- quotations, and I've heard even worse ones, and they're all usually accompanied by the sort of facial expression where you can tell there's not going to be any profit in arguing or talking about the esthetic pleasure of Mr. Updike's prose. None of the other famous phallograts of his generation -- not Mailer, not Frederick Exley or Charles Bukowski or even the Samuel Delany of *Hogg* -- excites such violent dislike. There are, of course, some obvious explanations for part of this dislike -- jealousy, iconoclasm, P.C. backlash, and the fact that many of our parents revere Mr. Updike and it's easy to revile what your parents revere. But I think the major reason so many of my generation dislike Mr. Updike and the other G.M.N.'s has to do with these writers' radical self-absorption, and with their uncritical celebration of this self-absorption both in themselves and in their characters.

Mr. Updike, for example, has for years been constructing protagonists who are basically all the same guy (see for example Rabbit Angstrom, Dick Maple, Piet Hanema, Henry Bech, Rev. Tom Marshfield, *Roger's Version's* "Uncle Nunc") and who are all clearly stand-ins for the author himself. They always live in either Pennsylvania or New England, are unhappily married/divorced, are roughly Mr. Updike's age. Always either the narrator or the point-of-view character, they all have the author's astounding perceptual gifts; they all think and speak in the same effortlessly lush, synesthetic way Mr. Updike does. They are also always incorrigibly narcissistic, philandering, self-contemptuous, self-pitying and deeply alone, alone the way only a solipsist can be alone. They never belong to any sort of larger unit or community or cause. Though usually family men, they never really love anybody --and, though always heterosexual to the point of satyriasis, they especially don't love women. The very world around them, as beautifully as they see and

describe it, seems to exist for them only insofar as it evokes impressions and associations and emotions inside the self.

I'm guessing that for the young educated adults of the 60s and 70s, for whom the ultimate horror was the hypocritical conformity and repression of their own parents' generation, Mr. Updike's evocation of the libidinous self appeared redemptive and even heroic. But the young educated adults of the 90s -- who were, of course, the children of the same impassioned infidelities and divorces Mr. Updike wrote about so beautifully -- got to watch all this brave new individualism and self-expression and sexual freedom deteriorate into the joyless and anomic self-indulgence of the Me Generation. Today's sub-40s have different horrors, prominent among which are anomie and solipsism and a peculiarly American loneliness: the prospect of dying without once having loved something more than yourself. Ben Turnbull, the narrator of Mr. Updike's latest novel, is 66 years old and heading for just such a death, and he's shitlessly scared. Like so many of the novelist's protagonists, though, Turnbull seems to be scared of all the wrong things.

*Toward the End of Time* is being marketed by its publisher as an ambitious departure for Mr. Updike, his foray into the futuristic-dystopic tradition of Aldous Huxley and soft sci-fi. The year is A.D. 2020, and time has not been kind. A Sino-American missile war has killed millions and ended centralized government as Americans know it. The dollar's gone; Massachusetts now uses scrip named for Bill Weld. No taxes -- local toughs now get protection money to protect the upscale from other local toughs. AIDS has been cured, the Midwest is depopulated, and parts of Boston are bombed out and (presumably?) irradiated. An abandoned space station hangs in the night sky like a junior moon. There are tiny but rapacious "metallobioforms" that have mutated from toxic waste and go around eating electricity and the occasional human. Mexico has reappropriated the U.S. Southwest and is threatening wholesale invasion even as thousands of young Americans are sneaking across the Rio Grande in search of a better life. America, in short, is getting ready to die.

The book's postmillennial elements are sometimes cool, and they truly would represent an interesting departure for Mr. Updike if they weren't all so sketchy and tangential. What 95 percent of *Toward the End of Time* actually consists of is Turnbull describing the prenominate flora (over and over as each season passes) and his brittle, castrating wife Gloria, and remembering the ex-wife who divorced him for adultery, and rhapsodizing about a young prostitute he moves into the house when Gloria's away on a trip. It's also got a lot of pages of Turnbull brooding about decay and mortality and the tragedy of the human condition, and even more pages of Turnbull talking about sex and the imperiousness of the sexual urge and detailing how he lusts after assorted secretaries and neighbors and bridge partners and daughters-in-law and a little girl who's part of the group of young toughs he pays protection to, a 13-year-old whose breasts -- "shallow taut

cones tipped with honeysuckle-berry nipples" -- Turnbull finally gets to fondle in the woods behind his house when his wife's not looking.

In case this sounds like a harsh summary, here's hard statistical evidence of just how much a "departure" for Mr. Updike this novel really is:

Total number of pages about the Sino-American war -- causes, duration, casualties: 0.75;

Total number of pages about deadly mutant metallobioforms: 1.5;

Total number of pages about flora around Turnbull's home, plus fauna, weather and how his ocean view looks in different seasons: 86;

Total number of pages about Mexico's repossession of the U.S. Southwest: 0.1;

Total number of pages about Ben Turnbull's penis and his various feelings about it: 7.5;

Total number of pages about the prostitute's body, with particular attention to sexual loci: 8.75;

Total number of pages about golf: 15;

Total number of pages of Ben Turnbull saying things like "I want women to be dirty" and "We are condemned, men and women, to symbiosis" and "She was a choice cut of meat and I hoped she held out for a fair price" and "The sexual parts are fiends, sacrificing everything to that aching point of contact": 36.5.

The novel's best parts are a half-dozen little set pieces where Turnbull imagines himself inhabiting different historical figures -- a tomb-robber in ancient Egypt, Saint Mark, a guard at a Nazi death camp, etc. They're gems, and I wished there were more of them. The problem is that they don't serve much of a function here other than to remind us that Mr. Updike can write great imaginative set pieces when he's in the mood. Their justification in the novel stems from the fact that the narrator is a science fan. Turnbull is particularly keen on subatomic physics and something he calls the theory of "many worlds" -- which actually dates from 1957 and is a proposed solution to certain quantum paradoxes entailed by the principles of Uncertainty and Complementarity, and which is unbelievably abstract and complicated but which Turnbull seems to think is roughly the same thing as the Theory of Past-Life Channeling, apparently thereby explaining the set pieces where Turnbull is somebody else. The whole quantum setup ends up being embarrassing the way something pretentious is embarrassing when it's also wrong.

Better, and more convincingly "futuristic," are the narrator's soliloquies on the blue-to-red shift and the eventual implosion of the

known universe near the book's end, and this would be among the novel's highlights, too, if it weren't for the fact that Turnbull is interested in cosmic apocalypse only because it serves as a grand metaphor for his own personal death -- likewise all the Housmanesque descriptions of the optometrically significant "Year 2020," and the book's final, heavy description of "small pale moths [that] have mistakenly hatched" on a late-autumn day and now "flip and flutter a foot or two above the asphalt as if trapped in a narrow wedge of space-time beneath the obliterating imminence of winter."

The clunky bathos of this novel seems to have infected even the prose, John Updike's great strength for almost 40 years. *Toward the End of Time* has occasional flashes of beautiful writing -- deer described as "tender-faced ruminants," leaves as "chewed to lace by Japanese beetles," a car's tight turn as a "slur." But a horrific percentage of the book consists of stuff like "Why indeed do women weep? They weep, it seemed to my wandering mind, for the world itself, in its beauty and waste, its mingled cruelty and tenderness" and "How much of summer is over before it begins! Its beginning marks its end, as our birth entails our death" and "This development seems remote, however, among the many more urgent issues of survival on our blasted, depopulated planet." Not to mention whole reams of sentences with so many modifiers -- "The insouciance and innocence of our independence twinkled like a kind of sweat from their bare and freckled or honey-colored or mahogany limbs" -- or so much subordination -- "As our species, having given itself a hard hit, staggers, the others, all but counted out, moved in" -- and such heavy alliteration -- "The broad sea blares a blue I would not have believed obtainable without a tinted filter" -- that they seem less like John Updike than like somebody doing a mean parody of John Updike.

Besides distracting us with worries about whether Mr. Updike might be injured or ill, the turgidity of the prose also increases our dislike of the novel's narrator (it's hard to like a guy whose way of saying his wife doesn't like going to bed before him is "She hated it when I crept into bed and disturbed in her the fragile succession of steps whereby consciousness dissolves"). This dislike absolutely torpedoes *Toward the End of Time*, a novel whose tragic climax (in a late chapter called "The Deaths") is a prostate operation that leaves Turnbull impotent and extremely bummed. It is made very clear that the author expects us to sympathize with and even share Turnbull's grief at "the pathetic shrunken wreck the procedures [have] made of my beloved genitals." These demands on our compassion echo the major crisis of the book's first half, described in a flashback, where we are supposed to empathize not only with the textbookish existential dread that hits Turnbull at 30 as he's in his basement building a dollhouse for his daughter -- "I would die, but also the little girl I was making this for would die. There was no God, each detail of the rusting, moldering cellar made clear, just Nature, which would consume my life as carelessly and relentlessly as it would a dung-beetle corpse in a compost pile" -- but also with Turnbull's relief at discovering a remedy for this dread -- "an affair, my first. Its colorful weave of carnal revelation and intoxicating risk and craven

guilt eclipsed the devouring gray sensation of time."

Maybe the only thing the reader ends up appreciating about Ben Turnbull is that he's such a broad caricature of an Updike protagonist that he helps us figure out what's been so unpleasant and frustrating about this gifted author's recent characters. It's not that Turnbull is stupid -- he can quote Kierkegaard and Pascal on angst and allude to the deaths of Schubert and Mozart and distinguish between a sinistrorse and a dextrorse Polygonum vine, etc. It's that he persists in the bizarre adolescent idea that getting to have sex with whomever one wants whenever one wants is a cure for ontological despair. And so, it appears, does Mr. Updike -- he makes it plain that he views the narrator's impotence as catastrophic, as the ultimate symbol of death itself, and he clearly wants us to mourn it as much as Turnbull does. I'm not especially offended by this attitude; I mostly just don't get it. Erect or flaccid, Ben Turnbull's unhappiness is obvious right from the book's first page. But it never once occurs to him that the reason he's so unhappy is that he's an asshole.

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\* Unless, of course, you consider constructing long encomiums to a woman's "sacred several-lipped gateway" or saying things like "It is true, the sight of her plump lips obediently distended around my swollen member, her eyelids lowered demurely, afflicts me with a religious peace" to be the same as loving her.

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## Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky

Have a look at two quotations. The first is from Edward Dahlberg, a Dostoevsky-grade curmudgeon if ever there was one:

The citizen secures himself against genius by icon worship. By the touch of Circe's wand, the divine troublemakers are translated into porcine embroidery.

The second is from Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*:

At the present time, negation is the most useful of all — and we deny —'

'Everything?'

'Everything!'

'What, not only art and poetry . . . but even . . . horrible to say . . .'

'Everything,' repeated Bazarov, with indescribable composure.

Apparently in 1957 Joseph Frank, then 38, a comp-lit professor at Princeton, was preparing a lecture on existentialism and started working his way through Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky's 1864 *Notes from Underground*. As anybody who's had to read it probably knows, *Notes*

is a powerful but extremely weird little novella, and both these qualities have to do with the fact that the book is simultaneously universal and particular. Its protagonist's particularly modern "disease" — his blend of grandiosity and self-contempt, of rage and cowardice, of ideological fervor and a self-conscious inability to act on his convictions, in sum his paradoxical and self-negating character — make him the sort of universal figure in whom we can all see parts of ourselves, the same kind of timeless literary archetype as Ajax or Hamlet. But at the same time, *Notes from Underground* and its narrator are just about impossible to understand without some knowledge of the intellectual climate of Russia in the 1860s, particularly the frisson of utopian socialism and atheistic utilitarianism then in vogue among the radical Russian intelligentsia, an ideology that Dostoevsky loathed with the sort of passion only Dostoevsky could loathe with.

Anyway, Professor Frank, as he's wading through some of this particular-context background so that he can give his students a halfway-comprehensive reading of *Notes*, starts to get interested in the fiction of Dostoevsky as a kind of bridge between two distinct ways of coming at text, a purely formal aesthetic approach v. a social-dash-ideological criticism that cares only about thematics and the philosophical assumptions that lie behind them.<sup>1</sup> That interest — plus 40 years of what must have been skull-crunching scholarly labor — has yielded the first four volumes of a projected five-book study of Dostoevsky's life and times and writing. All the volumes are published by Princeton U. Press. All four are titled *Dostoevsky* and then have subtitles: *The Seeds of Revolt, 1821–1849* (1976); *The Years of Ordeal, 1850–1859* (1984); *The Stir of Liberation, 1860–1865* (1986); and now, in 1995, in incredibly expensive hardcover, *The Miraculous Years, 1865–1871*. Joseph Frank is now 77 or so, and judging by his photo on *The Miraculous Years*' jacket he's not exactly hale, and probably all serious scholars

<sup>1</sup> It is, of course, true that contemporary literary theory is all about showing that there's no real distinction between these two ways to read — or rather it's about showing that aesthetics can always be decoded into a kind of covert politics — and one reason I think Frank's project here is so worthwhile is that it shows a different way to marry formal and ideological readings that isn't nearly as reductive and unpretty and hasn't got near the potential for reducing into smug P.C. horsetwaddle that literary theory has.

of Dostoevsky are waiting bated to see if Frank can hang on long enough to bring his encyclopedic study all the way up to the early 1880s, when Dostoevsky finished the fourth of his Great Novels,<sup>2</sup> gave his famous Pushkin Speech, and died. Even if the fifth volume of *Dostoevsky* doesn't get written, though, the appearance now of the fourth ensures Frank's own status as the definitive literary biographer of one of the best writers ever.

**\*\*Am I a good person? Do I even, deep down, really wish to be a good person? Or do I only want to seem like a good person so that people will approve me? Is there a difference?\*\*\***

In a way, Frank's books aren't really "literary biography" at all, at least not in the way that Ellmann's book on Joyce and Bate's on Keats are. For one thing, Frank is as much a cultural historian as he is a biographer: his aim is to create an accurate and exhaustive context for FMD's books, to place the author's life and writing within a fully rendered picture of nineteenth-century Russia's intellectual life. Ellmann's *James Joyce*, sort of the standard by which most lit-bios are measured, doesn't go into anything like Frank's detail on ideology or politics or social theory. What Frank is about is showing that a comprehensive reading of Dostoevsky's fiction is impossible without a detailed understanding of the specific cultural climate in which the books were conceived and written and also to which they were directed. This is because — Frank persuades us — Dostoevsky's mature works were fundamentally ideological novels and cannot really be read unless one understands the polemical agendas that inform them. Thus, for Frank, the concatenation of universal and particular that characterizes *Notes from Underground*<sup>3</sup> in

<sup>2</sup> Among the striking parallels between him and Shakespeare is the fact that FMD had four works of his "mature" period that are considered masterpieces — *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *Demons* (aka *The Demons* or *The Devils* or *The Possessed*), and *The Brothers Karamazov* — all four of which involve murders and all four of which are arguably tragedies.

<sup>3</sup> Volume III, *The Stir of Liberation*, contains I bet as fine an explicative reading of *Notes* as has ever been done, tracing its genesis as a reply to the "rational egoism" made fashionable in Chernyshevsky's 1863 novel *What Is to Be Done*, and identifying

fact characterizes all of the best work of FMD, a writer whose "evident desire," Frank says, is "to dramatize his moral-spiritual themes against the background of Russian history."

Another nonstandard feature of Frank's project is the amount of straightforward critical attention he pays to the actual books Dostoevsky wrote. "It is the production of such masterpieces that makes Dostoevsky's life worth recounting at all," his preface to *The Miraculous Years* goes, "and my purpose, as in the previous volumes, is to keep them constantly in the foreground rather than treating them as accessory to the life per se." At least a third of this latest volume is given over to close readings of the stuff Dostoevsky produced in this amazing five years — *Crime and Punishment*, *The Gambler*, *The Idiot*, *The Eternal Husband* (novella), and *Demons*.<sup>4</sup> These readings aim to be explicative rather than argumentative or theory-driven; i.e., their aim is to articulate as fully as possible what exactly Dostoevsky himself wanted the books to mean. While this approach seems to act as if there's no such thing as the Intentional Fallacy,<sup>5</sup> it seems prima facie justified by Frank's own

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the Underground Man's intended function for Dostoevsky as basically a parodic caricature. Frank's persuasive explanation for the frequent misreading of *Notes* (a lot of critics don't read the book as a *conte philosophique* and assume Dostoevsky designed the U.M. as a serious Hamlet-grade archetype) also helps explain why Dostoevsky's masterpieces are often read and admired even without any real appreciation of their ideological agendas: "... the parodistic function of [the Underground Man's] character has always been obscured by the immense vitality of its artistic embodiment" (v. III, p. 315) — that is, in certain ways Dostoevsky was too good for his own good.

<sup>4</sup> This last Frank refers to as *The Devils*. A clue to the formidable problems involved in translating Russian into English is the fact that lots of FMD's books have alternative titles.

<sup>5</sup> Frank never in four volumes mentions the Intentional Fallacy (viz., "The judging of the meaning or success of a work of art by the author's expressed or ostensible intention in producing it") or tries to head off the objection that his biography commits it all over the place. This is real interesting to me. In a way it's understandable, because the tone Frank maintains through all his readings is one of maximum restraint and objectivity: he's not about imposing a certain theory or way of decoding Dostoevsky, and he steers way clear of arguing with other critics who've applied various axes' edges to FMD's stuff. When Frank does want to criticize or refute a certain reading (as in occasional attacks on Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* in a well-trilled

project, which is always to trace and explain the novels' genesis out of Dostoevsky's own ideological engagement with Russian culture.<sup>6</sup>

**\*\*What does "faith" mean? Isn't it clearly nuts to believe in something there's zero proof of? Is there any difference between "faith" and a bunch of nose-pierced natives sacrificing virgins to volcanos because they believe it'll produce good weather? How can somebody have faith before he's presented with some sufficient reason to have faith? Is somehow *needing* to have faith a sufficient reason for having faith?\***

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refutation of Freud's 1928 "Dostoevsky and Parricide" in the Appendix to Volume I), he always does so simply by pointing out that the historical facts and/or Dostoevsky's own notes and letters contradict certain assumptions a critic has made. His argument is never that somebody else is wrong, just that they don't have all the facts . . . which again gives implicit authority to Frank's agenda of providing completely exhaustive and comprehensive context, the Whole Story.

But what's also interesting is that Joseph Frank must have come of age as a scholar at just the time when the New Criticism was becoming ascendent in the U.S. academy, and the good old Intentional Fallacy is pretty much a cornerstone of New Criticism, and so, in Frank's not merely rejecting or arguing against the I.F. but proceeding as if it doesn't even *exist*, it's tempting to imagine there's all kinds of marvelous scholarly patricidal currents swirling around, Frank giving an enormous silent raspberry to his old teachers. But if we remember that New Criticism's removal of the author from the interpretive equation did as much as anything did to open the door for theory (i.e. deconstruction, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Marxo-Feminist Cultural Studies, Foucaultian/Greenblattian New Historicism, etc.) — and that theory tends to do the text itself what New Criticism had done to the author of the text, then it starts to look as if Frank is taking a very early sharp turn away from poststructural criticism and theory (our age's *own* radical-intellectual fad), and trying to compose a system of reading and interpretation so utterly different from it that it (Frank's system) seems a more telling assault on theory than any frontal attack could be.

<sup>6</sup> It seems fair to warn potential readers, though, that Frank's readings of the novels are *extremely* close and detailed, at times almost microscopically so, and that this can make for some pretty slow going. Plus that Frank's explications all but require that his reader have Dostoevsky's novels fresh in mind. I found Volume IV's readings of *The Idiot* and *The Gambler* fascinating, but this is partly because I went ahead and reread those novels for this review. I had a harder time with the long chapter on *Crime and Punishment*, a novel I haven't read since school. And I should admit that I haven't yet read *Demons/The Devils* at all, and that when I got to vol. IV's very long explications of that novel I was wildly bored and confused.

\* \* \*

To appreciate Joseph Frank's achievement—and not just the achievement of having absorbed and decocted the millions of extant pages of Dostoevsky-notes and letters and journals and bios by contemporaries and critical studies in about a hundred different languages—it seems important to emphasize how many different approaches to biography and criticism he's trying to marry. Standard literary biographies spotlight an author and his personal life—especially the seamy or neurotic stuff—and pretty much ignore the specific historical context in which he wrote. Other studies—especially those with a theoretical agenda—focus almost exclusively on context and treat an author and his books as mathematical exponents of the prejudices, power-dynamics, and metaphysical delusions of his age. Some biographies act as if their subject's own works have already been all figured out, and they treat of a personal life's relation to meanings the biographers assume are already fixed and inarguable; whereas most of this century's "critical studies" treat an author's books hermetically, ignoring facts about the writer's circumstances and beliefs that can help explain not only what the work is about but why it has the particular individual magic of a certain writer's own unique voice and vision.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> It is the loss of an ability to countenance and discuss the *particularity* of works of literary genius that is maybe most to be loathed about the literary-theory industry's rise to power in contemporary criticism. True, a lot of poststructural theory is fascinating in its own right; but when it comes to actually reading some piece of fiction, most theoretical readings consist in just running it through a kind of powerful philosophical machine. This is in all meaningful ways equivalent to dissecting a flower instead of looking at it or smelling it. Dissection has its place, as do systems and general applications of method; but so does appreciation, and so does countenancing the singularity of something beautiful. It is Professor Frank's determination to countenance *both* the ideological forces at work around Dostoevsky's fictions *and* the completely distinctive and unabstractable way in which FMD transforms those forces that makes his biography so valuable right now, I think.

\* \* \*

**\*\*Is the point of my life simply to undergo as little pain and as much pleasure as possible? My behavior sure seems to indicate that this is what I believe. But isn't that kind of selfish? Forget selfish — isn't it a little lonely?\***

Frank's four volumes, though, compose an extremely detailed and demanding work on an extremely complex and demanding author, a fiction-writer whose time and culture are alien to us. It seems to me hard to expect much credibility in recommending Frank's biography unless I can give some sort of argument for why Dostoevsky's fiction ought to be important to us as individual readers in 1996 America. This I can do only crudely, because I'm not a critic or a Dostoevsky expert. But I am a living American who both tries to write fiction and likes to read it, and thanks to Frank I've spent pretty much the whole of the last two months immersed in Dostoevskynalia.

Dostoevsky is a titan, a canonical figure, but realize that this can be the kiss of death, because it makes it all too easy to treat him as a kind of sepia-tinted Historical Figure, belovedly dead. His books, and the tall hill of critical studies they've inspired, are of course required acquisitions for college libraries . . . and there the books usually sit, yellowly, smelling that way really old library books smell, waiting for somebody to have to do a term paper. Dahlberg is mostly right, I think: to make somebody an icon is to make him an abstraction, and abstractions are empty, 2-D. Surely, at any rate, abstractions are incapable of vital communication with alive persons.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> (Somebody has only to spend one term trying to teach literature in school to realize that the quickest way to kill a writer's vitality for potential readers is to present that writer ahead of time as "great" or "classic." Because then the author becomes for the students like medicine or vegetables, something that the authorities have declared "good for them" that they "ought to like," and then the students' nictitating membranes come down, and everybody's dead. Should this surprise anybody? We could learn a lot from students who hate to read, in my opinion.)

\* \* \*

**\*\*But if I decide to decide there's a different, less selfish, less lonely point to my life, isn't the reason for this decision my desire to be less lonely, meaning to suffer less pain? So can the decision to be less selfish be anything other than a selfish decision?\***

And it's true that there are features of Dostoevsky's work that are alien and off-putting. Russian, a non-Latinate language, is extraordinarily hard to translate into English, and when you add to this the archaism of a language 100+ years old, Dostoevsky's prose and dialogue can come off stilted and pleonastic and silly.<sup>9</sup> Then there's the kind of soppy-seeming formality of the culture Dostoevsky's characters inhabit. These are characters who, e.g., when they're absolutely furious at each

<sup>9</sup> Especially in the excruciatingly Victorianish translations of Ms. Constance Garnett, who in the '30s and '40s cornered the FMD/Tolstoy-translation market, and whose 1935 rendering of *The Idiot* has stuff like (I'm scanning almost at random):

"'Nastasya Filippovna!' General Epanchin articulated reproachfully." (152)

"The phrase flattered and touched and greatly pleased General Ivolgin: he suddenly melted, instantly changed his tone, and went off into a long, enthusiastic explanation." (463)

And even in the acclaimed new Knopf translations by Richard Pevar and Larissa Volokhonsky, the prose (in, e.g., *Crime and Punishment*) is still like:

"'Enough!' he said resolutely and solemnly. 'Away with mirages, away with false fears, away with spectres! . . . There is life! Was I not alive just now? My life hasn't died with the old crone! May the Lord remember her in His kingdom and — enough, my dear, it's time to go! Now is the kingdom of reason and light and . . . and will and strength . . . and now we shall see! Now we shall cross swords!' he added presumptuously, as if addressing some dark force and challenging it." (188)

. . . Umm, why not just "as if challenging some dark force"? Umm, can you challenge a dark force without addressing it? Or is there in the Russian something that keeps the above from being redundant, stilted, bad? If so, why not recognize that in English it's bad and then clean it up in a acclaimed new Knopf translation? Are prose-translators not supposed to fuck with the syntax at all? But Russian is an inflected language — it uses declensions and cases and stuff instead of word-order — so the translators are *already* fucking with the syntax just by putting it into uninflected English. I do not get it.

other, do stuff like "shake their fists" and call each other "scoundrels" or "fly at" each other.<sup>10</sup> Speakers use exclamation points in quantities today seen only in cartoons. Social etiquette is stiff to the point of absurdity — people are always "calling" on each other and either "being received" or "not being received" and obeying tosooco conventions of politeness even when they're insulting each other.<sup>11</sup> Plus everybody's got a long and hard-to-pronounce last name and Christian name — plus a patronymic, plus sometimes a diminutive — plus obscure military ranks and bureaucratic hierarchies abound; plus there are rigid and totally weird class distinctions that are hard to keep straight and understand the implications of, especially because the economic realities of old Russian society are so strange (see, e.g., the way even a destitute "former student" like Raskolnikov or an unemployed bureaucrat like the Underground Man can somehow afford servants).

The point is that, besides just the usual death-by-canonization, there is real and alienating stuff that stands in the way of our appreciating Dostoevsky and needs to be gotten around — either I guess by learning enough about all the unfamiliar stuff that it stops being unfamiliar, or else by accepting it the way we accept racist/sexist attitudes in some older fictions and just grimacing and reading anyway.

But some fiction is worth the work it takes to penetrate or eat all the impediments to its appreciation. Dostoevsky's stuff is worth the work. And this is not so just because of his place astride the Western canon — if anything, it's *despite* that. One thing that canonization and course-assignments obscure is that Dostoevsky isn't just great, he's *fun*. His novels almost always have just ripping good plots, lurid and involved and thoroughly dramatic. There are murders and attempted murders

<sup>10</sup> What on earth does it mean to "fly at" somebody? It happens dozens of times in every FMD novel. What, "fly at" them in order to beat them up? To get in their face? Why not *say* that, if you're translating?

<sup>11</sup> Q.v.:

"Mr. Ferfichkin, tomorrow you will give me satisfaction for your present words!" I said loudly, pompously addressing Ferfichkin.

"You mean a duel, sir? At your pleasure," the man answered. . . ." (from Pevear and Volkhonsky's acclaimed Knopf rendering of *Notes from U.*, p. 78).

and police and dysfunctional-family feuding and spies and tough guys and beautiful fallen women and unctuous con men and wasting illnesses and inheritances and scheming and silky villains and whores.

Of course, the fact that Dostoevsky can tell a really good story isn't alone enough to make him great — if it were, Judith Krantz and John Grisham would be great fiction writers, and as matters stand they're not even very good. What keeps them and lots of other gifted plot-weavers from being very good is that they don't have much talent for (or interest in) characterization — their interesting plots are usually inhabited by crude and uninteresting stick-figures.<sup>12</sup> The thing about Dostoevsky's characters is that they *live*. And by this I don't mean just that they're successfully realized and believable and "round." The best of them live inside us, forever, once we've met them. Recall e.g. the proud and pathetic Raskolnikov, the naive Devushkin, the beautiful and damned Nastasya of *The Idiot*,<sup>13</sup> the unctuous Lebyedev and spiderish Ippolit of the same novel; Cops' ingenious maverick detective Porfiry Petrovich (without whom there would probably be no commercial detective stories and eccentrically brilliant cops); Marmeladov, the hideous and pitiful sot; or the vain and noble roulette-addict Aleksey Ivanovich of *The Gambler*; the gold-hearted whores Sonya and Liza; the beautiful stone-hearted Aglaia; or the unbelievably repellent Smerdyakov, that living engine of slimy resentment in whom I see parts of myself I can barely stand to look at; or the child- and Christ-like, idealized and all-too-human Myshkin and Alyosha (the doomed human Christ and triumphant child-pilgrim, respectively). These — many more — transcend the page — *live* — and not because they're just

<sup>12</sup> I personally think this is why so much good commercial fiction has a dull and formulaic feel to it — it's less the plots than the characters that always end up seeming formulaic, painted by numbers.

<sup>13</sup> (who was, like Faulkner's Caddie, "doomed and knew it," and whose heroism consists in her haughty defiance of a doom she also courts — FMD seems like the first fiction-writer really to understand that some people love their own suffering, depend on it. Nietzsche would take Dostoevsky's insight and make it a cornerstone of his own devastating attack on Christianity, and this is vastly ironic: in our own age and culture of enlightened atheism we are very much Nietzsche's children, his ideological heirs, and without Dostoevsky here there would have been no Nietzsche, and yet Dostoevsky is among the most deeply religious of all writers . . .)

skillfully drawn types or facets of human beings, but because, acting within nailbitingly good plots, they dramatize the profoundest parts of all human beings, the parts most conflicted, most serious: the ones with the most at stake. Plus Dostoevsky's characters also — and without ever ceasing to be human and real — represent ideologies and philosophies of life: Raskolnikov the "rational egoism" of the 1860s' Left, Myshkin mystical Christian love, the Underground Man the influence of European positivism on the Russian character, Ippolit the individual will raging against death, Aleksey the perversion of Slavophilic pride in the face of European perfidy . . . on and on.

I submit that Dostoevsky wrote fiction about stuff that's really important. He wrote stories about identity, moral value, death, will, carnal v. spiritual love, greed, freedom, obsession, reason, faith, suicide. And he did it without ever reducing his characters to caricatures or his books to tracts. His concern was always *what it is to be a human being*, i.e. how a person, in the particular social and philosophical circumstances of Nineteenth-century Russia, could be a *real person*, be a person whose life was informed by love and values and principles instead of being just a very shrewd species of self-preserving animal.

**\*\*Is it possible really to love somebody? If I'm lonely, empty inside, everybody outside me is potential relief: I need them. But is it possible to love what you need? Does real love have to be voluntary? Does it have to even not be in my own best interests, the love, to count as love?\***

It's a famous irony that Dostoevsky, whose fiction is admired for its wisdom and compassion and moral rigor, was in many ways kind of a prick in real life — vain, solipsistic, arrogant, spiteful, selfish. A man with a pretty serious gambling problem, he was almost always broke, and whined constantly about his poverty, and was always badgering his friends and colleagues for emergency loans that he seldom repaid, and he held petty and longstanding grudges about money, and once pawned his young wife's coat in cold weather so he could gamble, etc.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Frank doesn't blink this sort of stuff, but in his account we learn that Dostoevsky's character was paradoxical: insufferably vain about his literary reputation, he was also

But it's just as well known that Dostoevsky's own life was full of incredible suffering and drama and tragedy and heroism. His Moscow childhood was so miserable that never once in any his books does Dostoevsky set or even mention any action in Moscow.<sup>15</sup> His remote and neurasthenic father was murdered by his own serfs when FMD was 17. Seven years later, the publication of his first novel,<sup>16</sup> and its endorsement by critics like Belinsky and Herzen, made Dostoevsky an instant superstar at the exact same time that he was starting to get involved with the Petrashevsky Circle, a group of revolutionary intellectuals who plotted to incite a peasant uprising against the Tsar. In 1849, FMD, sort of the McInerney of his era, was arrested as a conspirator, convicted, sentenced to death, and underwent the famous "mock execution of the Petrashevtsy," in which the conspirators were blindfolded and tied to stakes and at the "Aim!" stage of the firing-squad process when an imperial messenger rode up with a supposed "last-minute" reprieve from the merciful Tsar. His sentence commuted to imprisonment and exile, the epileptic Dostoevsky ended up spending almost a decade in balmy Siberia, returning to St. Petersburg in 1859 to find that the Russian literary world had all but forgotten him. Then his wife died — unpleasantly — then his beloved brother Mikhail died, then his literary journal *Epoch* went under, then his epilepsy started

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tormented his whole life by what he saw as his inadequacies as a writer; a leech and spendthrift, he also did stuff like voluntarily assume financial responsibility for his stepson, for the unbelievably nasty family of his deceased brother, and for the debts of the famous journal *Epoch* he and that brother had co-edited. Frank's fourth volume makes it clear that it was these honorable debts, not general deadbeatism, that sent Mr. and Mrs. FMD into exile in Europe to avoid debtor's prison, and that it was only at the spas of Europe that Dostoevsky's gambling mania went out of control.

<sup>15</sup> Sometimes this allergy to Moscow is awkwardly striking: q.v. the start of Part Two of *The Idiot*, when Prince Myshkin — the novel's protagonist — has left St. Petersburg for six full months in Moscow: "... of Myshkin's adventures during his absence from Petersburg we can give little information" (169). Frank doesn't mention much about this Moscovophilia; I have no idea what it's about.

<sup>16</sup> *Poor Folk*, a regulation "social novel" that frames kind of a goopy little love story with depictions of urban poverty sufficiently ghastly to elicit the approval of a socialist Left that in 1840s' Russia more or less equaled the literary episcopate.

getting so bad that he was constantly terrified that he'd die or go permanently crazy from the seizures.<sup>17</sup> Hiring a 22-year-old stenographer to help him complete *The Gambler* in time to satisfy a publisher with whom he'd signed an insane deliver-by-a-certain-date-or-forfeit-all-royalties-for-everything-you-ever-wrote contract, Dostoevsky married this amanuensis six months later, just in time to flee *Epoch's* creditors with her, wander unhappily through a Europe whose influence on Russia he despised,<sup>18</sup> have a beloved daughter who died of pneumonia almost right away, writing constantly, penniless, literally hungry, often clinically depressed in the aftermath of tooth-rattling grand mal seizures, going through cycles of roulette-binges and then rushing self-hatred. Volume IV details a lot of Dostoevsky's European tribulations via the journals of his new wife, Anna Snitkin, by all counts a really nice and patient person whose emotional<sup>19</sup> martyrdom

<sup>17</sup> It's true that FMD's epilepsy, including the mystical illuminations that attended his pre-seizure auras, gets no more than cursory attention from Frank, and reviewers like the *Times* of London's James L. Rice (himself the author of a weird book on epilepsy and Dostoevsky, a kind of medical biography), complained that Frank "gives no idea of the malady's chronic impact" on Dostoevsky's religious ideals and their representation in his books. Other critics who complain that Frank doesn't pay enough attention to FMD's pathology include Stephen Jan Parker of the *NYTBR*, who spends a third of his review of Volume III making arguments like "It seems to me that Dostoevsky's behavior does conform fully to the diagnostic criteria for pathological gambling as set forth in the American Psychiatric Association's diagnostic manual." As much as anything, it's reviews like these that help us appreciate Frank's own even-handed breadth and his absence of specific axes to grind.

<sup>18</sup> I don't want to neglect to observe that Frank's biography often provides good and interesting dirt. W/r/t FMD's adventures in Europe, for example, we learn in Volume IV that his famous 1867 fight with Turgenev, which was mostly over the fact that Turgenev (whom Frank clearly doesn't like, and portrays as a kind of yuppie with a monode) had offended Dostoevsky's passionate nationalism by attacking Russia in print and moving to Germany and declaring himself a German, was also partly over the fact that Dostoevsky had years earlier borrowed 50 thalers from Turgenev and promised to pay him back right away and never did — Frank is too restrained to make the obvious point that it's much easier to live with stiffing somebody if you decide that person's an asshole.

<sup>19</sup> An unexpected bonus is that Frank's volumes are full of marvelous and funny and tongue-rolling names — Snitkin, Dubolyobov, Strakhov, Golubov, von Voght,

as the spouse of this guy ought to qualify her as patron saint of the codependency-recovery movement or something.<sup>20</sup>

**\*\*What is "an American"? Do we have something in common as Americans, or is it just that we all live inside the same boundaries and are accountable to the same laws? How is America different from other countries? Is there something special about it? Forget about special privileges that go with being an American — are there special responsibilities that go with being an American? If so, responsibilities to whom?\***

Frank's account does cover all the personal stuff, and in great detail, and he doesn't try to downplay or whitewash the icky parts.<sup>21</sup> But his project requires that Frank at all times work to relate Dostoevsky's personal and psychological life to his fictions and to the ideologies that inform them. The fact that Dostoevsky is first and finally an *ideological*

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Katkov, Nekrasov, Pisarev. You can see why Russian writers like Gogol and Dostoevsky raised to a fine art the employment of epithetic names.

<sup>20</sup> Q.v., from her journal: " 'Poor Feodor, he does suffer so much . . . and is always so irritable, and liable to fly out about trifles. . . . It's of no consequence, because the other days are good, when he is so sweet and gentle. Besides, I can see that when he screams at me it is from illness, not from bad temper.' " Frank quotes large amounts of this sort of stuff without much evident awareness that the Dostoevskys' relationship was in certain ways pretty sick, at least by 1990s' standards: e.g. "Anna's forbearance, whatever prodigies of self-command it may have cost her, was amply compensated for (at least in her eyes) by Dostoevsky's immense gratitude and growing sense of attachment." Beattie, Bradshaw, et al. would have a field day with this sort of stuff.

<sup>21</sup> (See also e.g. Dostoevsky's disastrous passion for the utter bitch-goddess Appolinari Suslova, or the mental gymnastics he performs to justify his binges at the casino — or the fact, amply documented by Frank, that FMD really was an active part of the Petrashevsky circle and as a matter of fact probably did deserve to be arrested under the laws of the time, this *pace* a lot of biographers who've tried to claim that Dostoevsky just happened to be dragged by friends to the wrong radical meeting at the wrong time.)

writer<sup>22</sup> makes him an especially congenial subject for Joseph Frank's contextual approach to biography. And the four extant volumes of *Dostoevsky* make it clear that no personal event was as important to the genesis of the mature FMD than the mock execution of 22 December 1849, a period of several minutes when a certain frail, neurotic, and utterly self-involved 28-year-old believed his life was over. What resulted in Dostoevsky was some sort of very deep "conversion experience,"<sup>23</sup> though it gets complicated, because the Christian convictions that inform Dostoevsky's writings thereafter are not those of any organized theology or denomination, really, and are also bound up with a kind of mystical Russian nationalism and a political conservatism<sup>24</sup> that led the next century's Soviets to suppress FMD's work and any evidence of its influence.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> It's probably true that Tolstoy and Hugo and Zola and most of the nineteenth-century titans were also ideological writers. But the thing about Dostoevsky's gift for character and for rendering the psychological and moral and spiritual conflicts within (not just *between*) people is that it lets him dramatize extremely heavy and serious moral themes without ever seeming preachy or reductive, that is, without ever blinking the difficulties of moral and spiritual conflicts or making ideas of "goodness" or "redemption" seem simpler than they really are. You need only compare the protagonists' final conversions in Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych* and FMD's *Crime and Punishment* to appreciate Dostoevsky's ability to be moral without being moralistic.

<sup>23</sup> (a term from William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* that Frank uses a lot)

<sup>24</sup> Here, in Vol. III's chapter on *House of the Dead*, is another thing Frank discusses brilliantly: part of the reason why FMD abandoned the fashionable socialist principles of his twenties is that years of imprisonment in Siberia with the absolute bottom-feeders of society taught him that the peasants and urban poor of Russia totally loathed the comfortable upper-class intellectuals who wanted to "liberate" them, and also that they were kind of right for loathing them. If you want to get some idea of how Dostoevskyan irony might translate into modern U.S. culture, try reading *House of the Dead* against Tom Wolfe's "Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers."

<sup>25</sup> This state of affairs is one reason why Bakhtin's famous *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, published under Stalin, had to seriously downplay FMD's ideological involvement with his own characters. A lot of Bakhtin's praise for Dostoevsky's "polyphonic" characterizations and the "dialogic imagination" that allowed Dostoevsky to refrain from injecting his own values into his books is the natural result of a Soviet critic try-

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\*\*Does this guy Jesus Christ's life have anything to teach me even if he wasn't "divine"? What are the implications of the claim that somebody who was supposed to be God's relative, and so could have turned the cross into a planter or something with just a look, still voluntarily let them nail him up there, and died? And did he *know*? Did he *know* he could have broken the cross with just a look? — Speaking of knowing, did he know in advance that the death'd just be temporary? had God, like, clued him in? Because I bet I could climb up there, too, if I knew an eternity of right-hand bliss lay on the other side of a few hours of pain . . . — Does any of this even matter? Can I still believe in J.C. or Mohammed or Buddha or Whoever even if I don't believe they were personal relatives of God? Plus what would that even mean, anyway, "believe in"?

What seems most important is that FMD's near-death experience changed a typically vain and trendy young writer — a very talented one, true, but still somebody whose basic ambitions were for his own literary glory<sup>26</sup> — into somebody who believed deeply in moral/spiritual values<sup>27</sup> — nay, more, into somebody who believed that a life lived

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ing to discuss an author whose "reactionary" views the State wanted forgotten. Frank, who takes out after Bakhtin at a number of points in his books, doesn't really make clear the constraints Bakhtin was operating under.

26 Should we find it depressing that the young Dostoevsky was just like young U.S. writers today, or is it kind of reassuring?

27 Not surprisingly, FMD's exact beliefs are idiosyncratic and complicated, and Frank does a good job of tracing them out as they're dramatized in the novels (q.v., the effect of egoistic atheism on the Russian character in *Notes and C&P*; the deformation of Russian passion by worldly Europe in *The Gambler*; and, in *The Idiot's* Myshkin and *The Brothers Karamazov's* Zossima, the implications of a human Christ subjected literally to nature's scientific forces, an idea central to all the fiction Dostoevsky wrote after he saw Holbein the Younger's *Dead Christ* at the Basel Museum in 1867).

But what Frank has done really phenomenally well is to distill the enormous amounts of archival material that exist by and about FMD, helping make it compre-

without moral/spiritual values was not just incomplete but depraved.<sup>28</sup>

So, for me anyway, the big thing that makes Dostoevsky invaluable for millennial American readers is that he appears to possess degrees of passion, conviction, and engagement with deep moral issues that we — here, today — cannot or do not permit ourselves. Frank does an admirable job of tracing out the combinations of things that made this engagement possible — FMD's own beliefs and talent, the ideological and aesthetic climate of his day, etc. I think that any serious American reader/writer, though, on finishing Frank's books, will be driven to think hard about what exactly it is that makes so many of the novelists of our own place and time look so thematically shallow and lightweight, so *impoverished*, in comparison to Gogol or Dostoevsky or even lesser lights like Lermontov and Turgenev. Frank leads us to inquire of ourselves why we (under our own nihilist spell) seem to require of our writers an

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hensive instead of just using parts of it to bolster a particular critical stance. E.g., near the end of Vol. III, Frank finds and cites obscure notes for "Socialism and Christianity," an essay Dostoevsky never finished, that give a reasonably succinct picture of FMD's beliefs —

"Christ's incarnation . . . provided a new ideal for mankind, one that has retained its validity ever since: N.B. Not one atheist who has disputed the divine origin of Christ has denied the fact that He is the ideal of humanity. The latest on this — Renan. This is very remarkable.' And the law of this new ideal, according to Dostoevsky, consists of 'the return to spontaneity, to the masses, but freely. . . . Not forcibly, but on the contrary, in the highest degree willfully and consciously. It is clear that this higher willfulness is at the same time a higher renunciation of the will' " (Vol. III, 372).

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<sup>28</sup> FMD's particular foes were the Nihilists, the radical progeny of the '40s' socialists, whose name comes from a speech in Turgenev's *Father's and Sons*. But the real battle was wider. It is no accident that Joseph Frank's big epigraph for Vol. IV is from Kolakowski's classic *Modernity on Endless Trial*, for Dostoevsky's abandonment of utilitarian socialism for an idiosyncratic moral conservatism can be seen in the same light as Kant's awakening from "dogmatic slumber" into a radical Pietist deontology nearly a century earlier: "By turning against the popular utilitarianism of the Enlightenment, [Kant] also knew exactly that what was at stake was not any particular moral code, but rather a question of the existence or nonexistence of the distinction between good and evil and, consequently, a question of the fate of mankind."

ironic distance from deep convictions or desperate questions, so that contemporary writers have to either make jokes of profound issues or else try somehow to "work them in" under cover of some formal trick like intertextual quotation or incongruous juxtaposition, sticking them inside asterisks as part of some artily surreal defamiliarization-of-the-reading-experience flourish or some such shit.

Part of the answer to questions about contemporary art's thematic poverty obviously involves our era's postindustrial condition and postmodern culture. The Modernists, among other accomplishments, elevated aesthetics to the level of ethics, and Great Novels since Joyce tend to be judged largely on their formal ingenuity. Their legacy to us is that we now presume as a matter of course that "serious" literature will be aesthetically distanced from real lived life. Add to this the requirement of textual self-consciousness imposed by postmodernism, and it's probably fair to say that Dostoevsky et al. were free from certain cultural expectations that severely constrain our own novelists' freedom to be truly "serious."

But it's just as fair to observe that Dostoevsky operated under some cultural constraints of his own: a repressive government, state censorship, and above all the popularity of post-Enlightenment European thought, much of which thought went directly against beliefs he held dear and wanted to write about. The big thing for me is that Dostoevsky wasn't just a genius; he was, finally, brave. He never stopped worrying about his literary reputation, but he also never stopped promulgating the unfashionable stuff in which he believed. And he did this not by ignoring the unfriendly cultural circumstances in which he was writing, but by confronting them, engaging them, specifically and by name.<sup>29</sup>

Maybe it's not true that we today are nihilists. For we, at least, have certain devils we believe in, things we revile and fear. These devils include

<sup>29</sup> Plowing through the historical and linguistic impediments actually to read this author makes it very clear why Dostoevsky deserves his canonical place. In his novels, great and profound issues simultaneously transcend and are rooted in the particularities of place, time, history, character. The irony of his now being abstracted by canonization is that he is almost unequalled in his ability to make abstractions concrete and bare ideas alive and vital.

sentimentality, naiveté, archaism, fanaticism. Maybe it'd be better to call our art's culture one of *congenital skepticism*. Our intelligentsia distrust strong belief, open conviction. Material passion is one thing, but ideological passion disgusts us on some very deep level. We believe that ideology is now the province of the rival SIGs and PACs all trying to get their slice of the big green pie — and, looking around us, we see that it is indeed so. But the Dostoevsky one discovers in Frank's biography would point out — more like hop up and down and shake his fist and fly at us and scream — that this is at least partly because we have abandoned the field. Have abandoned the field to fundamentalist Christian movements whose absence of compassion and whose readiness to judge show clearly that they're clueless about the "Christian" principles they would impose on others. To rightist militias and conspiracy-theorists whose paranoia about the government depends on the government being just way more organized and efficient than it really is. And, especially in the literary and academic fields, to the mostly absurd and embarrassing Political Correctness movement, whose obsession with the *forms* of utterance and behavior show too well how desiccated and aestheticized our most liberal instincts have become, how desperately removed from what's really important: motive, feeling, belief and its absence.

Take a look at just a snippet from the famous "Necessary Explanation" of Ippolit in *The Idiot*:

" 'Anyone who attacks individual charity,' I began, 'attacks human nature and casts contempt on personal dignity. But the organisation of 'public charity' and the problem of individual freedom are two distinct questions, and not mutually exclusive. Individual kindness will always remain, because it is an individual impulse, the living impulse of one personality to exert a direct influence upon another. . . . How can you tell, Bahmutov, what significance such an association of one personality with another may have on the destiny of those associated?' "

Can you imagine any of our important contemporary novelists allowing a character to say things like this? — not, mind you, just as hypocritical bombast so that some hip cynical hero can put a pin in it, but as part of a ten-page monologue by somebody trying to decide whether to commit suicide. The obvious response to the question is also a true one: such a contemporary novelist would be, by our lights, pretentious and dumb. The presentation of such a speech in a major and serious novel today would provoke, not outrage or invective, but worse: one raised eyebrow and a very slight smile (maybe, if its writer was a really *major* novelist, a very subtle deadpan line in a Letterman monologue). The novelist would be — and this is our own age's truest vision of hell — laughed out of town.

So he — we, fiction writers — won't — ever — dare try to use serious art to advance ideologies.<sup>30</sup> The project would be as culturally inappropriate as Menard's *Quixote*. We'd be laughed out of town. Given this (and it is a given), who is to blame for the ideological passionlessness of our own Dostoevskys? The culture, the laughers? But they wouldn't — could not — laugh if a piece of passionately serious ideological contemporary fiction was also ingenious and radiantly transcendent fiction. But how to make it that? — how even, for a writer today, even a very talented writer today, to get up the guts to even try? There are no formulae, nor are there guarantees. But there are models. Stars to steer by. Frank's books are a cosmogony of one of them.

1995

<sup>30</sup> We will, of course, without hesitation use art to parody, ridicule, debunk or protest ideologies . . . but this is very different.

# The Flexicon

*Editor's Note: The Flexicon is the playful brainchild of Albert Goldbarth. Its aim is to pay homage to the lexical richness of English, a birthright that many poets and novelists today either ignore or squander. It is no accident that all the writers who participated in The Flexicon round-robin draw heavily on food metaphors, since their gourmandizing appetite for sensual words is astounding. Advocates of the plain style often react uneasily to what they believe is self-indulgent verbal excess or pedantry, castigating the stylists who prefer the fleshpots and musical embellishments of Baroque vocabulary to the stern truths of more restrained wordsmiths. Mere rhetoric, the Puritans scoff.*

*I, for one, cast my lot with the maximalists. Too much contemporary American poetry, in my opinion, is timid in choice of language: no seductive consonants, no mellifluous or raucous vowels, no cockatoos, no memorable turns of phrase. Instead, the verse plods flat and bloodless down the page, sounding like lowest-common-denominator speech or a drone of shopworn abstractions. The Flexicon's tomfoolery offers a cogent reminder of the lexical pleasures waiting to be savored.*

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*There are some who want language to be a clear broth. Stone. Light. Milk. Soul. Darkness.*

But there's also a bowl of broth asquiggle à la Pollock with thick egg noodles, with involuted vegetables sprouting hairs and wearing wens like lavish boutonnières, with floating sargassos of tripe, or matzoh balls so fully lunar you'd think that they would warp the field of gravity in the bowl. *Seiche. Grommet. Hoochie-koo. Incunabula. Houghmagandy.*

The language is a hobo stew, a ragout, an up-to-the-elbow search in the haggis.

I'm thinking of food not only because a word is a density on the tongue, but also because this morning I overheard one of those lucky moments of natural spoken beauty, in the supermarket. A guy in a hurry

Do you know where the Cheez Whiz  
That you squeeze is?

ALBERT GOLDBARTH

...

And so they got to it among the ant traps, she overcome by his burst of natural spoken beauty, coiling and uncoiling among the mounds of ersatz cream right next to the Limburger, he racking his deblooded brain for words to reward her with—*puttee, abonnement, scuzzy, porcelain, fanny, shebang, couvade, plimsoll, googol, fistula*—while she sighed ectoplasm all over him, inhaling phonemes like a milkmaid her own stool. *Phlegm, java, algebra*, he went on, heaving toward climax, stirred by a simple slangy anacoluthon, *boycott, Pernambuco, indri, gasket, akimbo, Aliquippa, dunt*. Then his mutter broke into the clear and he asked, "Does the Swan of Tuonela sing because it happens to be dying or because it is surviving? Why does it sing so majestically?" Jubilantly aghast, she ignored him, having gone beyond receptivity to mere words, having already sourpissed her mistresspiece.

"What's your fucking name?" he asked. "Joyce?"

"Only Joyce when I'm fucking," she said, aware that her best was behind her, as they all had always said. It was over, their oleaginous peak. It is possible to have no more than a paramedic's sense of fatality. He and his Joyce ended up barricaded (flimsy Maginot) behind huge blocks of weightless styrofoam, Poe-ed by Amontillado, gasping at their new diet of excelsior, waiting for fescue but doomed to remain there forever, he asking where it was, she answering with one immaculate phrase, a prodigy of impromptu civility. "It isn't where it *once* was," she told him, "you've scrambled my tripes good and proper, and they're going to move me to Fish and Meatus in the morning. Put that in your pipette and suck it. That's what comes of fancy talk."

"Sorry," he gasped, "I take it all back."

"They doesn't swim backward," she told him.

"Then we'll blind the little bastards with vinegar."

At once they set off for Aisle Eleven, pausing only to bow in the direction of a sign saying "Support the Dweebs of Houdinor Place."

They walked it all right, emerging in a golden shower that drowned the ant traps one and all.

PAUL WEST

...

Words were his only and all, his food for thoughts, his bonbons as well as bons mots, and when it came right down to it the hardscrabble of his despair. True for him, because true for all. Rhymes can slide over the lips like raw oysters without being tasted. But perhaps he knew only too well his rhyme scheme, perhaps, due to a concussion he suffered while heliarc welding, he could only speak in a four-point rhyme, and that the next thing he said was: "Holy mole, my goal is frijoles," and that while standing at the check-out line, with a soupçon of soup, a mélange of melba, a ragout of Ragu, and half a shopping cart filled with corpse food, he began dreaming of making a cajorie for Marjorie, and quite unselfconsciously burst into the following song:

Please leave your sweaters at home,  
if you are tempted to roam.  
You can eat some linguini and wear a bikini,  
but please leave your sweaters at home.

It was a small ditty, but Marjorie, whose favorite dish was word stew (which, like revenge, she preferred to eat cold) was bound to giggle and jiggle all the same. Panic set in. Had he run all his errands? From his pocket, he pulled out his list, "Things To Do Today":

1. Stomach-pump the vampire
2. Curry favor (with chutney)
3. Skip to my loo
4. Rediaper the babe in the woods
5. Squash blossoms on neck
6. Auscultate silverfish
7. Moon over Miami
8. Unzip tse tse fly
9. Refrond punkahwallah

10. Absquatulate
11. Teach car about auto-eroticism
12. Read Coppard on pool coping
13. Lope, mope, and syncope
14. Knit sweater from brows
15. Jactitate soundlessly
16. Peel Adam's apple
17. Shuffle off a mortal coil
18. Be gross in a grocery

With a flourish he checked off the last item. Because the day was still young and wordful, all that remained was to phone his fine, phoneme-mad friend, Goldbarth, and invite him to dine, in the margarine-free expanse of Marjorie's mansion.

DIANE ACKERMAN

...

"This sort of coy self-reflexive metaverbal text thing just depresses the shit out of me," exeleutherostomizes an incidental character—maybe a bagboy at the PriceChopper or some kind of high-class chef at Marjorie's Mansion or something—who appears now w/o any more reason or reality than the soubrettish cashier or the logophilic protagonist of the earlier sections of this serial exhibition, the nameless guy whose lexical sex scene in (2) is just an excuse for a lot of metalexical riffs and intertextual allusions and whose recursive errand-list in (3) is just an excuse for some arch wordplay and pinchbeck paradox. (Plus note that that cheese-happy protagonist (a male) is nameless so far, which is another standard move for this kind of kooky wacky metalexical serial spree-type fiction: either you give the guy a name like "Name" or "Logos" or "Techst" or something, or else you give him no name at all so that his queer namelessness becomes an object of the reader's attention and so comments obliquely on names/naming/signification as abstract phenomena, all of which seems tremendously cool and complex and *sui generis* if (a) it's 1965 and/or you're either (b) 20 years old or (c)

French, but which to the 35-year-old WASP bagboy/chef in 1998 seems generic and lame and depressing.)

Maybe the only important character-developmentish thing to know about the bagboy/chef is that he washed out of a Masters of Fine Arts in Poetry program at one of the Graduate Creative Writing Departments that I predict will compose just about the entire interested readership for a metalexic line-dance such as the *Flexicon*. This bit of developmental background, however clunky and discursive its insertion, has the advantage that it quote/unquote *motivates* not only the bagboy/chef's pissy attitude toward the preceding sections but his whole resoundingly confused and caveat-hobbled attitude toward the aesthetics of big fancy words. E.g., consider the following list of predicates, which the bagboy/chef would have seen in the Graduate Creative Writing Dept's "In(/Ex)clu(e)si(e)ve Vocabularies and the Canon(sens)ical Phallocracy of Neoclassical Dic(k)tion" poetics seminar if the seminar hadn't been offered only every other Spring (because the seminar's famous but almost translucently pale and delicate Prof took three out of every four terms off to do Visiting Writer gigs at Iowa and Hopkins and to undergo hormonal treatments for the congenital cryptorchidism that most of his own celebrated poems were sustained meditations on) and if the bagboy/chef hadn't dropped out after his first term (which was, of course, a Fall term):

Diminutive  
Big  
Unwritten  
Invisible  
Pulchritudinous  
Indecorous  
Foreign  
Unrecognizable  
Fancy  
Uncapitalized  
Misspelled  
Obscene

... and so on, like seven or eight columns of them, with the students' assignment being to name what truly interesting feature all the words

have in common, which, after stuff like “all predicates” and “all written in chalk” has been essayed and shot down, ends up being that each word itself possessed something like the opposite of whatever property it functions to denote, for example “Misspelled” being correctly spelled and “Big” being a small word and “Pulchritudinous” being a seriously repulsive word, etc., with the pharmaceutically hirsute and seborrheal Prof up at the board patting his forehead with a hankie and explaining that the list’s semiotic point is that words are also themselves things, objects, and themselves have qualities, qualities which are themselves subject to predication/signification/nullification via still *other* words—e.g., “‘Paris’ has five letters in it” vs. “Paris is a town in which no second-semester grad student would regard this sort of revelation as in any way revelatory”—and plus (for extra credit) that words’ and terms’ semantic and affective and ontological properties remain extant and describable even when those words and terms don’t refer to anything real—e.g., the well-known Russellian noun-phrase in “The present King of France is a cryptorchid.”

Missing this (ex)plication of what the Prof sometimes called Hypernominalism and sometimes called the Ineluctable Ontological Opacity of the Signifier (neither of which terms caught on) actually cost the bagboy/chef/ex-grad student nothing but a certain chic vocabulary for describing the whole problem, however, since he’d already hit the problem face-first at the inaugural meeting of his (one) career Graduate Poetry Workshop experience that first ill-fated fall, when the Workshop’s non-Prof (this teacher didn’t have a Ph.D., of which fact he seemed to be extremely proud, and mentioned it a lot, like it denoted some sort of special integrity or exemption), who was a burly workingman’s poet very much in the austere tradition of plain single-entendre diction and maximum unfussiness, put up on the board what he (i.e., the laconic and perversely proud non-Prof) called his Rule of Thumb, meaning if you didn’t follow the Rule his big thumb (which was actually muscular, visibly, like an arm, the thumb was) would jerk doorward in such a way as to signify that you were kicked out of the Workshop and thus flunked out of the Graduate Creative Writing Department itself and thus had no chance of earning the M.F.A. that could (assuming you had sufficient publications on your c.v.) get you a tenure-track job even without a doctorate, this R. of T. being:

## 'DON'T USE A BIG WORD WHEN A SMALL WORD WILL DO[.]'<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Note that this, the 4th Section of *The Flexicon* to which this recursive digression is itself appended—and which went through several agonizing drafts and countless perusals of dictionary and thesaurus in search of just the right word/phrase to convey just the right concept/*l'entendre*-matrix—follows the non-Prof's prehensile proscription to the letter at all times, despite the occasional deployment of such apparent jawbreakers as for example "excleutherostomizes" and "cryptorchid," which however in each instance of their use were the absolutely right and only words in contemporary English to signify just what needed to be signified. For instance, if "cryptorchid" hadn't been used, some kind of noun-phrase like "man who's got testicles but whose scrotum is nevertheless empty because the testicles refuse to leave the natal warmth of his abdomen and descend into the so-called 'real world'" would have had to stand in for it, which would not only have been clunky and infelicitous but would have taken a lot more time to read than just the one obscure but pathologically precise word does, not to mention the fact that the long clunky noun-phrase would have had to be used more than once, since a form of the word "cryptorchid" appears in the text of *Flexicon's* Section (4) either two, six, or three times (depending whether you construe this FNI as itself part of 4's actual "text" and, if so, whether you choose to count only *uses* of the word (i.e., the word deployed to refer to an actual extralinguistic cryptorchid, which by the way the renowned Prof in question really was) or to count both *uses* and *mentions* of it ("mentions" being the precise technical term for the deployment of the word in quotes or ital or bold so as to signify that the word is referring to the word *itself* rather than to any real-world referent—q.v. the "'Paris' has five letters in it" example in the Section's main text above. And same sort of deal with "excleutherostomizes," which denotes a very particular sort of one's-mind-speaking not captured by "exclaimed" or "ejaculated" or "interjected" and especially not by "jactitated," although "jactitated" would, in less restrained and painstaking hands, have proved irresistibly tempting, establishing as its deployment would the sort of interpersonal but intratextual link to Ms. Ackerman's Section (3) that coy self-reflexive serials like *Flexicon* thrive on, except "jactitate" has a subtle flavor of vaunt/obnoxiousness/calumny to its connotation that's different from "excleutherostomize"'s flavor of just innocently happening to verbalize something—almost the way you can sometimes think you're only thinking something and then look up at your listeners' faces and realize to your horror that you seem to have verbalized aloud the thing you were thinking without even consciously intending to do it (i.e., to say it), an innocence and lack of self-consciousness that might well be *perceived* as insolent or obnoxious but hasn't got the *intrinsic* obnoxiousness built into it that's part of the sense of "jactitate" (which word—that is, "jactitate"—also, as it were tertiarily, denotes a spasmodic or uncontrollable twitching, which means that Ms. Ackerman's Koan #15 could, if uttered to or interpreted by a neurologist or pharmaceutical researcher, make perfect—but I'm guessing wholly unintended—sense (which brings up the fascinating case of linguistic paradoxes that depend on a certain univocal interpretation for their paradoxicalness) and so are heavily context-dependent (the context being the identity of the listener and her particular interpretation of the relevant terms) when the whole point of paradoxes is that, like logical tautologies, they're supposed to hold sort of *a priori* in every possible real-world instance.

[FN], continued]

whereas in the case of Ms. Ackerman's #15 and a tardive-dyskinesia specialist the paradox fails to "not-signify" and thus isn't a true coin-of-the-realm paradox at all, at least in contemporary English).

All of which prenominate issues seem, at least to somebody like the dysphoric bagboy (who himself is sometimes given to jactitating a bit when he chances to look up and see the "15 Items or Less" sign swinging blithely over the #2's conveyor belt), to entail certain absolutely vital caveats and corollaries to the burly non-Prof's Rule of Thumb, viz. e.g.:

\*;But sometimes a small word won't do, and then it's not only permissible but probably even *necessary* to use a big word;

\*;Except you have to be really careful in the application of (\*;), because since words are themselves things with qualities, and since there's always going to be a slight divergence or doubling of a poetry-reader's attention between the qualities of the referents of the words and the words' *own* qualities (qualities which can, by the way, vary incredibly, even if there's no L.-Straussian context to affect interpretation—for instance, Rev. Goldbarth surely jests with "a word is a density on the tongue," because it is clearly *not* the case that all words are densities on the tongue: as in for just one example see the way the word "aquarelle"

is not a lingual density but rather a liberation of the tongue from all density (say "aquarelle" out loud, like chant it, over and over, until it does that weird thing chanted words do

where "aquarelle" separates from what it so perfectly names and becomes its own object, pure sound, floating, taking with it first tongue and then *chanteur*). And if you consider that a good portion of the attention the reader will be paying to the words themselves will be not just cognitive but *aesthetic*, which let's face it means in certain respects critical, judgmental, normative, then you can see why you have to be just *exceedingly* disciplined and painstaking and judicious and restrained in your use of a big word, because if the reader's ever tempted to deploy predicates like "gratuitous" or "pretentious" or "jactatory" or "show-offy" in her critical second-order description (even to herself, silently, even unconsciously) of the big word, then the entire delicate floating mechanism comes crashing down: she will be both unmoved by the poem and contemptuous of its author; and the contempt will be (in the bagboy's opinion) your well-deserved desert.

at which introductory inditement and promulgation the future bagboy, the first poem of whose application portfolio had been entitled "*NATURA NON FACIT SALTUM*" and had started out "Woe betide the Helminth whose Host / eschews Cheese," had begun already to get his affairs in order, decamping<sup>2</sup> soon after for PriceChopper's Express Lane #2 and for the next thirteen years standing forlornly beneath an advisory Express Lane sign that uses "LESS" to refer to countable items, and still living with his folks, and being one of those unpublishable-type poets who submit stuff to places like *APR* and *Parnassus* and never even get out of the Slush Pile because they don't even type it or enclose an SASE or any of the unmistakable nonverbal clues that the submitter's a pro and his submission ought to be read seriously. All of which, when you think of the corollaries the non-Prof/c(/sh)ould have appended to his digital axiom, is pretty fucking sad.

DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

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<sup>2</sup>(not absquatulating—see FN1)

\*\*\*

A Three-Part *quoz* for the Alchemical Flexicon:

Deep in the Malabar nightshade, dear,  
 magnus hitch  
 is diazitized  
 with a swivel-type  
 newel. Deep in the sem-sem X

Madras, madrasah, mahoon

Philargyry, that  
philocubist,

does it  
en-  
candle

the Dome of mysterious  
Hem-line?

Know it now.

Gladly, my eyes turn from a site of ruin  
to happy nomenclature.

MAC WELLMAN

\*\*\*

Folderol. Gewgaw. Speaking in tongues. Fribbling. Cheese Whiz or  
No Biz. Let's get these excesses straight, 'kay? The demagogue slipped  
into the demislip.

In the dark woods  
In the dark woods  
In the dark woods  
The noodles  
Noodled  
Their noodles

Sign on the Staten Island Ferry: *Notice: Please Remain Inside of Ropes,  
Until Boat is Fast to Dock.* Is the boat fast that we jump the ropes? Are  
we there yet?

By the blue stream  
 By the blue stream  
 By the blue stream  
 The prick  
 Pricked  
 His prick

Greasy chicken feathers and cheese rinds, Mom. Not sufferin' succotash. "I didn't know a verb from a house."—Malcolm X.

In the fast car  
 In the fast car  
 In the fast car  
 The weenies  
 Weaned  
 Their wieners

*Pied affectation never made him rome / his stile is like his garmentes spun at home.*—Ben Jonson, holding Mermaid Tavern court, drowns the lot of 'em, though his unpied garments were no guarantors of gravity he found wanting in pied.

In the grocery cart  
 In the grocery cart  
 In the grocery cart  
 The wankers  
 Wanked  
 Their wanks.

*That car got us there and back for one hell of a spell, Marjorie.* Could it have all been only a ruse of the hegemony—the groceries, the check-out, the bagging, the taking, the driving, the storing, the cooking, the eating, the living, all a trick of the arbitrary vehicle?

We still need a reason to read.

Over the green dale  
 Over the green dale  
 Over the green dale  
 Peter's  
 Peter  
 Petered out.

*Sup?*

*No thing.* "There are times when . . . 'plain talk' . . . distorts the truth through a deliberate avoidance of complexity."—September 1996 letter to the editor, *New York Times*. "The essential fault of surrealism is that it invents without discovering."—Wallace Stevens.

Cut the c\*\*\*

Beneath the bridge  
 Beneath the bridge  
                   Beneath the bridge  
 Shaft  
 Shafted  
 His shaft.

"Cursed be the father of the bride of the blacksmith who forged the iron for the axe with which the oak was felled from which the bed was carved in which was conceived the great grandfather of the man who was driving the carriage in which your mother met your father."—Robert Desnos.

On the sunny hill  
 On the sunny hill  
 On the sunny hill  
 The cranks  
 Cranked  
 Their cranks.

Where did I hear the tale of Amiri Baraka seeing Thelonius Monk on the street? *Sup?*—or *What's happening?*—Baraka asks. "Everything. All

the time. Every googolplex of a second." One of the Originals group of Chinese poets working now, Jhou Yaping, cites the influence of the late T'ang dynasty:

ornamental, colorful diction stimulating the senses  
 metaphor  
 heaping  
 static states, details

Jeremy Prynne notes "our" exoticism, to the Originals, "with our credit-card view of the speech act."

At the frilly mall  
 At the frilly mall  
 At the frilly mall  
 The bagboy  
 Bagged  
 A bag.

*I am grateful to follow DFW, whose poets btw do not fare well here.*—  
 This is a constructed sentence with an invented implied subject.\*

At the pearly gates  
 At the pearly gates  
 At the pearly gates  
 The pecker  
 Pecked  
 His pecker.

\*Surely the years since 1965 add up to more than the second sentence of this ¶, or I'm off to the movies dinner, movie, art—the Biennial; where the painting by Raymond Pettibon reads:

*If rhetoric ever meant anything. And it did! It did!*

SUSAN WHEELER

If the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom, then that mode of  
 lexis breeds the Callas of idiom, aria auf excelsius, and exceeds the  
 analysis of reductio ad absurdum, and amen!, till the node, malignant,  
 of success speeds to its kingdom-done-deal

and the goad of sexus is freed of its load of excess and meads in the alice  
 of pissdom where, feckless, it seeds the chrysalis of vision and weeds the  
 women from the amen, hallelujah, glorioso, the abode wherein the toad  
 of hexes leads to the princess of kissdom, her hair a frizzlom, and the  
 pillow prince of Priapus showed off his phallus of jism that musta  
 growed in Texas and its molasses that flowed reckless into the chalice of  
 fizzledom, domicile for the pizzle of sizzle-and-cum, to explode (outside  
 the malice of Christendom, the tallis of Judaism, the talismen of schism)

while fee fi fo fum bleeds the Englishmun and Puritun, simple Simun  
 one to one, one syllable to one deed does indeed lead to killable paralysis  
 in abyssdom, the asinine fallacy or the callous of hell (which some say  
 is too many adjectives, and pun, they solemn, the low road in the  
 shallows of the system!) with no side wallows in hallelujahs or frissons  
 that lead to the omphalos of elysium, glory be to dapp and sap

for yea, the road of excess leads to the palace—see where the circumlocu-  
 tionous road goed, how the road growed and growed by following its nose  
 through the plexus, then rose and got high on the Parnassus—of  
 wisdom, exultate in excess!

SUSAN YANKOWITZ

...

"Cecilia was a tough cookie."

And so I'm taking this back to food, this splicey piece that started so  
 simply with its need to locate squeeze cheese, segued immediately to  
 Paul West's gamy main squeeze, then went on to mainline endless  
 hypo'd hyperlingual lalaland digressions into its overblown system.  
 Now, though—back to basics. To food.

In one of his dextrous essays, Bernard Cooper refers to an early childhood playmate who, "entranced by any old ordinary word, [would] begin to say it over and over. Mary, his sister, once let out an ear-splitting scream because . . . Jeffrey sat in a corner incessantly chanting 'cheese';

A small word; but it evidently transported him big distance.

"Cecilia" above is Cecilia Payne-Gaposchkin, perhaps the most eminent woman astronomer ever, a kind of Columbus of universal hydrogen. (The description of her tenacity is from fellow astronomer Jesse Greenstein.) When she sat in on lectures by bigwig Niels Bohr at Cambridge, she found that they were "rendered almost incomprehensible by his accent. There were references to what I recorded as 'soup groups' " —

Which should bring us back full-circle to the supermarket. That guy is leaving. He has his can of pseudocheese, and his receipt. Two tickets to a Bulls game. A condom. A picture of Otis, three, and Nona, four now. *Real things*, he thinks. A job. A plank of cut white pine. They don't go gassy, metamorph, and recombine to something else, they don't fog up or rhapsodize or curl around to gnaw themselves, they aren't made of void and a tickle of quantum fizz.

—"only later emended to 'sub-groups.' "

Language is my pleasure.

Still, I'm ending with non-verbal pleasure: a man who's simply cleared one hour at dusk to nosh on cheese-and-Ritz and stare at the day's-end colors. He sits on a stone. The light froths over him, like milk. He doesn't consciously think of his soul, but surely *something* in him stirs. And then the darkness comes.

ALBERT GOLDBARTH

# *Annunciation*

I saw a virgin who did not want to be  
impregnated by words—but I do,  
nor did I see her pushing off the unwanted angel  
when it was over, her humped back cat hissing,  
sensing perhaps, the human, inhuman, natural son.  
The loudest sound I ever heard came from within my ear:  
babble and chaos, twins inside me, as if the word and verb  
from the beginning were without pause, stop, caesura—  
all words meaningless, life without time and weather.  
Did I hear my death conceived inside my ear,  
like a child some call “the Savior”?

# WHY WRITE

Thoughts on the Craft of Fiction

ESSAYS BY:

RICK BASS  
TOM CHIARELLA  
PAT CONROY  
RICHARD FORD  
MARY GAITSKILL  
ELIZABETH GILBERT  
BARRY HANNAH  
JIM HARRISON

AMY HEMPEL  
MARK JACOBSON  
DARIUS JAMES  
DENIS JOHNSON  
THOM JONES  
NORMAN MAILER  
TERRY MCMILLAN  
RICK MOODY  
ANN PATCHETT

JAYNE ANNE PHILLIPS  
MARK RICHARD  
JAMES SALTER  
LEE SMITH  
ROBERT STONE  
WILLIAM VOLLMANN  
DAVID FOSTER WALLACE  
JOY WILLIAMS  
STEPHEN WRIGHT



Will Blythe Editor

D

# The Nature of the Fun

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DAVID FOSTER WALLACE



THE BEST METAPHOR I know of for being a fiction writer is in Don DeLillo's *Mao II*, where he describes a book-in-progress as a kind of hideously damaged infant that follows the writer around, forever crawling after the writer (dragging itself across the floors of restaurants where the writer's trying to eat, appearing at the foot of the bed first thing in the morning, etc.), hideously defective, hydrocephalic and noseless and flipper-armed and incontinent and retarded and dribbling cerebro-spinal fluid out of its mouth as it mewls and blurbles and cries out to the writer, wanting love, wanting the very thing its hideousness guarantees it'll get: the writer's complete attention.

The damaged-infant trope is perfect because it captures the mix of repulsion and love the fiction writer feels for something he's working on. The fiction always comes out so horrifically defective, so hideous a betrayal of all your hopes for it — a cruel and repellent caricature of the perfection of its conception — yes, un-

derstand: grotesque because *imperfect*. And yet it's yours, the infant is, it's *you*, and you love it and dandle it and wipe the cerebrospinal fluid off its slack chin with the cuff of the only clean shirt you have left (you have only one clean shirt left because you haven't done laundry in like three weeks because finally this one chapter or character seems like it's finally trembling on the edge of coming together and working and you're terrified to spend any time on anything other than working on it because if you look away for a second you'll lose it, dooming the whole infant to continued hideousness). And so you love the damaged infant and pity it and care for it; but also you hate it — *hate it* — because it's deformed, repellent, because something grotesque has happened to it in the parturition from head to page; hate it because its deformity is *your* deformity (since if you were a better fiction writer your infant would of course look like one of those babies in catalog ads for infant wear, perfect and pink and cerebro-spinally continent) and its every hideous incontinent breath is a devastating indictment of *you*, on all levels . . . and so you want it dead, even as you dote on it and wipe it and dandle it and sometimes even apply CPR when it seems like its own grotesqueness has blocked its breath and it might die altogether.

The whole thing's all very messed up and sad, but simultaneously it's also tender and moving and noble and cool — it's a genuine *relationship*, of a sort — and even at the height of its hideousness the damaged infant somehow touches and awakens what you suspect are some of the very best parts of you: maternal parts, dark ones. You love your infant very much. And you want others to love it, too, when the time finally comes for the damaged infant to go out and face the world.

So you're in a bit of a dicey position: you love the infant and you want others to love it, but that means that you hope others won't

see it *correctly*. You want to sort of fool people; you want them to see as perfect what you in your heart know is a betrayal of all perfection.

Or else you don't want to fool these people; what you want is you want them to see and love a lovely, miraculous, perfect, ad-ready infant and to be *right, correct*, in what they see and feel. You want to be terribly wrong, you want the damaged infant's hideousness to turn out to have been nothing but your own weird delusion or hallucination. But that'd mean you were crazy; you have seen, been stalked by, and recoiled from hideous deformities that in fact (others persuade you) aren't there at all. Meaning you're at least a couple of fries short of a Happy Meal, surely. But worse: it'd also mean you saw and despised hideousness in a thing *you* made (and love), in your spawn and in certain ways, *you*. And this last, best hope, this'd represent something way worse than just very bad parenting; it'd be a terrible kind of self-assault, almost self-torture. But that's still what you most want: to be completely, insanely, suicidally wrong.

But it's still all a lot of fun. Don't get me wrong. As to the nature of that fun, I keep remembering this strange little story I heard in Sunday school when I was about the size of a fire hydrant. It takes place in China or Korea or someplace like that. It seems there is this old farmer outside a village in the hill country who worked his farm with only his son and his beloved horse. One day the horse, who was not only beloved but vital to the labor-intensive work on the farm, picked the lock on his corral or whatever and ran off into the hills. All the old farmer's friends came around to exclaim what bad luck this was. The farmer only shrugged and said, "Good luck, bad luck, who knows?" A couple days later the beloved horse returned from the hills in the company of a whole priceless herd of wild horses, and the farmer's

friends all come around to congratulate him on what good luck the horse's escape turned out to be. "Good luck, bad luck, who knows?" is all the farmer says in reply, shrugging. The farmer now strikes me as a bit Yiddish-sounding for an old Chinese farmer, but this is how I remember it. But so the farmer and his son set about breaking the wild horses, and one of the horses bucks the son off his back with such wild force that the son breaks his leg. And here come the friends to commiserate with the farmer and curse the bad luck that ever brought these accursed wild horses onto his farm. The old farmer just shrugs and says, "Good luck, bad luck, who knows?" A few days later the Imperial Sino-Korean Army or something like that comes marching through the village, conscripting every able-bodied male between like ten and sixty for cannon-fodder for some hideously bloody conflict that's apparently brewing, but when they see the son's broken leg, they let him off on some sort of feudal 4F, and instead of getting shanghaied the son stays on the farm with the old farmer. Good luck? Bad luck?

This is the sort of parabolic straw you cling to as you struggle with the issue of fun, as a writer. In the beginning, when you first start out trying to write fiction, the whole endeavor's about fun. You don't expect anybody else to read it. You're writing almost wholly to get yourself off. To enable your own fantasies and deviant logics and to escape or transform parts of yourself you don't like. And it works — and it's terrific fun. Then, if you have good luck and people seem to like what you do, and you actually start to get paid for it and get to see your stuff professionally typeset and bound and blurbed and reviewed and even (once) being read on the A.M. subway by a pretty girl you don't even know, it seems to make it even *more* fun. For a while. Then things start to get complicated and confusing, not to mention scary. Now you feel like

you're writing for other people, or at least you hope so. You're no longer writing just to get yourself off, which — since any kind of masturbation is lonely and hollow — is probably good. But what replaces the onanistic motive? You've found you very much enjoy having your writing liked by people, and you find you're extremely keen to have people like the new stuff you're doing. The motive of pure personal fun starts to get supplanted by the motive of being liked, of having pretty people you don't know like you and admire you and think you're a good writer. Onanism gives way to attempted seduction, as a motive. Now, attempted seduction is hard work, and its fun is offset by a terrible fear of rejection. Whatever "ego" means, your ego has now gotten into the game. Or maybe "vanity" is a better word. Because you notice that a good deal of your writing has now become basically showing off, trying to get people to think you're good. This is understandable. You have a great deal of yourself on the line, now, writing — your vanity is at stake. You discover a tricky thing about fiction writing: a certain amount of vanity is necessary to be able to do it all, but any vanity above that certain amount is lethal. At some point you find that 90-plus percent of the stuff you're writing is motivated and informed by an overwhelming need to be liked. This results in shitty fiction. And the shitty work must get fed to the wastebasket, less because of any sort of artistic integrity than simply because shitty work will cause you to be disliked. At this point in the evolution of writerly fun, the very thing that's always motivated you to write is now also what's motivating you to feed your writing to the wastebasket. This is a paradox and a kind of double bind, and it can keep you stuck inside yourself for months or even years, during which period you wail and gnash and rue your bad luck and wonder bitterly where all the *fun* of the thing could have gone.

DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

The smart thing to say, I think, is that the way out of this bind is to work your way somehow back to your original motivation — fun. And if you can find your way back to fun, you will find that the hideously unfortunate double bind of the late vain period turns out really to have been good luck for you. Because the fun you work back to has been transfigured by the extreme unpleasantness of vanity and fear, an unpleasantness you're now so anxious to avoid that the fun you rediscover is a way fuller and more large-hearted kind of fun. It has something to do with Work as Play. Or with the discovery that disciplined fun is more fun than impulsive or hedonistic fun. Or with figuring out that not all paradoxes have to be paralyzing. 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 everywhere share and respond to, feel. Fiction becomes a weird way to countenance yourself and to tell the truth instead of being a way to escape yourself or present yourself in a way you figure you will be maximally likable. This process is complicated and confusing and scary, and also hard work, but it turns out to be the best fun there is.

The fact that you can now sustain the fun of writing only by confronting the very same unfun parts of yourself you'd first used writing to avoid or disguise is another paradox, but this one isn't any kind of bind at all. What it is is a gift, a kind of miracle, and compared to it the rewards of strangers' affection is as dust, lint.

F/X PORN

David Foster Wallace  
Waterstone's Magazine  
Winter/Spring 1998

What's the difference between a Hollywood special-effects blockbuster like "Terminator 2" and a hard-core porn film? Very little, claims novelist, essayist and footnote fetishist David Foster Wallace.

1990s moviegoers who have sat clutching their heads in both awe and disappointment at movies like "Twister" and "Volcano" and "The Lost World" can thank James Cameron's "Terminator 2: Judgment Day" for inaugurating what's become this decade's special new genre of big-budget film: Special Effects Porn. "Porn" because, if you substitute F/X for intercourse, the parallels between the two genres become so obvious they're eerie. Just like hard-core cheapies, movies like "Terminator 2" and "Jurassic Park" aren't really "movies" in the standard sense at all. What they really are is half a dozen or so isolated, spectacular scenes -- scenes comprising maybe twenty or thirty minutes of riveting, sensuous payoff -- strung together via another sixty to ninety minutes of flat, dead, and often hilariously insipid narrative.

"T2," one of the highest-grossing movies in history, opened six years ago. Think of the scenes we all still remember. That incredible chase and explosion in the L.A. sluiceway and then the liquid metal T-1000 Terminator walking out of the explosion's flames and morphing<sup>1</sup> seamlessly into his Martin-Milner-as-Possessed-by-Hannibal-Lecter corporeal form. The T-1000 rising hideously up out of that checkerboard floor, the T-1000 melting headfirst through the windshield of that helicopter, the T-1000 freezing in liquid nitrogen and then collapsing fractally apart. These were truly spectacular images, and they represented exponential advances in digital F/X technology. But there were at most maybe eight of these incredible sequences, and they were the movie's heart and point; the rest of "T2" is empty and derivative, pure mimetic polycelluloid.

It's not that "T2" is totally plotless or embarrassing -- and it does, admittedly, stand head and shoulders above most of the F/X Porn blockbusters that have followed it. It's rather that "T2" as a dramatic narrative is slick and cliché and calculating and in sum an appalling betrayal of 1984's "The Terminator." "T1," which was James Cameron's first feature film and had a modest budget and was one of the two best U.S. action movies of the entire 1980s,<sup>2</sup> was a dark, breathlessly kinetic, near-brilliant piece of metaphysical Ludditism. Recall that it's A.D. 2027 and that there's been a nuclear holocaust in 1997 and that chip-driven machines now rule, and "Skynet," the archonic *diabolus ex machina*, develops a limited kind of time-travel technology and dispatches the now classically cyborgian A. Schwarzenegger back to 1984's Los Angeles to find and terminate one Sarah Connor, the mother-to-be of the future leader of the human "Resistance,"

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<sup>1</sup>(Actually defined in the film as "mimetic polyalloy," whatever that's supposed to mean.)

<sup>2</sup>The 1980s other B.U.S.A.M. was Cameron's second feature, the 1986 "Aliens," also modestly budgeted, also both hair-raising and deeply intelligent.

one John Connor;<sup>3</sup> and that apparently the Resistance itself somehow gets one-time-only access to Skynet's time-travel technology and sends back to the same space-time coordinates a Resistance officer, the ever-sweaty but extremely tough and resourceful Kyle Reese, to try desperately to protect Ms. Sarah Connor from the Terminator's prophylactic advances,<sup>4</sup> and so on. It is, yes, true that Cameron's Skynet is basically Kubrick's HAL, and that most of "T1"'s time-travel paradoxes are reworkings of some fairly standard Bradbury-era science fiction themes, but "The Terminator" still has a whole lot to recommend it. There's the inspired casting of the malevolently cyborgian Schwarzenegger as the malevolently cyborgian Terminator, the role that made Ahnode a superstar and for which he was utterly and totally perfect (e.g. even his goofy 16-r.p.m. Austrian accent added a perfect little robofascist tinge to the Terminator's dialogue<sup>5</sup>). There's the first of Cameron's two great action heroines<sup>6</sup> in Sarah Connor, as whom the limpid-eyed and lethal-lipped Linda Hamilton also turns in the only great performance of her career. There is the dense, greasy, marvelously machinelike look of "The Terminator"'s mechanized F/X;<sup>7</sup> there are the noirish lighting and Dexedrine pace that compensate ingeniously

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<sup>3</sup>(Whose initials, for a prophesied saviour of humanity, are not particularly subtle.)

<sup>4</sup>The fact that what Skynet is attempting is in effect a retroactive abortion, together with the fact that "terminate a pregnancy" is a pretty well-known euphemism, led the female I first saw the movie with in 1984 to claim, over coffee and pie afterwards, that "The Terminator" was actually one long pro-choice allegory, which I said I thought was not w/o merit but maybe a bit too simplistic to do the movie real justice, which led to kind of an unpleasant row.

<sup>5</sup>Consider, for example, the now famous "I'll be back" line took on a level of ominous historical resonance when uttered by an unstoppable killing machine with a German accent. This was chilling and brilliant commercial postmodernism at its best; but it is also what made "Terminator 2"'s in-joke of having Ahnode repeat the line in a good-guy context is so disappointing.

<sup>6</sup>It is a complete mystery why feminist film scholars haven't paid more attention to Cameron and his early collaborator Gale Ann Hurd. "The Terminator" and "Aliens" were both violent action films with tough, competent female protagonists (incredibly rare) whose toughness and competence in no way diminish their "femininity" (even more rare, unheard of), a femininity that is rooted (along with both films' thematics) in notions of maternity rather than just sexuality. For example, compare Cameron's Ellen Ripley with the panty-and-tank-top Ripley of Scott's "Alien." In fact it was flat-out criminal that Sigourney Weaver didn't win the '86 Oscar for her lead in Cameron's "Aliens." Marlee Matlin indeed. No male lead in the history of U.S. action films even approaches Weaver's second Ripley for emotional depth and sheer balls -- she makes Stallone, Willis, et. al. look muddled and ill.

<sup>7</sup>(There is a ponderous, marvelous built-looking quality (complete with ferrous clanks and/or pneumatic hisses) that -- oddly enough -- at roughly the same time also distinguishes the special effects of Gilliam's "Brazil" and Paul Verhoeven's "Robocop." This was not cool only because the effects were themselves cool, but also because here were three talented young tech-minded directors who rejected the airy, hygienic look of Spielberg's and Lucas's F/X. The grimy

for the low budget and manage to establish a mood that is both exhilarating and claustrophobic.<sup>8</sup> Plus "T1"'s story had at its center a marvelous "Appointment-in-Samarra"-like irony of fate: we discover in the course of the film that Kyle Reese is actually John Connor's father,<sup>9</sup> and thus that if Skynet hadn't built its nebulous time machine and sent back the Terminator, Reese wouldn't have been back here in '84, either, to impregnate Sarah C. This also entails that meanwhile, up in A.D. 2027, John Connor has had to send the man he knows is his father on a mission that J.C. knows will result in both that man's death and his (i.e. J.C.'s) own birth. The whole ironic mess is simultaneously Freudian and Testamental and is just extraordinarily cool for a low-budget action movie.

Its big-budget sequel adds only one ironic paradox to "The Terminator"'s mix: in "T2," we learn that the "radically advanced chip"<sup>10</sup> on which Skynet's CPU is (will be) based actually came (comes) from the denuded and hydraulically pressed skull of "T1"'s defunct Terminator...meaning that Skynet's attempts to alter the flow of history bring about not only John Connor's birth but Skynet's own, as well. All "T2"'s other important ironies and paradoxes, however, are unfortunately unintentional and generic and kind of sad.

Note, for example, the fact that "Terminator 2: Judgment Day," a movie about the disastrous consequences of humans relying too heavily on computer technology, was itself unprecedentedly computer-dependent. George Lucas' Industrial Light and Magic, subcontracted by Cameron to do "T2"'s special effects, had to quadruple the size of its computer graphics department for the T-1000 sequences, sequences which also required digital-imaging specialists from around the world, thirty-six state-of-the-art Silicon Graphics computers, and terabytes of specially invented software programs for seamless morphing, realistic motion, digital "body socks," background-plate compatibility, congruence of lighting and grain, etc. And there is no question that all the lab work paid off: in 1991, "Terminator 2"'s special effects were the most spectacular and real-looking anybody had ever seen. They were also the most expensive.

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density and preponderance of metal in Cameron's effects suggested that he was looking all the way back to Mééliès and Lang for visual inspiration.)

<sup>8</sup>(Cameron would raise the use of light and pace to near-perfection in "Aliens," where just six alien-suited stuntmen and ingenious quick-cut editing resulted in some of the most terrifying Teeming Rapacious Horde scenes of all time. (By the way, sorry to be going on and on about "Aliens" and "The Terminator." It's just that they're great, great, commercial cinema, and nobody talks about them enough, and they're a big reason why "T2" was such a tragic and insidious development not only for 90s films but for James Cameron, whose first two films had genius in them.))

<sup>9</sup>(So actually I guess it would be more like "Luke Skywalker's Appointment in Samarra" - - nobody said this was Art-Cinema or anything.)

<sup>10</sup>(Viz. a "neutral net processor" based on an "uncooled superconductor," which I grieve to report is a conceit ripped off from Douglas Trumbull's 1983 "Brainstorm.")

"T2" is thus also the first and best instance of a paradoxical law that appears to hold true for the entire F/X Porn genre. It is called the Inverse Cost and Quality Law, and it states very simply that the larger a movie's budget is, the shittier that movie is going to be. The case of "T2" shows that much of the ICQL's force derives from simple financial logic. A film that would cost hundreds of millions of dollars to make is going to get financial backing if and only if its investors can be maximally -- maximally -- sure that at the very least they will get their hundreds of millions of dollars back<sup>11</sup> -- i.e. a megabudget movie must not fail (and "failure" here means anything less than a runaway box-office hit) and must thus adhere to certain reliable formulae that have been shown by precedent to maximally ensure a runaway hit. One of the most reliable of these formulae involves casting a superstar who is "bankable" (i.e. whose recent track record of films shows a high ROI). The studio backing for "T2"'s wildly sophisticated and digital F/X therefore depends on Mr. Arnold Schwarzenegger agreeing to reprise his Terminator role. Now the ironies start to stack, though, because it turns out that Schwarzenegger -- or perhaps more accurately "Schwarzenegger, Inc.," or "Ahnodyne" -- has decided that playing any more malevolent cyborgs would compromise the Leading Man image his elite and bankable record of ROI entails. He will do the film only if "T2"'s script is somehow engineered to make the Terminator the Good Guy. Not only is this vain and stupid and shockingly ungrateful,<sup>12</sup> it is also common popular knowledge, duly reported in both the trade and the popular entertainment media before "T2" even goes into production. There's consequently a weird postmodern tension to the way we watch the film; we're aware of what the bankable star's demands were, and we're also aware of how much the movie cost and how important bankable stars are to a big-budget movie; and so one of the few things that keeps us on the edge of our seats during the movie is our suspense about whether James Cameron can possibly weave a plausible, non-cheesy narrative that meets Schwarzenegger's career needs without betraying "T1"'s precedent.

Cameron does not succeed, at least not in avoiding heavy cheese. Recall the premise he settles on for "T2": that Skynet once again uses its (apparently not all that limited) time-travel device, this time to send a far more advanced liquid metal T-1000 Terminator back to 1990s L.A., this time to kill the ten-year-old John Connor (played by the extremely annoying Edward Furlong,<sup>13</sup> whose voice keeps cracking pubescently and who's just clearly older than ten), and that the intrepid human Resistance has somehow captured, subdued, and "reprogrammed" an old Schwarzenegger-model Terminator -- resetting its CPU's switch from TERMINATE to

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<sup>11</sup>The industry term for getting your money back plus that little bit of extra that makes investing in a movie a decent investment is ROI, which is short for Return on Investment.

<sup>12</sup>Because Schwarzenegger -- compared to whom Chuck Norris is Olivier -- is not an actor or even a performer. He is a body, a form -- the closest thing to an actual machine in the history of the S.A.G. Ahnode's elite bankable status in 1991 was due entirely to the fact that James Cameron had had the genius to understand Schwarzenegger's essential bionism and to cast him in "T1."

<sup>13</sup>It augurs ill for both Furlong and Cameron that within minutes of John Connor's introduction in the film we're rooting vigorously for him to be Terminated.

PROTECT, apparently<sup>14</sup> -- and then has somehow once again gotten one-time access to Skynet's time-travel technology<sup>15</sup> and sent the Schwarzenegger Terminator back to protect young J.C. from the T-1000's infanticidal advances.<sup>16</sup>

Cameron's premise is financially canny and artistically dismal: it permits "Terminator 2"'s narrative to clank along on the rails of all manner of mass-market formulae. There is, for example, no quicker or easier ingress to the audience's heart than to present an innocent child in danger, and of course protecting an innocent child from danger is heroism at its most generic. Cameron's premise also permits the emotional center of "T2" to consist of the child and the Terminator "bonding," which in turn allows for all manner of familiar and reliable devices. Thus it is that "T2" offers us cliché explorations of stuff like the conflicts between Emotion and Logic (territory already mined to exhaustion by "Star Trek") and between Human and Machine (turf that's been worked in everything from "Lost in Space" to "Blade Runner" to "Robocop"), as well as exploiting the good old Alien - or - Robot - Learns - About - Human - Customs - and -

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<sup>14</sup>A complex and interesting scene where John and Sarah actually open up the Terminator's head and remove Ahnode's CPU and do some further reprogramming -- a scene where we learn a lot more about neural net processors and Terminative anatomy, and where Sarah is strung out and has kind of an understandable anti-Terminator prejudice and wants to smash the CPU while she can, and where John asserts his nascent command presence and basically orders her not to -- was cut from the movie's final version. Cameron's professed rational for cutting the scene was that the middle of the movie "dragged" and that the scene was too complex: "I could account for the Terminator's behavior changes much more simply." I submit that the Cameron of "T1" and "Aliens" wouldn't have talked this way. But another big-budget formula for ensuring ROI is that things must be made as simple for the audiences as possible; plot and character implausibilities are to be handled through distraction rather than resolved through explanation.

<sup>15</sup>(Around which the security must be shockingly lax.)

<sup>16</sup>That's the movie's main plot, but let's observe here that one of "T2"'s subplots actually echoes Cameron's Schwarzenegger dilemma and creates a kind of weird meta-cinematic irony. Whereas "T1" had argued for a certain kind of metaphysical passivity (i.e., fate is unavoidable, and Skynet's attempts to alter history serve only bring it about.) "Terminator 2"'s metaphysics are more active. In "T2," the Connors take a page from Skynet's book and try to head off the foreordained nuclear holocaust, first by trying to kill Skynet's inventor and then by destroying Cyberdyne's labs and the 1st Terminator's CPU (though why John Connor spends half the movie carrying the deadly CPU chip around in his pocket instead of just throwing it under the first available steamroller remains unclear and irksome). The point here is that the protagonists' attempts to revise the "script" of history in "T2" parallel the director's having to muck around with "T2"'s own script in order for Schwarzenegger to be in the movie. Multivalent ironies like this -- which require that film audiences know all kinds of behind-the-scenes stuff from watching Entertainment Tonight and reading Premiere magazine -- are not commercial postmodernism at its finest.

Psychology - From - Sarcastic - and/or - Precocious - but - Basically - Goodhearted - Human - with - Whom - It - Bonds formula (q.q.v. here "My Favorite Martian" and "E.T." and "Starman" and "The Brother From Another Planet" and "Harry and the Hendersons" and "Alf" and ad almost infinitum). Thus it is that the 85% of "T2" that is not mind-blowing digital F/X sequences subjects us to dialogue like: "Vhy do you cry?" and "Cool! My own Terminator!" and "Can you not be such a dork all the time?" and "This is intense!" and "Haven't you learned that you can't just go around killing people?" and "It's OK, Mom, he's here to help" and "I know now vhy you cry, but it's somesing I can never do"; plus to that hideous ending where Schwarzenegger gives John a cyborgian hug and then voluntarily immerses himself in molten steel to protect humanity from his neural net CPU, raising that Fonzieque thumb as he sinks below the surface,<sup>17</sup> and the two Connor hug and grieve, and then poor old Linda Hamilton -- whose role in "T2" requires her not only to look like she's been doing nothing but Nautilus for the last several years but also to keep snarling and baring her teeth and saying stuff like "Don't fuck with me!" and "Men like you know nothing about really creating something!" and acting half-crazed with paramilitary stress, stretching Hamilton way beyond her thespian capacities and resulting in what seems more than anything like a parody of Faye Dunaway in "Mommy Dearest" -- has to give us that gooeey "I face the future with hope, because if a Terminator can learn the value of human life, maybe we can, too" voiceover at the very end.

The point is that head-clutchingly insipid stuff like this puts an ever heavier burden of importance on "T2"'s digital effects, which now must be stunning enough to distract us from the formulaic void at the story's center, which in turn means that even more money and directional attention must be lavished on the film's F/X. This sort of cycle is symptomatic of the insidious three-part loop that characterizes Special Effects Porn --

ONE: Astounding digital dinosaur / tornado / volcano / Terminator effects that consume almost all the director's creative attention and require massive financial commitment on the part of the studio;

TWO: A consequent need for guaranteed megabuck ROI, which entails the formulaic elements and easy sentiment that will assure mass appeal (plus will translate easily into other languages and cultures, for those important foreign sales...);

THREE: A director -- often one who's shown great talent in earlier, less expensive films -- who is now so consumed with realizing his spectacular digital vision, and so dependent on the studio's money to bring the F/X off, that he has neither the leverage nor the energy to fight for more interesting or original plots / themes / characters.

-- and thus yields the two most important corollary formulations of the Inverse Cost and Quality Law:

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<sup>17</sup>(His hair doesn't quite catch on fire in the molten steel, though, which provokes intriguing speculation on what it's supposed to be made of.)

(ICQL(a)) The more lavish and spectacular a movie's special effects, the shittier that movie is going to be in all non-F/X respects. For obvious supporting examples of ICQL (a), see lines 1-2 of this article and/or also "Jurassic Park," "Independent Day," "Forrest Gump," etc.

(ICQL (b)) There is no quicker or more efficient way to kill what is interesting and original about an interesting, original young director than to give that director a huge budget and lavish F/X resources. The number of supporting examples of ICQL (b) is sobering. Have a look, e.g., at the difference between Rodriguez's "El Mariachi" and his "From Dusk to Dawn," between DeBont's "Speed" and "Twister," between Gilliam's "Brazil" and "Twelve Monkeys," between Bigelow's "Near Dark" and "Strange Days." Or chart Cameron's industry rise and artistic decline from "T1" and "Aliens" through "T2" and "The Abyss" to -- dear Lord -- "True Lies." U.S. entertainment media report that Cameron's new "Titanic," currently in American release, is (once again) the most expensive and technically ambitious film of all time. Doubtless, Britons have been pricing trenchcoats and lubricants in anticipation of its arrival in the UK.



"Infinite Jest: Reviews, Articles, and Miscellany"

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A FUN THING THEY'LL NEVER DO AGAIN

Gus Van Sant meets David Foster Wallace

Dazed & Confused, May 1998

There's a symmetry to having Gus Van Sant and novelist and essayist David Foster Wallace converse. One of Van Sant's favorite writers, Wallace is the eagle-eyed observer of the minutiae of mid-America, yet has remained largely unnoticed in this country [Britain]. His obsessively detailed observations were spotted early by Van Sant, who approached Wallace, hoping to adapt his turbulent opus "Infinite Jest" for the big screen. Nothing has as yet come of the project -- but watch this space for collaborations between two of the most potent voices of popular culture.

The following interview was conducted over the phone between Van Sant's hotel room in LA and Wallace's home in Bloomington, Illinois. Van Sant transcribed and edited the conversation and requested the original punctuation and interferences remain untouched.

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David Foster Wallace: The thing that I don't get, and this doesn't have to go on record, is that either you're a total mensch, or this is some sort of very important venue, because I would have imagined that you know, you could go around being offered cocaine by the...

Gus Van Sant: (laughter)

DFW: ...people in LA. (interference) Um's and 'ers. (interference, Gus fumbles with tape recorder covering David's words)... Full of long distance conversations.

GVS: I'm a mensch. What does mensch mean?

DFW: What does mensch mean...?

GVS: Good guy, right?

DFW: Good, sturdy, good hearted guy.

GVS: (Pause) I thought that after we talk together I would type this up and then send it to you to approve it. Give you a...do you have a computer?

DFW: Uh...yeah. (loud unexplained bang) But I don't have anything that, like...I make my own disks and stuff. Well, you're a mensch, I'll probably sign off on whatever you do as long as you don't have me you know, confessing to pederasty or something like that (Gus laughs). Not having a passport makes me very blasé about what appears in foreign periodicals since I know I'll never see it.

GVS: Really, so you don't travel abroad?

DFW: I will at some point but I haven't had a passport since I was a little boy.

GVS: Wow. (long pause) Um, well, so , um, how's your class?

DFW: I'm on leave this year. I'm auditing a class but I'm not teaching. The class I'm auditing is a real bitch but somehow I'm holding on at a high C or low B.

GVS: What's the class?

DFW: It's ah, it's advanced tax accounting, which is a long story and you probably don't want to know about it but it's wa-a-a-y over my little noggin'. It's a Will Hunting class.

GVS: Oh my God.

DFW: 35 pages of incredibly dense, you know, CPA stuff at night and then you get tested on it the next day.

GVS: Wow.

DFW: Speaking of which -- can I just ask -- did those two guys -- was that the first screenplay that they'd written?

GVS: Yeah.

DFW: Did either of them have serious math backgrounds?

GVS: Um (pause) no. But we had a guy -- do you know math?

DFW: I mean I, I (breathes into phone) one of the things I majored in um, was like Philosophy of Mathematics so I know a lot of the theory of math. I'm not...

GVS: Mmhmm.

DFW: ...I couldn't do what he does.

GVS: Because we had a guy named Pat O'Donnell in Toronto who was a professor of Physics, University of Toronto, and he devised, he designed the mathematics basically and he had his own kind of like fun with it because he realized, you know, that the people that he was designing the math for were the mathematicians around the world that would see the movie.

DFW: That's the thing -- and some of it was over my head. What was the problem -- it was the second problem that Will solved, um, that the grad student notices was correct on the board and that the other faculty member at MIT gets so upset about, because Will comes up with the solution and it involves joining and forming almost what looks like a horizontal tree.

GVS: Right.

DFW: What, what, do you recall the problem?

GVS: You mean the one where he insults the guy and he leaves the room, they're doing it on the overhead projector?

DFW: Yeah, I don't know how much of an insult it is but it's a great moment of like academic vanity...

GVS: Yeah, he...

DFW: ...the academic realism of that movie was -- I don't know that I've seen anything else that quite captures the...

GVS: It's a, it's a problem that, uh, I don't know what that one is, I've forgotten literally what it is. Um. It's a mathematical -- all the, all the problems are pretty much not physics they're mathematical and uh, that one is, is a, um, a problem that the guy is kind of known for, it's a, the guy he's disproving, he's found a new way to look at it, so...

DFW: right.

GVS: ...He's kind of damaged all this work that the guy has done and that little solution that he's putting up on the board is something (clears throat) ...it was a touchy one because we wanted to have that be kind of like the most advanced problem within the film...

DFW: yeah.

GVS: ...So Pat, our advisor, said that he could find a problem where, where the answer would actually be, um, like, when you're talking to the mathematic public they'll actually believe, you know, that what Will has written might be a solution, but if you looked into it it's sort of a red herring and it's not really a solution at all.

DFW: Yeah, I kept trying, 'cause here are sort of three separate problems that are explicitly done and the second one's done in a quick montage and they cancel out some terms and then give each other a high five and that I was pretty sure was a Fourier trans- (interference)

GVS: Yeah...

DFW: -- which is something that I've seen, um, but-but that one (dog barks) hang on, HUSH! -- that one with the joint vertices I, I had recog- (chair moves loudly) ...so, so in the screenplay did Damon (dog barks) and Affleck just put in a lot of math in there or something or did you...

GVS: Yeah...

DFW: ...massage the screenplay?

GVS: We had to work on it because we didn't have the math problems in the screenplay we just had (clears throat) we had uh, you know: Will looks at the problem on the board and he writes an answer. And then, the next scene would read: the professor, um, encounters the answer on the board and puts his hand on his forehead and says Oh my God!

DFW: Uh-huh.

GVS: You know, that kind of thing. There were never any literal problems and so when we started filming we realised, well -- there has to be something (laughs) on the board. So we went to um...

DFW: Well that stuff was real interesting.

GVS: Yeah. We went -- yeah it was kind of interesting partly -- um a physicist at Harvard (whose name is Shelly) um, had told us that physics and the mathematics that go along with it is not particularly

something that you can go and make money with in the marketplace (sound of one of us peeing in the toilet). You need grants and that sort of thing to get by, people are not going to really want to have anything to do with you except other physicists, it's not that valuable, and people are not going to be fighting over the guy. You needed to have -- in his estimation -- a combinatorial mathematician who is way more valuable and people need him to solve their problems, like to do their accounting, like doing the stuff in the class you're taking.

DFW: Oh sure, or it was dead-on about cipher decryption, that's like...

GVS: yeah

DFW: ...that's probably the biggest money field that there is right now.

GVS: So we changed it so he was a combinatorial mathematician.

DFW: Well that's what Steffan Skaarsgaard was. The thing that interested me about Will -- and of course this is like a stroke movie for me -- is you've got like a total nerd who is incredibly good looking, can beat people up and has Minnie Driver in love with him, so I'm, like I saw it twice voluntarily. Most of the serious math weenies who I've met, and I've met a few, like who've graduated from college at 12 and stuff, they're not all that smart in other areas. I've like never met any who've had photographic memories with respect to stuff like agrarian social histories of the American South or legal precedent in the American judicial system and stuff, and so he seemed as if he could almost have done anything that he wanted to do and that math was almost a kind of accident.

GVS: That's the way we thought of him. But I always felt that his memory was something that was kind of like a bonus. And that mathematics was something that he had done when say he was alone as a child.

DFW: Uh-huh.

GVS: And he had learned and he had become very advanced but that his memory was maybe separate -- the memory was like the trick part. So he remembered certain things that he had read in different books his retention was so phenomenal but it was almost like a trick so when he is defeating the guy in the Harvard bar by quoting from text books this sort of capitalist versus socialist...

DFW: Which trust me is every bonehead kid's fantasy of being able to do that. (Gus laughs) Fuckwad with a pony tail in a Harvard bar, I've met that guy. The girl I went and saw the movie with first thought that the guy was like to icky and villainous to be realistic and I hastened to disagree with her. It was the first script they had written?

GVS: Yeah, it was.

DFW: That's kind of amazing.

GVS: And they were really young, I mean, at the time they were like 22 and 24.

DFW: Really? ...bastards.

GVW: I know, it's crazy.

DFW: One of the great puzzles I work with is I'm basically a nerd and everybody I know are nerds and how do you make nerds interesting (Gus laughs). And I haven't seen it done that compellingly for a

while. We'll stop talking about "Good Will Hunting" in just one second, but one thing is that I really like Skaarsgaard. I liked "Zero Kelvin" and "Breaking the Waves." The conflict in him of discovering someone who in Whitman's phrase "spreads the broader breast than his own" I thought was really well done and it's a lot how it is for writing teachers. You want your student to be brilliant but not too brilliant. And particularly that scene where Damon sets the proof on fire, which could have very easily been cheesy and I thought was really moving. There were intimations that Skaarsgaard was tormented and was a student seducer. The first time we see this he's under some sort of tent and he says "Would you join me for a drink tonight?" And the second, oh, it's when Will is fucking with the mind of George Plimpton and outside Skaarsgaard is talking about a proof being like a symphony. But he's doing it in a very sort of Svengali way (Gus laughs) to some nubile undergraduate. Was there more of that stuff, or...

GVS: That was the result of basically Stellan filling out his character. (clears throat) He is really a very amazing actor. He's been in the Stockholm Shakespearean Company for like sixteen years. He has a really, like extensive background. And he is also not known in our country, so when he is over here it is nice for him because he is used to being some kind of Richard Gere of Sweden. And he was in "The Unbearable Lightness of Being" as the hunky Swedish guy. So these things he added on his own after we talked about him being like a rock star version of a math professor.

DFW: Well, but also at MIT within the world of math there's sexy math and non-sexy math, and sexy mathematicians. That was one texture that I thought the movie captured really well.

GVS: Along with that there were the questions on how he relates to his students and he thought that maybe he was attracted to some of his students, and then the question was was it just girls or was it girls and boys and so I suggested that maybe its both and we left it at that.

DFW: And you know it suggests and probably not to anyone in academia, but a professor who is that overt with his students -- there's something pathetic about it, it's the big sign that there's a big void, big pain, unless the guy is just Snidely Whiplash and is twirling his moustache and laughing. The thing that made me not believe it was these two kids' screenplay was how, for me, as interesting as Will was, I thought that with Skaarsgaard and Williams, the movie was very generous (dog barking) about their own characters and their own pain and the way Will in a very kind of tangential way I thought...it didn't seem contrived at all, kind of became an occasion for their pain to get illuminated and in certain ways worked out. That encounter the two of them have -- see this is going to look like I'm totally kissing your ass -- in the middle of the third act right before Will comes in, when Williams is telling Skaarsgaard to shove the medal up his ass, but its also clear that Williams is coming very much out of his incredible grief over the death of his wife, that's when I really got impressed -- the way I think of it -- with the screenplay. Because when you have a male - model - nerd - cool - tough - guy - hero and it's all about him and his conflicts and all that stuff. I thought it was Williams' best movie. Maybe "Fisher King" was as good but he capered in that and except for one recreation of a home run he didn't go manic in this at all. And he didn't do his adorable, you know...

GVS: So do you have students like that in your school?

DFW: (laughs) This is the interviewer segueing isn't it. Trying to shift the focus. Students who are like Will Hunting?

GVS: Well, yeah. Essentially. But I guess you got out of that type of class, because you started out teaching in a more advanced writing kind of graduate situation and then you went to teaching more of a literature 101.

DFW: (noncommittal) Yeah. What's great about under grad classes and especially in the Midwest is that

you'll get kids who are talented and the ones who are educated are almost always autodidacts like Hunting simply because public education in the Midwest isn't very sophisticated and so the kids who can write, write naturally, really sort of out of themselves so when you discover them you're really discovering something. You're not just checking off on a superstar student who was admitted through a highly selective process. The best under grad writing student I've had was this girl. I met her when she was 18, she had a three year old kid. She is from a little town, trailer park, got knocked up at fifteen and was reading "Middlemarch" on the bus trying to go to the welfare office to get her bottle of milk subsidy from the Government agency (Hindu music). You know and she didn't...anything she knew she taught herself. And you find these kids, and it really is one of those rare moments where you understand why teaching is this incredibly magical profession because you get to be the voice of authority that gets to say nice things instead of mean things and wake them up to the fact that they're brilliant (more Hindu music). You know this girl's now going to the Iowa Writers Workshop, and this is one of two or three magical stories that I've had since I started here. But that's why I prefer the undergrads to the grads.

GVS: What has she ended up doing?

DFW: Well she ended up doing fiction writing which actually I had dissuaded her from. I think that she is a much better critic than a fiction writer but she's gotten accepted at Iowa and she's going next year and Iowa is probably the MIT of creative writing (music). Not that that happens all the time but when it does and you're the first to actually see it, it's another reason why I really vibed well with the movie, I kinda understood, you know, why his testicles drew up when he saw that answer to the equation on the board and realized who had written it. And just the fact the writers of the screenplay are two kids that young who could also recreate the textures of blue collar Boston you know which I lived in for three years. They have got the Boston bonehead culture down perfectly -- and can also realize how a teacher would feel upon making a discovery, I thought it was really rather remarkable. The film-goer cap is doffed. I hope they don't just start being in big-budget action movies and spend all their time at the gym and retreats making...

GVS: Me too.

DFW: ...hundred million dollar salaried plastic product. There was about a year when "Infinite Jest" came out and I was finishing the last thing of the book of essays, and then there were all the errors in "Infinite Jest" to correct from the hardcover and then there was the copy editing for the essay book and there were also the first serious reading tours that I did for both books for about a year. The only writing that I did was like on airplanes and it's all like tiny little weird fragments and uh, yeah I've been doing some stuff that's not really sort of -- straightforward. I don't know where it's going as much as I normally do but that seems like it's all right. Everything's kind of winding down now and there was this last little tour for the paperback and the essays and then there will descend a great silence.

GVS: Which is important right?

DFW: Well, I think to be honest, when you haven't had much attention, ever, and you get a lot of attention, there are things about it that are nice and the more juvenile parts of me are going to miss (Gus laughs). But there's also a lot of just absolutely unavoidable fakiness and bullshit which I'll bet you have seen and I'm not looking forward to that.

GVS: Can you work on the road?

DFW: Well, it's probably the same for you -- there's all kinds of signifiers.

GVS: You're absorbing stuff on the road.

DFW: I mean I can work... it's probably not an accident the next book that I will finish will be a book of short stuff, some of which is very very very short and I guess I've sort of been in a position where I've had to do really short things for a while. I don't see being able to do anything long while traveling a lot simply because -- it's gotta be somewhat like making a film -- at a certain point you've just got to develop a momentum and the thing's got to be worked on until it's done and you can't really take three weeks off and go do something else and then come back to it. So I don't know. What's the next thing for you? You probably've already shot something else by now.

GVS: I want to write a book.

DFW: Do we know what we... Jesus, you've got a lot more direction than I do. What are you going to do?

GVS: I've been working on something for about a year. It's about a Romanian kid who flees the Ceausescu regime in the 80s for the States and becomes an American Dead Head and goes on tour. It's mostly about the character and the people that he runs into and it does have the tour as something that he drifts in and out of. Actually he gets... there's this Romanian family he is part of and his father is an animator who animates with wooden dowels, these animated puppets. And he is a famous animator in America but he'd started off as an industrial designer in Romania. And when they come over, his real father, as it turns out is an importer of large quantities of marijuana that he brings in from Asia.

DFW: How do you know all this stuff before you're done with the thing?

GVS: I've mapped it out. I've been writing different chapters. I haven't filled it all out but I've been bouncing from one part of it to another. You know I don't know if this is actually how it will end up... but...

DFW: See this always happens whenever I talk to somebody else who's writing, suddenly I feel this incredible wave of self-loathing.

GVS: (laughs) Oh-no. How come?

DFW: Well because when you're not making really good movies, then with your left hand you're...

GVS: But I'm a very beginning writer.

DFW: Yeah, well.

GVS: Who are some of your favorite writers?

DFW: You're really wielding the old baton on this aren't you? To be honest... my faves?

GVS: Yeah.

DFW: Ones that people don't know all that well? Oh, that's right this is a British magazine so they won't have heard of a lot of these. Cormac McCarthy, have you read "Blood Meridian"? It's literally the western to end all westerns. Probably the most horrifying book of this century, at least fiction. But it is also, this guy, I can't figure out he gets away with it, he basically writes King James English, I mean, he practically uses Old English thou's and thine's and it comes off absolutely beautifully and unmannered and ungratuitous. He's got another one called "Suttree," God that one, God that would make a fantastic

movie.

GVS: (perks up) What's it called?

DFW: It's called "Suttree."

GVS: How do you spell that?

DFW: S-u-t-t-r-e-e. It came out, oh golly, mid 70s. But it's about a down and out college educated man named Cornelius Suttree who has kind of abandoned everything to live in a houseboat in Knoxville, Tennessee in the late 40s and early 50s and all of his friends in his entire world are derelicts and retards and twisted people. It's about four hundred pages of the most dense lapidary prose you can imagine about characters who are at the level of functional idiots and are drinking rot-gut. "Suttree" is the book that got him a MacArthur grant and he used the MacArthur to go to Mexico and do the research for "Blood Meridian." Okay, we'll play. Are there any new movies coming out that you like?

GVS: I just saw Michael Moore's film "The Big One" -- I liked that quite a bit.

DFW: Have you seen "The Big Lebowski"?

GVS: I did see that, and I liked it a lot. There have been those that don't think that it stands up to "Fargo," but there you go. People have their opinions, and that's OK.

DFW: Their movies are really smart but they ride or fall on their characterizations. "Fargo" had Frances McDormand who was fantastic. And "Miller's Crossing" had Gabriel Byrne in far and away his best role. ...I'm going to have to wind up here soon.

GVS: ...OK...

DFW: ...do something about these dogs and let them outside or they're going to...

GVS: Okay. I'm totally done.

DFW: Something tells me, Gus, that when you start transcribing that you aren't going to want to transcribe all this... and not to sound cheesy but good luck at the Oscar ceremony.

GVS: Thanks.

DFW: Anyway. Thanks very much, and thanks, Dazed & Confused.

\* \* \* \*

GUS VAN SANT  
Biography by Mike Fordham

His first feature film, made for only \$35,000, was "Mala Noche," a raw and elliptical tale of obsession and unrequited love. It became evident with his second film, "Drugstore Cowboy," that Gus Van Sant had style, and with his third, "My Own Private Idaho," that he had substance.

Van Sant became, if not one of the very few voices of gay cinema to cross over into the mainstream,

certainly the most audible one. "Even Cowgirls Get the Blues," Van Sant's next cinematic venture, was probably his most poorly judged. The adaptation of Tom Robbins' novel became lodged in a post-production impasse, and finally received a less than lukewarm response on release. Van Sant's first studio picture, "To Die For," was a return to form, an acid-sharp look at the media and the nature of success. "Good Will Hunting" star Matt Damon auditioned for the part of Nicole Kidman's schoolboy lover, and although he didn't get the role (he was too "all-American"), Van Sant kept in touch with him. He faced competition for both Damon and Affleck's Oscar-winning script from Robert Redford and Sidney Pollack, but secured "Good Will Hunting" nonetheless. Van Sant has faced accusations of selling out ever since the commercial success of "To Die For" and this is to some extent the topic of his first novel, "Pink," published last year. The most experimental and obviously autobiographical piece of work he has done in any medium for a while, the book's protagonist is a middle-aged infomercial director who is mourning the death of a young actor. It doesn't take much imagination to see that the actor is based on River Phoenix. Van Sant has also ventured into music, releasing two records over the last year. His next film project will be the direction of a music video for the band Hanson.

DAVID FOSTER WALLACE  
Biography by Nicky Wise

In the mid-to-late 80s it was Jay McInerney, Tama Jamowitz and Bret Easton Ellis who cultivated hardcore literature into a fashion accessory. But there remained a void in the market, as there always is, for a writer of enough weight to entirely encapsulate the gestations of this generation without needing to be worn on its sleeves. After the enormous and diverse wakes created by the IQ contents and tangents of DeLillo and Pynchon novels, it was difficult to imagine what was left to tackle. Until David Wallace's "Infinite Jest." Published in 1996, it is a 1000-page comic tome considering substance abuse, dysfunctional families and tennis against a post-millennial backdrop. Behind the center story of three brothers -- a sex-craving football fan, a clever tennis prodigy and a dwarf -- who are trying to deal with the suicide of their father, is a vast non-linear structure of tangential riffs that seem to gel into a vision of collective and individual psychic meltdown. Wallace's two previous books, "The Broom of the System" (1987) -- a tale of a switchboard operator's search for love -- and "Girl with Curious Hair" (1989) -- a follow-up volume of short stories -- hinted at his potential genius.

Son of a philosophy professor and an English teacher, he spent his childhood playing tennis and listening to his parents recite Joyce's "Ulysses" and seemed to be set for a career as a professional philosopher. But Wallace chose fiction and his senior thesis at Amherst College in Massachusetts became the first rough chunk of "The Broom of the System." After graduating he attended a creative writing programme at the University of Arizona and soon had a contract with Viking Penguin. Thus began a period of self doubt and abuse as Wallace took up excessive drinking, drugs, promiscuity and suicidal tendencies in keeping with what he thought was the lifestyle of a serious writer. Sourcing the tennis references for "Infinite Jest" from his youth, this period definitely fuelled his other subject areas of addiction and depression. Halting his descent in 1990 for a straighter existence, he moved to Normal, Illinois taking a job as an associate professor at the college. He bought a middle-class home and adopted two labradors called Jeeves and Drone. Wallace's latest work is called "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again -- essays and arguments." After moving to Bloomington, Illinois, he is currently working on a volume of short stories.

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## Laughing with Kafka

From a speech given by David Foster Wallace in March at "Metamorphosis: A New Kafka," a symposium sponsored by the PEN American Center in New York City to celebrate the publication of a new translation of "The Castle" by Schocken Books.

One reason for my willingness to speak publicly on a subject for which I am sort of underqualified is that it affords me a chance to declaim for you a short story of Kafka's that I have given up teaching in literature classes and miss getting to read aloud. Its English title is "A Little Fable":

"Alas," said the mouse, "the world is growing smaller every day. At the beginning it was so big that I was afraid, I kept running and running, and I was glad when at last I saw walls far away to the right and left, but these long walls have narrowed so quickly that I am in the last chamber already, and there in the corner stands the trap that I must run into," "You only need to change your direction," said the cat, and ate it up.

For me, a signal frustration in trying to read Kafka with college students is that it is next to impossible to get them to see that Kafka is funny...Nor to appreciate the way funniness is bound up with the extraordinary power of his stories. Because, of course, great short stories and great jokes have a lot in common. Both depend on what communication-theorists sometimes call "exformation," which is a certain quantity of vital information removed from but evoked by a communication in such a way as to cause a kind of explosion of associative connections within the recipient. This is probably why the effect of both short stories and jokes often feels sudden and percussive, like the venting of a long-stuck valve. It's not for nothing that Kafka spoke of literature as "a hatchet with which we chop at the frozen seas inside us." Nor is it an accident that the technical achievement of great short stories is often called "compression" -- for both the pressure and the release are already inside the reader. What Kafka seems able to do better than just about anyone else is to orchestrate the pressure's increase in such a way that it becomes intolerable at the precise instant it is released.

The psychology of jokes helps account for part of the problem in reading Kafka. We all know that there is no quicker way to empty a joke of its peculiar magic than to try to explain it -- to point out, for example, that Lou Costello is mistaking the proper name "Who" for the interrogative pronoun "who," etc. We all know the weird antipathy such explanations arouse in us, a feeling not so much of boredom as offense, like something has been blasphemed. This is a lot like the teacher's feeling at running a Kafka story through the gears of your standard undergrad-course literary analysis -- plot to chart, symbols to decode, etc. Kafka, of course, would be in a unique position to appreciate the irony of submitting his short stories to this kind of high-efficiency critical machine, the literary equivalent of tearing the petals off and grinding them up and running the goo through a spectrometer to explain why a rose smells so pretty.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>A more grad-schoolish literary-theory-type machine, on the other hand, is designed to yield the conclusion that one has been deluded into imagining there was any scent in the first place.

Franz Kafka, after all, is the writer whose story "Poseidon" imagines a sea-god so overwhelmed with administrative paperwork that he never gets to sail or swim, and whose "In the Penal Colony" conceives description as punishment and torture as edification and the ultimate critic as a needed harrow whose *coup de grace* is a spike through the forehead.

Another handicap, even for gifted students, is that -- unlike, say, Joyce's or Pound's -- the exformative associations Kafka's work creates are not intertextual or even historical. Kafka's evocations are, rather, unconscious and almost sub-archetypal, the little-kid stuff from which myths derive; this is why we tend to call even his weirdest stories nightmarish rather than surreal. Not to mention that the particular sort of funniness Kafka deploys is deeply alien to kids whose neural resonances are American. The fact is that Kafka's humor has almost none of the particular forms and codes of contemporary U.S. amusement. There's no recursive word-play or verbal stunt-piloting, little in the way of wisecracks or mordant lampoon. There is no body-function humor in Kafka, nor sexual entendre, nor stylized attempts to rebel by offending convention. No Pynchonian slapstick with banana peels or rapacious adenoids. No Rothish satyriasis or Barthish metaparody or arch Woody-Allenish kvetching. There are none of the ba-bing ba-bang reversals of modern sit-coms; nor are there precocious children or profane grandparents or cynically insurgent co-workers. Perhaps most alien of all, Kafka's authority figures are never just hollow buffoons to be ridiculed, but are always absurd and scary and sad all at once, like *In the Penal Colony's* Lieutenant.

My point is not that his wit is too subtle for U.S. students. In fact, the only halfway effective strategy I've come up with for exploring Kafka's funniness in class involves suggesting to students that much of his humor is actually sort of unsubtle, or rather anti-subtle. The claim is that Kafka's funniness depends on some kind of radical literalization of truths we tend to treat as metaphorical. I opine to them that some of our deepest and most profound collective intuitions seem to be expressible only as figures of speech, that that's why we call these figures of speech "expressions." With respect to "The Metamorphosis," then, I might invite students to consider what is really being expressed when we refer to someone as "creepy" or "gross" or say that somebody was forced to "eat shit" in his job. Or to reread "In the Penal Colony" in light of expressions like "tonguelashing" or "She sure tore me a new asshole" or the gnomic "By a certain age, everybody has the face he deserves." Or to approach "A Hunger Artist" in terms of tropes like "starved for attention" or "love-starved" or the double entendre in the term "self-denial," or even as innocent a factoid as that the etymological root of "anorexia" happens to be the Greek word for longing.

The students usually end up engaged here, which is great, but the teacher still sort of writhes with guilt, because the comedy-as-literalization-of-metaphor tactic doesn't begin to countenance the deeper alchemy by which Kafka's comedy is always also tragedy, and this tragedy always also an immense and reverent joy. This usually leads to an excruciating hour during which I backpedal and hedge and warn students that, for all their wit and exformative voltage, Kafka's stories are not fundamentally jokes, and that the rather simple and lugubrious gallows humor which marks so many of Kafka's personal statements -- stuff like his "There is hell, but not for us" -- is not what his stories have got going on.

What Kafka's stories have, rather, is a grotesque and gorgeous and thoroughly modern complexity. Kafka's humor -- not only not neurotic but anti-neurotic, heroically sane -- is, finally,

a religious humor, but religious in the manner of Kierkegaard and Rilke and the Psalms, a harrowing spirituality against which even Ms. O'Connor's bloody grace seems a little bit easy, the souls at stake pre-made.

And it is this, I think, that makes Kafka's wit inaccessible to children whom our culture has trained to see jokes as entertainment and entertainment as reassurance.<sup>2</sup> It's not that students don't "get" Kafka's humor but that we've taught them to see humor as something you get -- the same way we've taught them that a self is something you just have. No wonder they cannot appreciate the really central Kafka joke -- that the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle. That our endless and impossible journey toward home is in fact our home. It's hard to put into words up at the blackboard, believe me. You can tell them that maybe it's good they don't "get" Kafka. You can ask them to imagine his art as a kind of door. To envision us readers coming up and pounding on this door, pounding and pounding, not just wanting admission but needing it, we don't know what it is but we can feel it, this total desperation to enter, pounding and pushing and kicking, etc. That, finally, the door opens...and it opens outward: we've been inside what we wanted all along. Das ist komisch.

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<sup>2</sup>There are probably whole Johns Hopkins U. Press books to be written on the particular lallating function humor serves at this point in the U.S. psyche. Nonetheless, a crude but concise way to put the whole thing is that our present culture is, both developmentally and historically, "adolescent." Since adolescence is pretty much acknowledged to be the single most stressful and frightening period of human development -- the stage when the adulthood we claim to crave begins to present itself as a real and narrowing system of responsibilities and limitations<sup>2a</sup> -- it's not difficult to see why we as a culture are so susceptible to art and entertainment whose primary function is to "escape." Jokes are a kind of art, and since most of us Americans come to art essentially to forget ourselves -- to pretend for a while that we're not mice and all walls are parallel and the cat can be outrun -- it's no accident that we're going to see "A Little Fable" as not all that funny, in fact as maybe being the exact sort of downer-type death-and-taxes thing for which "real" humor serves as a respite.

<sup>2a</sup>You think it's a coincidence that it's in college that most Americans do their most serious falling-down drinking and drugging and reckless driving and rampant fucking and mindless general Dionysian-type reveling? It's not. They're adolescents, and they're terrified, and they're dealing with their terror in a distinctively American way. Those naked boys hanging upside down out of their frat-house's windows on Friday night are simply trying to get a few hours' escape from the stuff that any decent college has forced them to think about all week.

**WARNING**

SOME MATERIAL IN THIS  
ARTICLE MAY NOT BE  
SUITABLE FOR MINORS.

If they held the Oscars in hell, they might look a lot like **The Adult Video News Awards**. Herewith, noted subculturalists **Willem R. deGroot** and **Matt Rundlet** submit a field report from the Hollywood underworld

**NEITHER**

**NOR**

**E**VERY MARCH, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences presents awards for outstanding achievement in all aspects of mainstream cinema. These are the Academy Awards. The A.A.'s notorious commercialism and hypocrisy disgust most of the tens of millions of viewers who tune in during prime time to watch the presentations. We all tune in, despite the grotesquerie of the pretense that it's still an art form, of hearing people in \$5,000 gowns invoke lush clichés of surprise and humility scripted by publicists, the whole sardonic postmodern deal—but we still seem to watch. To care. Even though the hypocrisy hurts, even though opening sales and marketing strategies are now bigger than the movies themselves. There's no joy anymore, it seems like. Worse, there seems to be a conspiracy where we all pretend there's still joy. That we think it's funny when Dole does a Visa ad and Cuomo a Doritos ad and Gorbachev kills for Pizza Hut. That the whole mainstream

celebrity culture is rushing to cash in and is all the while congratulating itself and pretending not to cash in. The whole thing seems to suck.

Your correspondents humbly offer an alternative.

**E**VERY JANUARY, the least pretentious city in America hosts the Annual AVN Awards. AVN stands for *Adult Video News*, which is sort of the *Variety* of the U.S. porn industry. This thick, expensively designed magazine costs \$7.95 per issue, is about 83 percent ads, and is clearly targeted at adult-video retailers. Its circulation is appr. 40,000.

Though the sub-line vagaries of entertainment accounting are legendary, it is nevertheless acknowledged that the U.S. adult-film industry, centered in the San Fernando Valley just over the mountains from Hollywood, is a way larger and more efficient moneymaking machine than is theatrical mainstream American cinema.

Nor is it an accident that both *Adult Video News*—whose articles are more like advertorials—and its yearly awards came into being in 1982. The early 1980s, after all, saw the genesis of home-video rentals, which have done for the adult industry pretty much what TV did for pro football.

From the 12/11/97 Press Release issued by

AVN (visitable also at [www.avn.com](http://www.avn.com)):

"The nominations for the 15th Annual AVN Awards were announced today. [The passive's a bit disingenuous—the Release itself is announcing them.] This year's awards show, commemorating AVN's 15th anniversary, celebrates 'History.'

"Awards will be presented in a record 106 categories over a two-night period.

"The adult industry released nearly 8,000 releases [sic] in 1997, including over 4,000 'new' releases (non-compilation). AVN reviewed every new release in every category [sic] this

1. At. say, an average of 90 minutes per movie, this means some person or persons put in 1.4 years of nonstop continuous porn-viewing. Your correspondents now submit, for the consideration of judicial authorities, the idea of sentencing incorrigible sex-offenders to volunteer as judges for the Annual AVN Awards and spend 1.4 years gazing without rest at the latest in American adult video. For we guarantee that they will never again thereafter want to see, hear, engage in, or think about human sexuality in any form whatsoever. Trust us on this. All five marginal (and male) print journalists assigned to cover the 1998 AVN Awards concur: Even just watching the dozen or so "big" or "high-profile" adult releases of the past year—*Bad Wives*, *Excess*, *A Week and a Half in the Life of a Prostitute*, *Miscreants*, *New Wave Hookers 5*, *Seduce & Destroy*, *Buttman in Barcelona*, and *Gluteus to the Maximum*—pulled everyone's entire glandular switchboard. By the end of the Awards weekend, none of us were even having normal biological first-thing-in-the-morning or jouncy-bus-ride-between-hotels erections, and when approached even innocently by members of the opposite sex we all now recoiled as from a hot flame (which made our party kind of a strange and challenging breakfast gig, according to our Sunday A.M. waitress).

**It Turns Out**



**What, No Governors Ball?** Loitering at Caesars after being honored at the Adult Video News Awards, clockwise from top left, "Gonzo" pioneer John Stagliano; Tiffany Mynx and Best Director Robert Black; Female Performer of the Year/Best Actress Stephanie Swift; Nikki Tyler and Jenna Jameson

it year, logging over 30,000 sex scenes.<sup>1</sup> "By comparison, last year there were approximately 375 films eligible for the Academy Awards that these voters [sic—meaning *different* voters from the AVN voters, presumably] were hired to see. AVN had to watch more than 10 times the amount of releases in order to develop the nominations." [syntax and repetition sic, 4,000 divided by 375 is indeed over 10].

FROM THE ACCEPTANCE speech of Mr. Tom Byron, Saturday, 10 January 1998, Caesars

Palace, Caesars Complex, Las Vegas NV, upon winning AVN's 1998 Male Performer of the Year Award (and with no little feeling): "I want to thank every beautiful woman I ever put my c--k inside." [Laughter, cheers, ovation.]

From the acceptance speech of Ms. Jeanna Fine, *ibid*, upon winning AVN's 1998 Best Supporting Actress Award for her role in Mr. Robert Black's *Miscreants*: "Jesus, which one is this for, *Miscreants*? Jesus, that's another one where I read the script and said 'Oh s--t, I am going to hell. But that's okay, 'cause all my

**PHOTOGRAPHED BY NATHANIEL WELCH**

*friends'll be there too!*" [Laughter, cheers.]

From last year's inter-Award of Mr. Bobby Slayton, professional comedian and Master of Ceremonies for the 1997 AVNAs: "I know I'm looking good, though, like younger, 'cause I started using this special Grecian Formula—every time I find a gray hair I f--k my wife in the a--. [No laughter, scattered groans.] F--k you. That's a great joke." B. Slayton—a gravelly Dice Clay knockoff who kept introducing every

male performer as "The woman I'm going to put my d---k off for," and who astounded all the journalists in attendance with his unfunnyness and his resemblance to every apartment-complex coke dealer any of us had ever met—is carefully absent from the 1998 Awards gala. The '98 M.C. is one Mr. Robert Schimmel, minus of *In Living Color* and a Howard Stern regular. Schimmel looks like a deprived and deeply tan Wallace Shawn and is no less coarse than B. Slayton but a whole lot better. He does the pantomime of somebody attempting intercourse with a Love Doll he's been too lazy to blow up all the way. He contrasts the woeful acidity of his own ejaculate with the concussive whims of certain well-known male performers, comparing these men's ejaculations to automatic lawn sprinklers and doing an eerie sonnet impression of same. All of 1998's marginal journalists are together at Table 189 at the very back of the ballroom. Most of the reporters come from the sorts of men's magazines that sit ink-wrapped behind the cash registers of convenience stores, and they are a singularly worldly and jaded crew, but Schimmel gets a

The fundraiser took in \$6,000, slightly less than one-millionth of porn's yearly estimated A.G.I.

AS YOU KNOW if you've seen *Casino*, *Showgirls*, *Bugsy*, etc., there are really three Las Vegases. Binion's, where the World Series of Poker is always played, exemplifies the "Old Vegas," centered around Fremont Street. Las Vegas's future is now under late-stage construction at the very end of the Strip, on the outskirts of town (where malls always go up); it's to be a bunch of theme-parkish, more "family-oriented" casinos of the kind that De Niro describes so plangently at the end of *Casino*.

But Las Vegas as most of us know it, Vegas *qua* Vegas, comprises the dozen or so hotels that flank the Strip's middle. *Vegas Populi*: the opulent, gorgeous, vulgar, ecstatically decadent hotels, cathedra to gambling, partying, and entertainment of the most microphone-swinging sort. The Sands. The Sahara. The Stardust. MGM Grand. Maxim. They're all in a small radius. Yearly utility expenditures on neon well into seven figures. Harrahs, Casino Royale (with a big 24-hour Denny's attached), Flamingo

kind of Rome—conqueror of its own people. An empire of Self. It's breathtaking. The winter's light rain makes all the neon bleed. It's almost too pretty to stand. There could be no site but Las Vegas's Caesars for modern porn's Awards. Way more tourists and conventioners recognize the performers than you'd expect. Double takes all over the hotel. Even just putting coins in a loose-carousel slot machine, a porn star is a prime attraction. Las Vegas doesn't miss a trick.

The Annual AVN Awards are always scheduled to coincide with the International Consumer Electronics Show (CES), which this year runs from 8 through 11 January. The CES is an extremely big deal. It's like a combination convention and talent show for the best and brightest in the world of consumer tech. Steve Forbes is here. DSS's Thomson. Sun Microsystems is using the CES to launch its PersonalJava 1.0. Bill Gates gives a packed-house speech on Saturday morning. Major players in TV, cable, and merchandising host a panel on the short-term viability of HDTV. The CES as a whole is bigger than yr. corpers' own hometowns. It's spread out over four hotels and has 10,000-plus booths.

The male **FANS** move in groups of three or more. Their expressions tend to be those of junior-high boys at a peephole, but all **JOWLS** and no hairline.

... of them—whose *noms de guerre* are Hecuba and Dick Filth—laughing so raucously that people from a table nearby keep looking over in annoyance. At one point in the monologue Dick Filth actually falls on a California Roll. ... But all this is Saturday night, the main event. And there are just a whole lot of festivities preceding Saturday's climax.

THIRTY-FOUR-YEAR-OLD porn actor Peter Jammer killed himself in 1995. Starters Grant, Alex Jordan, and Savannah have killed themselves in the last fifteen years. Savannah and Jordan received AVN's Best New Performer Awards in 1991 and 1992, respectively. Savannah killed herself after being disfigured in an accident. Alex Jordan is famous for having typed her suicide note to her pet bird. ... A.-based support group called Protect Adult Welfare (PAW) runs a 24-hour crisis center for people in the adult industry. A fundraiser for PAW was held at a Mission Hills, California, country club last November. It was a nude pinning tournament. Dozens of starlets agreed to participate. Hundreds of adult-video Fans showed up and paid to watch them bowl naked.

Hilton, Imperial Palace. The Mirage, with its huge laddered waterfall always lit up. Circus Circus. Treasure Island, with its intricate façade of decks and rigging and mizzens and vang. The Luxor, shaped like a ziggurat from Babylon of yore. Barbary Coast, whose sign out front says: CASH YOUR PAYCHECK—WIN UP TO \$25,000

These hotels are the Vegas we know. The land of Lola and Wayne. Of Siegfried and Roy, Copperfield. Showgirls in towering head-dresses. Sinatra's sandbox. Most of them built in the '50s and '60s, the era of mob chic and entertainment-cum-industry. Half-hour lines for taxis. Smoking not just allowed but encouraged. Toupees and adhesive name tags and women in fur. The Harley Davidson Cafe, with its tympanum of huge, protruding hawg; Bally's, with its row of phallic pillars all electrified and blinking in grand mal sync.

Nor let us forget Vegas's synecdoche and beating heart. It's kitty-cornet from Bally's: Caesars Complex. The Granddaddy. As big as twenty Wal-Mart's end-to-end. Real marble and fake marble; carpeting you can pass out on without contusion; 129,750 square feet of casino alone. Domed ceilings, clerestories, barrel vaults. In Caesars Complex is America conceived as a new

But far and away the most popular venue at the CES—with total attendance at close to 100,000 every year—is what is called the Adult Software<sup>4</sup> exhibition, despite the fact that the CES itself treats the Adult trade show kind of like the crazy relative in the family and keeps it way out in what used to be the parking garage of the Sands Hotel. This facility, a serious bus ride from all the other CES sites, is an enormous windowless all-cement space that during Show hours manages to induce both agoraphobia and claustrophobia. A sign says you have to be 21 to get in. The median age inside is 45, almost all male, just about every visitor wearing some sort of conventioner's name tag. Every production company in the adult industry, from Anabolic to Zane, has a booth here; the really big companies have booths that are sprawling and multidisplay and more like small strip malls. A lot of porn's top female performers are contract players, exclusive vendors to one particular production company, and they're putting in serious time at their companies' booths, pressing all manner of flesh.

The best way to describe the sonic environment at the CES is: imagine the apocalypse took the form of a cocktail party. The male Fans move through the fractal maze of booths in groups of three or more. Their eyes tend to be those of junior-high boys at a peephole, an ex-

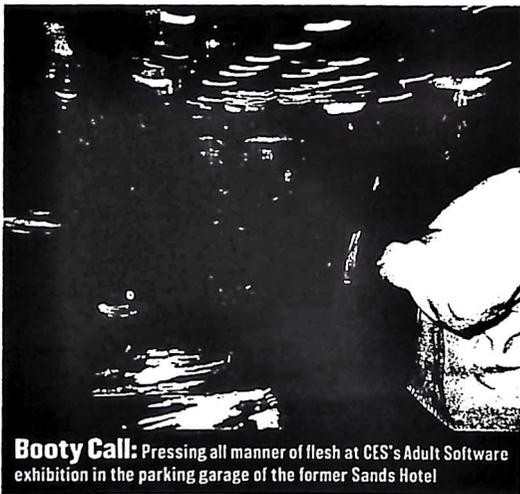
2. Mr. Peter North, in particular, delivers what seem more like mortar rounds than bioemissions.  
3. (It's an American panel, shaz all.)  
4. Yes, "Software" is a funny misnomer. It's going to be a constant temptation to keep winking and nudging and saying "no pun intended" or "as it were" after every possible double entendre, of which there are so many that yr. corpers. have decided to try to leave most of them to the reader's discretion.

ssion that looks pretty surreal on a face with  
is and no hairline. Some among them are  
eo retailers—most aren't. Most are just Fans,  
industry's breath and bread. A lot of the  
not only recognize but know the names,  
se names, and curricula vitae of almost all the  
ale performers.

It takes an average of two hours and twelve  
utes to traverse the Adult CES expo, count-  
average four delays for getting lost after  
nicane turn or a baroque ceiling-high cheval  
is designed to double the visual exposure of  
arwave Video's display for *Texas Dildo  
squerade* gets you all turned around. Your  
respondents are here with Harold Hecuba  
Dick Filth, who have very generously of-  
d to act as guides and docents, and here is a  
dom spatter of things we  
the first time we come in:  
A second-tier Arrow Pro-  
otions starlet in a G-string  
es for a photo, forked  
sally over the knee of a  
rbidly obese cell-phone  
ailer from suburban  
iladelphia. The guy taking  
picture, whose CES  
ne tag says Hi and that his  
ne is Sherm, addresses the  
ter as "babe" and asks her  
'give us a little more bush  
there." An Elegant  
starlet with polyresin  
igs attached to her back is  
ng a Milky Way bar  
le she signs video boxes.  
or Steven St. Croix is  
iding near the Caballero  
ne Video booth saying to  
one in particular "Let me

of here. I can't wait to get out of here."<sup>5</sup>  
It video stores have a very distinctive  
ll—a mix of cheap magnetic tape and disin-  
int—and the Sands' former parking garage  
ank with it. Asian businessmen move  
ugh the aisles in dense graceful packs and  
issiduously cheery and polite. A young guy  
full-color Frankenstein T-shirt is spray  
ting cartoon flames on an actress's breasts  
ic Sin City booth. Producer/director Max  
lore draws a huge crowd at his MAX-  
LD booth, where one of his girls is squat-  
on the countertop pleasuring herself with  
urt of a riding crop. Max's videos' prom-  
l posters have him carrying a girl in mini-  
s over his shoulder against the backdrop of  
us city skylines; the pitches at the bottom  
EE PRETTY GIRLS SODOMIZED IN MANNERS  
FOULI SEE C[—]M-SPLATTERED GIRLS TOO  
D TO KNOW BETTER! Max is a story all to  
lf, according to Harold Hecuba. D. Filth  
porn executive dressed entirely in Camp-  
ightwatch plaid are both smoking cigars

and keep holding their cigars up together and  
comparing the ash to see which one has the  
cleanest burn. A lot of the industry males and  
even some of the starlets are also smoking  
cigars. 1998 is definitely the Year of the Cigar.  
The starlets are all dressed in either extremely  
formal cocktail dresses or else abbreviated  
Latex/vinyl/Lycra ensembles. Heels are uni-  
formly sharp and ultrahigh. Some of the starlets  
are so heavily made up they look embalmed.  
They have complexly coiffed hair that tends to  
look really good from twenty feet away but on  
closer inspection is totally dry and dead.  
"Bizarno-Sleaze" filmmaker Gregory Dark is do-  
ing sleight-of-hand tricks with his trademark fe-  
dora. He has a goatee. Harold Hecuba also has  
a goatee; Dick Filth has more like a soul patch.



**Booty Call:** Pressing all manner of flesh at CES's Adult Software exhibition in the parking garage of the former Sands Hotel

This year, a good 75 percent of the males in and  
around the adult industry appear to be wearing  
variants of the goatee.<sup>6</sup>

Next to the Outlaw Productions booth, a  
starlet in a gold lamé spaghetti-strap gown,  
chewing gum and blowing blue bubbles, is be-  
ing videotaped by a disabled Fan whose camera  
and parabolic mike are bolted to the arm of his  
wheelchair; the starlet is pointing to the tattoos  
on her left arm and appears to be explaining the  
origin and context of each one. At the Vivid  
Video multibooth complex,<sup>7</sup> Ms. Taylor Hayes  
has what is probably the longest autograph-  
and-flesh-press line of anybody at the Adult  
CES. Taylor is big-league pretty—she looks  
like a slightly debauched Cindy Crawford—  
and an oversize monitor suspended from the  
ceiling shows her scantily clad and dancing  
amid dry-ice flames. There's a berm of boxed  
videos on the floor by the counter and a huge  
man with a visor and handheld credit card ma-  
chine on Taylor's right flank as she greets each  
Fan like a long-lost relative. According to Dick

Filth, Taylor is both a genuinely nice person  
and a consummate pro.

The booth for XPFor Media—a company  
known for its "Southern Belles" video series and  
Orgy for World Peace website—is particularly  
arresting because all the execs at XPFor seem to  
be under 25, and the booth's atmosphere is that  
of a fraternity party in its third straight day. One  
young bald guy is unconscious in a fetal position  
on the counter, and some wag has glued all sorts  
of feathers and flaccid plastic two-headed dil-  
doish things to his skull. XPFor's owners/auteurs  
are brothers, trust-fund babies from an *Ice  
Stormish* Connecticut suburb. Their real names  
are (no kidding) Farrel and Moffitt Timplake.

Everyone is visibly sweating. At all the  
booths, starlets treat the Fans with the same ab-  
sent, rigid-faced courtesy that flight attendants  
and restaurant hostesses deploy. You can tell  
how bored the performers are by the way their  
faces light up when they see someone they  
know. Well over half the industry's current su-  
perstars are in this huge room. T.T. Boy is here,  
standing alone with his trademark glower, the  
Boy who is rumored to bring a semiautomatic  
pistol with him to the set and who was featured  
in a 1995 *New Yorker* article that was full of  
lines like "A pom shoot is an intricately delin-  
eated ecology." Mr. Vince Vouyer (sic)<sup>8</sup> is on  
hand, as are Seth Gecko, Jake Steed, Serenity,  
Missy, and Nick East. Here is the ageless  
Randy West, who looks like a surfer would look  
if the surfer were also a Mafia chauffeur, with  
his perennial tan and hair like rigid surf. Mr.  
Jon Dough—winner of AVN's coveted Best  
Actor (Video) statuette in both '96 and '97—al-  
ternates between various booths, wearing his  
customary expression of having evolved psy-  
chologically to the point where he's so incredi-  
bly cool and laid-back that all of life is a yawn.

And two-decade veteran Joey Silvera is at  
the CES, though mostly in his capacity as an  
auteur: Silvera now directs Evil Angel's popular  
"Butt Row" video series.<sup>9</sup> Following the lead  
of pioneers like John Leslie and Paul Thomas,  
most of today's top male stars now also direct  
(and per the store boxes "Present") their  
own line of videos, e.g. "Tom Byron's C[—]m-  
back P[—]y" series, "Jon Dough's Dirty Sto-  
ries," the eye-popping Rocco Siffredi's "[Vari-

5. (St. Croix's background is that he apprenticed as a mason but then couldn't get union work. He has great arcanic eyebrows and has won a lot of AVN Awards.)

6. Dick Filth reports that a couple years ago the big industry trend was Heavy Metal and that everybody had very long hair and wore black T-shirts and iron crosses, etc.

7. Vivid is one of the '90s industry's true powers, a company famous for having billboards that cause traffic accidents in downtown L.A.

8. (whose real name turns out to be John LaForme (sp!)). Q: Why, if your real name were John LaForme, would you possibly feel the need for a nom de guerre?)

9. Silvera, who broke in way back in the '70s at Times Square's Show World, looks like a curly-haired and extremely fit praying mantis. He's also famous for always showing up on the set with a small duffel bag filled with multibrand vitamins and mineral and herbal supplements, all self-prescribed.

ous European Cities] By Night" line, etc.

It is difficult to describe how it feels to gaze at living human beings whom you've seen perform in porn movies. To shake the hand of a man whose precise erectile size, angle, and vasculature are familiar to you. That strange "I-think-I-know-you" sensation one feels upon seeing any celebrity in the flesh is here both intensified and twisted. It feels intensely twisted to see reigning industry queen Jenna Jameson at the Vivid booth chilling out in Jordaches and a latex bustier and to know already that she has a tattoo of a sundered valentine with the (rather heavy) double entendre HEART BREAKER on her right buttock. To watch Peter North try to get a cigar lit and to have that sight backlit by the memories of his mortarlike ejaculations.<sup>10</sup> To have seen already these human faces in orgasm—that most unguarded and purely neural of expressions, the one so vulnerable that for centuries you basically had to marry a person to get to see it.<sup>11</sup> This weirdness may account for some of the complex emotional intercourse taking place between the performers and Fans at the Adult CES. The patrons may leer and elbow each other from a distance, but by the time the men get to the front of the line and face the living incarnation of their VCR's fantasy-babe, most of them turn into quivering goggle-eyed schoolboys, sheepish and salivacious.

"Most of these guys become incredibly nervous when I come up to them," veteran starlet Shane has explained. "I'll put my arms around a guy and his whole body will be trembling. They pretty much do whatever I tell them to do." The entire industry has this oddly reversed equation—the consumers are the ones who lookervative or ashamed or shy, while the performers are cocky and smooth and 100 percent pro.

IT IS NO LONGER the 1980s, and the Meese-Commission mentality that led to a major crackdown on video porn is long gone. Federal task forces and PTA outrage are now focused on the Internet and kiddie porn. But today's

adult industry is still hypersensitive about what it perceives as fascist attacks on its First Amendment freedoms. A specially prepared trailer now runs before many higher-end adult videos, right between the legal disclaimer on the product's compliance with or exemption from 18 U.S.C. Section 2257 and ads for phone services like 900-666-HEAD. Against shots of flowing flags and the Lincoln Memorial, a voice says stuff like, "Censorship goes against our Bill of Rights. It is an attempt on the part of the government to legislate morality and to stifle free

FEMINISTS OF ALL stripe oppose the contemporary adult industry for certain reasons having to do with pornography's putative effects on women. Their arguments are well-known and in some respects persuasive. But some antiporn arguments in the 1990s are now centered around adult entertainment's alleged effects on the men who consume it. Some masculinists believe that a lot of men are actually addicted to video porn, and that this addiction causes subtle but grievous harm. A Mr. David Mura has a little book called *A Male Grief: Notes on Pornography and Addic-*

*tion*, which is a bit New Agey but interesting in places, e.g.:

"At the essence of pornography is the image of flesh used as a drug, a way of numbing psychic pain. But this drug lasts only as long as the man stares at the image. ... In pornographic perception, each gesture, each word, each image, is read first and foremost through sexuality. Love or tenderness, pity or compassion, become subverted by, and are made subservient to, a greater deity, a more powerful force. In short, the world is reduced to a simple common denominator. . . . Those in the thrall of pornography try to eliminate from their consciousness the world outside pornography, and this includes everything from their



**Leer and Moaning in Las Vegas:** At the exhibit, any vaguely scantily clad female could attract gawkers.

expression. Vote for those who believe in limiting government intrusion into your personal affairs. Vote against censorship." These trailers always say they're sponsored by either the Adult Video Association or something called The Free Speech Coalition. Both organizations (and the extent to which the two are separate is unclear) are essentially PACs. In other words, porn is now a hard-lobbying political force no less than GM or RJR Nabisco.

family and friends to their business deals or last Sunday's sermon to the political situation in the Middle East. In engaging in such elimination the viewer . . . reduces himself. He becomes stupid."

This kind of stuff sounds a little out-there, maybe, until one notes the eerie similarity between the eyes of the Fans at the Adult CES and the eyes of the people in their fifth hour of pumping silver dollars into the slot machines of the Sands' casino just outside.

What's equally weird is that if you wait, you can then scuttle back to the hotel and watch Jameson & North have gymnastic sex in The Naked One on pay-per-view for \$9.95.

ii. Harold Hecuba, whose magazine job entails reviewing dozens of adult releases every month, has an interesting vignette about a Los Angeles Police Department detective he met once when H.H.'s car got taken into and a whole big box of Elegant Angel Inc. videotapes was stolen (a box with H.H.'s name and work address right on it) and subsequently recovered by the L.A.P.D. A detective brought the box back to Hecuba personally, a gesture that H.H. thought was extraordinarily thoughtful and public-spirited until it emerged that the detective had just used the box's return as an excuse to meet Hecuba—whose citizenship work he appeared to know—and to discuss the ins and outs of the adult video industry. It turned out that this detective—60, happily married, a grampa, shy, polite, clearly a decent guy—was a Fan. He and Hecuba ended up over coffee, and when H.H. finally cleared his throat he asked the cop why such a clearly decent guy squandered his civic virtue as a Fan, the detective confessed that what drew him to the films was "the faces," i.e. the actresses' faces, i.e. those rare moments in orgasm or accidental intimacy when the women dropped their so-called "I'm-a-nasty-girl" sneer and became someone real. "Sometimes—and you never know when, it is the thing—sometimes all of a sud-

den they'll reveal themselves," was the detective's way of putting it. "Their what-do-you-call-it—humaneness." It turns out that the detective found adult films moving, in fact far more so than most mainstream Hollywood movies, in which line genre actors—sometimes very gifted actors—go about feigning genuine humanity. "In real movies," it's all on purpose. I suppose what I like in porno is the accident of it."

The detective's explanation seems to yz. correpz. very interesting. It helps explain some of the appeal of adult films that are supposed to be "naked" and "explicit" but are often some of the most aloof, unrevealing footage for sale anywhere. For much of the cold, dead, oiling quality of adult films is attributable to the performers' faces. These are faces that usually appear bored, emotionless, wotomniklike, but are in fact simply hidden, the self locked away someplace far behind the eyes. Surely this hiddenness is the way a human being who is giving away the very most private parts of himself preserves a sense of dignity and autonomy—he denies us true expression. (You can see this bored, hard, dead look in strippers, prostitutes, and porn performers of all locales and genders.)

But the detective is on to something, because it's also true that occasionally in a sex scene the hidden self appears. You can see the porn performer's face change as self-consciousness (most females) or crazed blankness (most males) yields to some genuine erotic joy in what's going on; the sighs and moans change from automatic to expressive. It

happens only once in a while, but the detective is right: the effect on the viewer is electric. And the adult performers who can do this a lot—allow themselves to feel and enjoy what's taking place, camera or no—become huge, legendary stars. The Ginger Lynn and Keisha of the '80s could do this, and now sometimes Jill Kelly and Rocce Silfrudi can. Jenna Jameson and T.T. Boy cannot. They remain just bodies.

Among the late '90s male performers, Jon Dough is the most duping example of this, and it is an abiding mystery why he's won so many AVN Awards and why he's so omnipresent in everything that H. Hecuba now defines an "experimental" adult film as any adult film without Jon Dough.

12. (previously set in 1995 by a Ms. Annabel Chong, at 251 male adult) 13. According to Dick Filth, the imbroglino started when Hecuba crashed the party and was spotted by Ms. Nicci Sterling, about whom Hecuba had said in a recent film review that it was "unclear whether she'd win any beauty contests, but the sure could suck —k.". It was apparently the beauty-contest crack that had hurt Ms. Sterling's feelings, and on seeing H.H., and suffering the relaxation of social inhibitions for which entertainment parties of all kinds are famous, Nicci Sterling made a bedtime for Hecuba and uttered two high-volume expletives and attempted to smite H.H. with an open-handed right cross, whereupon H.H. had the wherewithal (aided perhaps by the six-inch platinum heels that made

**J**UST A LITTLE BIT more here on the whole scene at the Adult CES, which is a lot more of a rub-elbows-type venue than the stylized rds ceremony is going to end up being. Harold Hecuba is deep in conversation with a marginal porn producer about one of his performer's being sidelined with something called a prolapsed sphincter," which yr. corressps. decline to follow up on in any way. It is now that Ms. Jasmin St. Claire has made an appearance at the XPlor booth to spell the starlet behind the counter, who is limping to the booth's rear; she (the limping starlet) has (reportedly) had to be braced with silicon to fit into her pants. The Xplor line starts to swell. Jasmin St. Claire is wearing a red vinyl jacket-and-miniskirt ensemble. A porn starlet entering any kind of room or area has a distinctive aura about her—you turn your head to look even if you don't want to. It really is like watching a figure emerge from a pinball-machine illustration as a high-concept comic book step out of a 3-D and come your way. It turns out truly to be possible to feel as if your eyeballs are protruding slightly from their sockets. The weird thing is that Jasmin St. Claire isn't even at all that pretty, at least not today. Her hair is dyed so black it looks almost purple, and she is so incredibly cosmeticized that she looks like a crow. (She is also somewhat knock-off, plus of course has the requisite Howard-grade bust.) Ms. St. Claire is being escorted to the booth by two large men whose sessions are describable only as mug-tish. This is another thing about porn stars: they're never alone. They're always accompanied by at least one and sometimes as many as four flinty-eyed males. The general suspicion is that of a very expensive thoroughbred gelded onto the track under a silk blanket. Ms. Jasmin St. Claire's cult-celebrity status at the '98 CES stems from her having broken the *World Gang Bang Record*<sup>12</sup> by taking on a row in *Amazing Pictures*' 1996

*World's Biggest Gang Bang 2*. Since many of these men were strictly amateur Fans who'd had only to fill out an application and produce an HIV all-clear from the D.P.H., she now enjoys an almost legendary populist appeal—"The People's Porn Star"—and an enormous throng of Fans with autographable memorabilia begins to gather at the Xplor booth, which throngs Ms. St. Claire appears for the moment to be ignoring, because she and H. Hecuba, having exchanged warm double-cheek kisses, are now deeply in some kind of tête-à-tête above the sockless Dockside of the unconscious kid on the counter. Dick Filth—after your correspondents have remarked on how it's kind of heartwarming how everyone in the adult industry all seem to be friends, even film reviewers and performers—dishes an involved anecdote about

execs and producers are not very In, and directors (especially those who've never undergone the initiation of having sex on camera themselves) are less In than the performers. Reviewers and industry journalists are even less In than execs, and non-industry journalists are way, way non-In, almost as low-caste as the great mass of porn Fans themselves (for which Fans the Insider term is *mook*<sup>14</sup>).

All of this is meant to help explain how exactly your correspondents ended up in porn titan Max Hardcore's personal suite at the Sahara and got to hang out in a room with Max, his crew, porn starlets Alex Dane and Caressa Savage, and two B-girls—viz. it was really Hecuba and Filth who were invited to hang out in the suite on Friday afternoon, but yr. corressps. hung like paposes to their backs, and the burly

## The **PORN** industry is occluded and insular in a way that makes it seem like **HIGH SCHOOL**, with its involved hierarchies of popularity and influence.

how Jasmin St. Claire actually once tried to strangle Harold Hecuba at an industry soirée a couple years ago, an anecdote which, if you're interested, appears below.<sup>13</sup>

**N**OT UNLIKE URBAN youth organizations, police, carnival workers, and many other culturally marginalized guilds, the American porn industry is occluded and insular in a way that makes it seem almost like high school. There are cliques, antiques, alliances, betrayals, conflagratory rumors, legendary enmities, and public blood-lettings, plus involved hierarchies of popularity and influence. You're either In or you're not. Performers, being the industry's fissile core, are of course In. Despite their power, studio

MAXWORLD Production Assistant wasn't quick enough about slamming the door.

So your correspondents were, for a couple hours—at least logistically—In.

For a regular civilian male, hanging out in a hotel suite with porn starlets is a tense and emotionally convoluted affair. There is, first, the matter of having seen the various intimate activities and anatomical parts of these starlets heretofore and thus feeling oddly "shy" around them. There is also a complex sexual tension. Because porn films' worlds are so sexualized, with everybody seemingly teetering right on the edge of coitus all the time and it taking only the slightest nudge or excuse—a stalled elevator, an unlocked door, a cocked (Continued on page 100)

ring's balance precarious and forced her to telegraph the blow) her hand behind it could knock his trifocals off. And Ms. Jasmin St. Claire, seeing Harold Hecuba clutching the hand of an agitated and very Nicé Sterling, performed a set pick off the three-foot width "The Hedgehog" Jeremy and leapt on Hecuba's back and de-hat Filth mainstays was a pretty authentic-looking L.A.P.D.-1 Choke Hold, prompting Hecuba to whirl 360° several times and to dislodge Ms. St. Claire while he still had the cerebral oxygen, so, inadvertently whelpers Ms. Sterling into Mr. Randy's missing Wren's cuffure for the first time in industry memory the best of Filth's recollection) simultaneously dislodging partial autoint trifocals and sending them out in an arc across and into the forbidding décolletage of Ms. Christy Canyon, so recovered (the glasses) or even seen ever again.

Filth also reports that the Sterling Incident had been just zieberg's tip or the camel's straw so far as Ms. Jasmin St. Claire 'd Hecuba were concerned. Harold Hecuba had apparently read a recent interview with J.St.C. in which she had confessed she was taking the rather staggering amount of \$8 she was on *World's Biggest Gang Bang 2* and investing it in a (rather outdaring) string of gumball machines all up and down the CA Hecuba had chosen to publish this confidence in the inter-

view, and Ms. St. Claire was reportedly furious that Hecuba had publicized her "secret investment strategy," believing that now everyone and his brother was going to want to get into gumball-vending and it would glut the market, and so Ms. St. Claire had had it in for Harold Hecuba for some time and may well have viewed the Sterling Incident more as a convenient excuse than as the rescue of what appeared to be an endangered colleague.—D. Filth says debate over the true motives behind the Choke-Hold-360°-Hair-Cleavage fiasco has been vigorous and multifaceted for twenty months now.

<sup>14</sup> *Mook* means roughly what tube used to mean to carnival insiders. Like all psychically walled communities, the adult industry is rife with code and jargon. *Wood* is a camera-ready erection; *woodman* is a dependably potent male performer; and *waiting for wood* is a discreet way of explaining what everybody in the cast and crew is doing when a male performer is experiencing *wood trouble*, which latter term is self-evident. *S.S.* is a sex scene; *D.P.* means a Double Penetration, wherein a starlet's nether orifices are simultaneously accessed by two woodmen (q.v. 1996's semiclassic *NYDP Blue*). (Certain masochistic and capacious starlets are apparently available for Triple Penetrations, but they are rare and marginal, and so—thankfully—are TPs.) *Tuck 'n' Bush* denotes a film with both anal and vaginal S.S.'s. *Sheet (wh)* is an industry term for both the act of male orgasm (*v*) and the material there-

by emitted (*n*). (Note, however, that both H. Hecuba and D. Filth aver that one of their big challenges as reviewers is to keep coming up with lively and evocative synonyms for semen.) *Money—short for money shot*—is a successfully filmed male orgasm, which 100 percent of the time takes place external to the female partner; e.g. a *fecal* is a money whose sheet is directed onto the partner's face. *Girl-Girl* signifies a Sapphic S.S., which every single hetero adult film seems to require at least one of. *Beam* denotes a straight-on deep-focus view of a dilated, wood-ready orifice. A *B-girl* is a second- or third-rank porn actress who's lower-paid than a starlet and is usually available for more pressure, degrading, or painful S.S.'s. *Fluff (v)* is an unfilmed oral activity designed to induce, maintain, or enhance a woodman's wood (and high-end porn films used to actually employ what were called *fluff girls*, who were usually B-girls in waiting).

**EXERCISE:** Use at least eight (8) of the prenominate adult industry terms in a well-formed English sentence.

**SAMPLE SOLUTION:** "After a long wait for wood, a B-girl fluffed the woodman into a state where he could take part in a D.P. S.S. whose frequent beams required maximum wood, and after a shakily drawn S.S. ended up in a spectacular facial in which the starlet really displayed her professionalism by managing to stay enthusiastic even though a good bit of the sheet went right in her eye."

(Continued from page 93)

eyebrow, a firm handshake—to send everyone tumbling into a tangled mass of limbs and orifices, there's a bizarre unconscious expectation/dread/hope that this is what might happen right here in Max Hardcore's hotel room. Here your correspondents find it impossible to overemphasize that this is a *delusion*. In fact, of course, the unconscious e/d/h makes no more sense than it would be hanging out with doctors at a medical convention and to expect that at the slightest nudge everyone in the room would tumble into a frenzy of MRIs and invasive surgery. Nevertheless the tension persists, despite the fact that the actresses are obviously tired and dissociated from the day's CES, <sup>15</sup> <sup>16</sup> plus, it emerges, somewhat sore: it turns out that Max Hardcore is shooting one of his "Gonzo" porn spectaculars right here at the 1998 Consumer Electronics Show, using the CES as a hook and backdrop, and the girls have been alternating CES meet-and-greets and riding-crop shenanigans with an exhausting and S.S.-intensive filming schedule. (Max has not yet gotten around to chatting with CES's administration about their feelings on having the world's biggest consumer electronics trade show featured by name in a *SEE PRETTY GIRLS SODOMIZED IN MANNERS MOST FOUL* video—he's a firm believer in the fait accompli theory of artistic endeavor. . . .)

Max Hardcore—a.k.a. Max Steiner, a.k.a. Paul Steiner, né Paul Little—is about 5'6" and a very fit 135. He is somewhere between 40 and 60 years old and resembles more than anything a mesomorphic and borderline-psycho Henry Gibson. He is wearing a big black cowboy hat and what has to be one of very few long-sleeved Hawaiian shirts in existence anywhere. Once the P.A. guarding the door mellows out and introductions are made (H.H. managing to use the name of this magazine several times in one

sentence), Max reveals himself to be a genial and garrulous host and offers everybody disposable plastic cups of vodka before settling in with H.H. and yr. corpers. to discuss what for Max are the most pressing and relevant issues at this year's AVN Awards, which issues are the career, reputation, personal history, and overall life philosophy of Mr. Max Hardcore.

Pioneered (depending whom you talk to) by either Hardcore or John ("Buttman") Stagliano, "Gonzo" has become one of this decade's most popular and profitable genres of adult video. It's sort of a cross between an MTV documentary and the Hell panel from Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* triptych. A Gonzo film is always set at some sort of distinctive locale or occasion—Daytona Beach at Spring Break, the Cannes film festival, etc. There's always a randy & salivous "host" talking directly to a handheld camera: "Well and we're here at the Cannes film festival, and it looks like there's going to be lots of excitement, John Travolta and Sigourney Weaver are supposed to both be in town, and there's also the world-famous Beach, and I'm told there's always some seriously good-looking little girls at the Beach, so let's us head on down." (That's the approximate lead-in to a recent Max-at-Cannes Gonzo, a lead-in Max refers to with a 56-tooth grin as "always mercifully brief"—and note the "little girls at the Beach" thing, because this is one of Max's professional signatures, the infantilization of his videos' females as dramatic foils for his own persona, which is always that of a sort of degenerate uncle or stepdad.) Then the shaky but always focused camera heads on down to the ocean or casino or CES or whatever, scoping out attractive women while the host moans and chews his knuckle in lust. Then pretty soon host & camera start actually coming up to these women and engaging them in little cameo "interviews" full of sideways leers and salacious double entendre. Some of the interviewees are civilians, but a certain percentage are what Max refers to as "ringers," i.e. professional porn

actresses. And so the viewer is treated to the classic frat fantasy of moving, via just a couple of singles-bar "Hey babe" lines, from scoping out an attractive woman to having wild and anatomically diverse sex with her while one of his buddies captures the whole thing on tape.<sup>17</sup>

The issue of who exactly invented Gonzo being vexed and so notwithstanding, Max Hardcore is famous as a director for several things: (1) Being incredibly disciplined about budgets and tactical logistics, complete with forcing his staff and crew to wear identical jumpsuits of scarlet nylon so that they look like a national ski team—Max's shoots are described (by Max) as "almost military operations"; (2) Not only employing ringers but actually sometimes being able to talk real live civilian "litle girls" on the Beach or in the mall into coming on back to the special MAXWORLD RV and having specialized sex on camera<sup>18</sup>; (3) Being the first in "mainstream" (meaning non-ferish) adult video to perpetrate on women levels of violation, humiliation, and degradation that would have been unthinkable even a few years ago. *W/t* (3), Max, after detailing to yr. corpers. the vo- and avocations that led him into the adult industry (a tale too literally incredible even to think about fact-checking and printing, not to mention that we don't want to give Max the satisfaction), informs us that he is and always has been adult video's "cutting edge" and that other less bold & original filmmakers have systematically used *his*, Max's, degradations of females as a blueprint for their own subsequent derivative films' degradations. (Harold Hecuba and Dick Filth, by the way, have heard Max hold forth many times before and are now outside the circle of discourse—D.F. in the bathroom for what seems a particularly long time, H.H. on the couch with the B-girls discussing the implications of Seinfeld's retirement for NBC's '98 lineup.)

Alone and in a place of conspicuous honor on a wood-finish shelf at the rear of Max's suite is an actual AVN Awards statuette. The

15. (recall that riding-crop demo. . .)

16. The actresses seem, in fact, not only uncommunicative but downright surly. How much of this is convention-booth fatigue and how much is the stony demeanor of insiders toward all Outsiders is anyone's guess. They are all in post-CES multi-baggy jeans and sweats and big fuzzy slippers, etc. Without their makeup and ap-purtenances, Savage and Dane look even prettier: the B-girls do not. They spend most of the time on the suite's big vinyl couch watching a syndicated *Seinfeld* triple-header.

17. So note that whereas traditional, "dramatic" porn movies simulate the 100% sexualization of real life (viz. by creating a kind of alternative real world in which everyone from secretaries to firemen to dental hygienists is always just one prompt away from frantic intercourse), Gonzo videos push the envelope even farther by offering an apparent sexualization of actual real life (by, e.g., combining real footage of the babes on the Cannes Beach with scripted footage of seduction and explicit sex). Gonzo thus seems literally like the por-equivalent of the mainstream trend in Docudramas, *COPS*, *Real-Life Adventures of 3rd-Shift Trauma Surgeon*, etc.

18. This is not a rumor. It is documented as fact. No theories/analyses of this phenomenon or of the civilian females' motives/susceptibilities will be attempted. The relevant questions are too large and stupefying.

19. (Here the suspicion that the Award statuettes are bought in bulk, possibly he, feels oddly confirmed.)

20. Plus of course the ubiquitous smolder that's so much a part of '90s commercial culture. . . e.g. H. Hecuba, during a marathon screening of several Award-nominated videos on Friday, points out rather insightfully that the relationship between a Calvin Klein advertisement and a hard-core adult film is essentially the same as the relation between a funny joke and an explanation of what's funny about that joke.

21. [Unfortunately, or mercifully, the exigencies of taste prevent us from reproducing Max's vivid descriptions of said deprivates. Ed.]

22. (as it were)

23. Yes: this is it: what's so unbelievable is not the degree or relentlessness of porn people's egotism (Jammin Ste. Claire's way of greeting journalists is to offer them a personally autographed photo; Tom Byron, who is 36 and has precisely one ambute, affects the air of a Mafia don at the Sands' bar's nightly porn parties, extending his hand knuckles-up as if for obeisance, etc. etc.). It's the obtuseness of it. Take for just one other instance the 29-year-old Mr. Scotty Schwartz, with whom through the good offices of H. Hecuba your correspondents had a working supper that was a whole Russian novel in itself. Young Mr. Schwartz, maybe 5'0" in low gravity and

platform shoes, is a former Hollywood child star whose performances in Richard Pryor's *The Toy* and Darren McGavin's *A Christmas Story* were the zenith of a career whose abrupt decline led—through a flux of circumstances too numerous to even take notes on—to an acquaintance with the ubiquitous Ron Jeremy and an entry to the insular social nexus of adult video. Either desperate or deranged or both, Scotty Schwartz apparently decided that the "controversy" of his appearance in a hard-core film would jumpstart his legit career (kind of like rehab or an arrest, is Scotty's analogy; he repeatedly gnashes his teeth over the fact that his old rival Corey Feldman's career survived a rehab). And the adult industry, only too happy to cash in on the novelty of Scotty's mainstream celebrity (recall 1994's *John Wayne Bobbitt Uncut*, after all), starred Schwartz in *Wicked Pictures' 1996 Scotty's X-Rated Adventure*, a film beset by near-crippling anxiety and epic wates for wood, all of which Scotty recounts in a detail that inspires pure empathic honor in yr. male corpers.

(Mr. Bobbitt's porn debut, too, was named by serious wood issues—impotence apparently being the Achilles' heel of nearly all nonprofessional woodmen ("performance anxiety" must take on a whole new hideous resonance in the magnesium glare of a working porn shoot)—but Bobbitt finally submitted to a penile injection of prostaglandin [known in the adult industry as "Instant Wood"],

trophy looks a bit like an Oscar/Emmy/Clio except the figurine's arms are up and out (rather like Richard Nixon at the climax of the '68 GOP convention), and something a little blurry and indistinct about the casting gives the trophy a sort of cubic-zirconium aspect. Whether the statuette is heavy & solid v. hollow & Little Leaguish remains unknown—there is no invitation to touch or heft it. One of the B-girls on the couch is now either laughing or weeping hysterically into her hands at something Harold Hecuba has said; her bare shoulders heave. It would be fantastic if the *Seinfeld* rerun on the big TV were the episode about everybody trying to refrain from masturbating, but it isn't.

Asked by yr. corpsps. what he won this AVN Award on the shelf for, Max Hardcore slaps his knee: "I f--king stole it." It's now that hard middle-distance inspection reveals that the "MAX HARDCORE" on the metal strip at the trophy's base has been scratched in by someone who is not a professional engraver. It looks done with a Bowie knife, in fact. Max expands on his statuette caper: shur inexplicably out of the Awards for years, he last year, upon exiting the stage (he's a presenter every year, which he regards as the AAVNA's way of twisting the emotional blade) espied a large cardboard box filled with blank and unused AVN Award statuettes.<sup>19</sup> Whereupon he thought, as he now puts it, "What the f--k, I f--king deserve it," and snagged one, hiding it in his enormous Stetson for the remainder of the show.

Alex Dane is now telling Harold Hecuba about a stray dog she found and has decided to keep. As she describes the dog she seems maybe fourteen; the impression lasts only a second and is heartbreaking. One of the B-girls, meanwhile, is explaining that she has just gotten a pair of cutting-edge breast implants, which she can adjust the size of by adding or draining fluid via small valves under her armpits, and then—perhaps mistaking your correspondents' expres-

sions for ones of disbelief—she raises her arms to display the valves. There really are valves.

**S**O MUCH ABOUT the adult industry seems like an unsubtle parody of Hollywood and the nation writ large. The top performers are comic-book caricatures of sexual allure. The prosthetic breasts and lifted buttocks and muscle implants are nothing more than accentuations of a mentality that yields vast liposuction and collagen industries. The gynecologically explicit sexuality of Jenna, Jasmin, et al seems more than anything like a *Mad* magazine spoof of the "smoldering" sexuality of S. Stone and Madonna and P. Anderson Lee and so many other mainstream iconettes.<sup>20</sup> Not to mention the fact that the adult industry takes many of the psychological deformities that Hollywood is famous for—the vanity, the vulgarity, the commercialism—and not only makes them overt and grotesque but seems to revel in that grotesquerie.

Good old Max Hardcore, for instance, is a complete psychopath—that's part of his Gonzo persona—but so is Max Steiner. You'd almost have to have been there in that suite. Max sits holding court in his hat and pointy boots, looking at once magisterial and mindless, while his red-suited acolytes laugh on cue and a junior-high dropout shows off her valves. The first several minutes of the impromptu interview in the Sahara are spent passing around a copy of something called *Icon* magazine, which Max announces is doing a profile on him—we are expected to leaf through the magazine and comment favorably on its content and layout while Max watches us the same intense way a parent watches you when you're looking at a snapshot of their kid that they've taken out uninvited and pressed on you. There then follows the torrent of personal history and background that yr. corpsps. have decided to deny Max the satisfaction of seeing reproduced here. There then's a kind of Max 101—like survey of personal philosophy & Gonzo theory & the statuette anecdote. The vodka is top-shelf and the plastic cups dusty. Then it suddenly occurs to

Max that he wants to show us something from this week's shooting that he thinks will sum up his particular pom genius better than mere verbiage could, and he starts flipping through a notebook to find something.

"What it is we got this one little girl back in the [infamous MAXWORLD] trailer and after... like, your standard depravities,<sup>21</sup> we get her to stick a pen—no, a what-do-you-call..."

CREWMAN: "Magic Marker."

MAX: "... Magic Marker, stick it up her ass, and we got her to stick it up her a--hole and write all this... this stuff," holding up the notebook, opened to a page; again he has us pass it around: I'M A LITTLE F--KHOLE is written on the sheet in a hand<sup>22</sup> that seems impressively legible considering the logistics of the statement's production. Dick Filth makes a waggish inquiry about future film plans involving this girl and a typewriter, but Max doesn't laugh (we note that Max never laughs at a joke he hasn't told), and so neither does anyone else.

It's worth also observing the way Max solicits the PREMIERE photographer—who also got in on Filth and Hecuba's coattails—with his own idea of the perfect shot for the title page of this very PREMIERE article. The shot is to be of M. Hardcore holding an entire armful of AVN award trophies, seated in some kind of imperial-looking and really nice chair that is itself set up on the palm-studded boulevard of the famous Las Vegas Strip—so the photographer will get lots of smeary neon and appropriately phallic bldgs in the background—with a retinue of scantily clad starlets either draped swoonily over him or prostrate at his feet, or both. It is vital to note that there are no tone-quotes and no irony or embarrassment or self-awareness of any sort on Max's face as he sketches this photo's tableau; he's in the kind of earnest that one imagines Irving Thalberg was always in.<sup>23</sup>

**T**HE 15TH ANNUAL AVN Awards are actually split over two consecutive nights, a tactic which Max H. thought the legit Oscars

whereas Schwartz bravely/cravenly chose to limp through S.'s R.A. without medical assistance.)

... The thrust of the whole long story being that Schwartz, though (understandably) no longer a porn performer, has abandoned mainstream ambitions for the adult vorex and is now a budding Gonzo-genre director, and is even this week guiding something called *Scotzy's Behind the Anal Door at the C.E.S.* (which presumably Max Hardcore doesn't know about) through a hectic series of Tush 'n' Bush shoots.

Anyway, the point is that yr. corpsps. were on Thursday night lured to this supper by Hecuba's reports that S. Schwartz had become son of the unofficial mascot of the adult industry and knew absolutely everybody and was also a near-maniac character: we figured that he'd be an invaluable source of background and context and gossip. H.H. had already prepared us for Schwartz's manner (which is physiologically irritating the same way a musical note held for too long is physiologically irritating), but what he neglected to mention was that Scotzy Schwartz is totally incapable of talking about anything other than himself—two courses and a half an hour are spent on Scotzy's mainstream return and the l--king-over he got from fate's liddle finger (alliteration and anatomically mixed metaphor Schwartz's) and the comparative injustice of the art of his and C.

Feldman's careers, another twenty minutes on Schwartz's budding and allegedly platonic relationship with a "nice girl" he met On-Line (during which initial 50 minutes one of your correspondents kept putting his napkin in his mouth). Nor did Schwartz seem able or disposed to tell any story of which he himself was not the hero. Here—as close to verbatim as stupefaction permitted—is Scotzy's description of his introduction to Russ Hampshire, head of VCA Inc. and what Scotzy terms "a very very big fish: like /his/ if you know what I'm saying to you here" in the adult industry:

"So I'm at this party and hanging and schmoozing up the girls and there across the room is Russ Hampshire and Russ catches my like eye: if you know what I'm saying and goes like 'Hey Kid, c'mere' and so I do I go over I mean this is Russ F--king Hampshire you know what I'm saying here and I do I like go on over to where Russ is and Russ comes over to me and goes 'Scotzy, I been watching you. I like your style. I'm a good judge of people, and Scotzy, you're good people. I never heard one person say one bad thing about you.'" [Keep in mind that this is Scotzy telling this story. Note how verbatim he gets Hampshire's dialogue. Note the altered timbre and perfectly timed delivery. Note the way it never even occurs to Schwartz that a normal U.S. citizen might be bored or repelled by Scotzy's lengthy recitation of someone else's praise of him. Schwartz knows

only that this interchange occurred and that it signifies that a big fish approves him and that it reendorses to Scotzy's credit and that he wants it widely widely known]." "Kid, I just want you to know you're OK in my book, and if there's anything I can do to, you know, help you, anything at all, I just want you to say the word."

... End of vignette, and new Scotzy—like Max, like Jasmin, like Jenna and Randy and Tom—looks around, examining his auditors' faces for the admission that cannot possibly fail to appear. What is the appropriate social response to an anecdote like this—a contextless anecdote, apropos nothing, with its smugly unsubtle (and yet not unmoving, finally, in its naked insecurity) agenda of getting you to admire the teller? The few seconds after, with the vignette hanging there and Scotzy's eyes on your correspondents' faces like fingers, were the first of countless such moments over the AAVNA weekend. How is one expected to respond? It was really uncomfortable. One of yr. corpsps. opted for "Gosh. Wow." The other pretended to have had a Brussels sprout go down the wrong way.

24. Here Ms. Alex Dane said the concurred: She'd been wanting to see *Titanic* but wasn't sure she could "even sit still that long."

EXERCISE: Predict and script Max Hardcore's wholly predictable response to Ms. Dane's concern about sitting for an extended period of time.

would do well to emulate: "Get all the bulls--t out of the way the first night—Best packaging, marketing, best gay, s--t like that. It's f--king smart. Who wants to sit through that s--t?"<sup>24</sup>

ARE THE AVN AWARDS possibly rigged? Max Hardcore (he of the purloined statuette, keep in mind) calls them "a total conflict of interests." After all, he explains, *Adult Video News* is heavily ad-dependent,<sup>25</sup> and they're under heavy "... pressure from the big hitters like Vivid and VCA to, like, you know, give the nod."

Ms. Ellen Thompson, an AVN Associate Editor and an Awards judge who votes under the n.d.g. Ida Slapeter<sup>25a</sup>: "We've heard this for years. I hear this complaining also goes on in the mainstream. I don't like insulting anybody, but sometimes there's sour grapes. What are we supposed to say? Vivid and VCA put out good product. We truly, honestly do vote fairly."

Mr. Dick Filth: "The best perception, backed up by tons of anecdotal evidence, is that they are totally, totally fixed and rigged."

SATURDAY'S THE BIG NIGHT. The banquet, the onstage entertainment, the headline Awards. See & Be Seen. Gamblers and Fans, and hordes of all ilk are massed at the Caesars cabstand to watch the starlets arrive. There are camcorders and flashbulbs but no paparazzi per se. Some of the performers come in limos, others in shiny penile sports cars; others seem to mysteriously just appear. There are even more starlets here than there were at the CES, and they are seriously dolled up. There are cerise halters and pearl-colored Lycra bodysuits with burgundy suede open-toed shoes. There are platinum lamé gowns slit all the way to the trapezius area. Bottoms less covered than shellacked look like they by all rights should have panty lines but do not have panty lines. There are lime-colored leotards and toile bell-bottoms and suede bustiers and miniskirts the same texture and length as a ballerina's ruffe. Garter-straps flash and Merry Widow bodices shadow the interior of translucent blouses. Several of the outfits defy very basic precepts of classical physics. Coiffures are towering and comical. The starlets are all on the arms of men, but

none of these escorts are male pom performers. Average heel height is 4". A loud civilian voice from the cabstand actually utters the phrase "Va Va Voom," which yr. corresps. have never before heard uttered anywhere outside a Sinatra movie. Breasts are uniformly zeppelinesque and in various perilous stages of confinement. Max is in a Stetson the color of weak chocolate milk, and his adjustable B-girl—wearing a kind of cowboy suit that's mostly fringe—has inflated her breasts to what simply has to be maximum capacity.

Woodman-wise, black is clearly in at the 15th Annual AVN Awards. A lot of the men are in black tuxedos and black tie and black dress shirts. One guy is wearing a paisley suit of either serge or some kind of upholstery material. Another has silver platform shoes and a silver vest w/ no shirt underneath. A guy on the arm of Morgan Fairlane has an enormous razorous mohawk à la British punks of the late '70s.

Inside the hotel, a kind of impromptu cocktail party forms in the broad marble hall outside the ballroom. Burly casino guys stand taking tickets and are extremely discouraging about anybody trying to bum-rush the Show. The crush of bodies here entails a degree of physical contact that CES mooks never even dreamed of. There are pockets of white klieg glare as cable-TV reporters interview various performers about the air of keen excitement in the air (sic). A suspicion we'd had all week but had decided was fundamentally unverifiable is now instantly verified when one of yr. corresps. gets shoved against a starlet and is jabbed in the side by her breasts, and it hurts. Everyone is holding drinks in plastic glasses, and it's totally unclear where they got them. The starlets take turns being interviewed re atmospheric excitement while the woodmen all avoid cameras like mafiosi. The TV lights are not doing anyone's faces any good at all. Several of the male Insiders—from John Leslie to Tony Tedeschi—look so pallid and sallow in tuxes as to appear diseased. Mr. Nick East devotes a full 5.5 minutes of rapt concentration to the cuticle of his left thumb. A slight surprise is that a lot of the industry's top woodmen are short—5'6", 5'7"<sup>26</sup>; most of their companions tower over them. Dick Filth confirms

that the industry's 5'6" standard helps a prodigious male organ look even more prodigious on video, a medium that apparently does all kinds of strange things to perspective.

TICKETS FOR SATURDAY'S main event are \$195, in advance. It's unclear whether anyone's ticket is comped, but journalists pay full retail. Our tickets designate our table as #189, 2500 tickets have been sold, and since it's highly doubtful that anybody got past the casino guys outside without a ticket, tonight's attendance can confidently be fixed at 2500.

The ballroom itself is a huge L-shape with the stage at the (as it were) joint; thus half of the 15th Annual AVN Awards' audience is geometrically invisible to the other half. This problem is addressed via six sail-sized video screens that hang from the ceiling at strategic points throughout the auditorium. During the nearly two hours<sup>27</sup> between when the doors open and the Awards show actually starts, the screens alternate quick clips from porn classics<sup>28</sup> (the theme of the 15th AVNA is "The History of Adult") with live shots of people making their entrances and mugging for the remote cameras AVN has got circling the room.

Both Harold Hecuba and Dick Filth have come equipped with binoculars (H.H.'s in a very official-looking Audubon Society calfskin case), which seems mysterious until we all arrive at Table 189, which is at the very, very back of the L's northern leg, hundreds of yards even from the nearest video screen. "They always put the print guys out in mookland," Hecuba explains. This is unpleasant surprise #1. Unpleasant surprise #2 is the supper the \$195 includes, which turns out to be buffet-steam-table-style and might best be described by inviting you to imagine a very cosmopolitan and multicultural hospital cafeteria.

Now moving w/ laden plate to a table near us is a man in a full-body leopardskin suit whose way of acknowledging people he knows is to point at them rather than waving to them. On his arm is a B-girl in a body stocking made of what appears to be a very densely woven net. The whole scene in here is overwhelming. You very rarely see aerobic leg-warmers with 4" spike heels. The ballroom's ceil-

25. Note that the slick, full-color 15th AAVNA Official Program is itself an advertiser-subsidized document, its lists of categories and nominees are arranged among full-page spreads hyping the nominated films themselves. This doesn't seem beyond the pale—certainly Variety does the same sort of thing at Ciacinema. Other advertisements in the AAVNA Program are for things like Wet Platinum-brand lubricant—

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Whether these ads are niche-directed at industry Insiders (doubtful though they're pretty much the only ones who are going to get the programs), at retailers, or at plain old mooks is unclear.

26. There are 45 Official Voters listed in the Awards Program. Here

are some of their names: Avie Chute, Rich C. Leather, Marlon Brandeis, Roland Tuggonis, Stroker Palmer, and S. Andrew Roberts & Slave Girl (so actually there are either 45 or 44 Official Voters, depending on whether Slave Girl gets her own vote or is just along to rubber-stamp S. Andrew Roberts's vote). Oddly, Ms. Ellen Thompson appears on the list both as Ida Slapeter and as Ellen Thompson, so one wonders just how many ontologically distinct voters there really are. Hecuba and Filth, who are professional adult-film reviewers, have no idea who most of the people on the list are. Nor does an independent Big 6 accounting firm rally the ballots in secret under armed guard or any of that Oscar-type security. According to Slapeter/Thompson, the voting is "secret," but the completed ballots are named in to Gene Ross and Paul Fitzhien, who are the Publisher and V.P. (and the co-owners) of *Adult Video News*, and who are thus the ones who stand to gain the most from ad revenues. The whole thing doesn't exactly inspire rock-solid confidence.

26. What the top woodmen most resemble are gymnasts—they're small and muscular and move with the liquid economy of athletes, as if equipped with internal gyroscopes. Little of their physical grace is ever visible on tape.

27. We are not kidding—the Oscars are terse and minimalist compared to the AAVNA.

28. (e.g. Debbie Does Dallas, Behind the Green Door, something with John Holmes, The Devil in Miss Jones, etc.—nothing identifiable from Deep Throat, though, and absolutely nothing involving Traci Lords ...)

29. (platonically)

3. (We're on duty.)

31. E.g. H. Hecuba has strictly enjoined us from buying any sort of distilled beverage for Dick Filth, for reasons that become apparent at the evening wens on.

32. (The waiters' special 15th AAVNA fringe benefit, which sharply lowered yr. corresps.' empathy with them, wasn't revealed until the gala itself was concluded—see below.)

33. Filth is shouting because between the screens' clips' audio and the band warming stonally up and the ambient conversational roar it's close to deafening in here. When the Awards Show itself starts up, the technicians will have the amplifiers turned all the way up to Shnering, which, even though it will tend to cause mused hair and spilled drinks in both directions' front rows, those of us way back in mookland appreciate.

ing is the color of rancid meringue; it has 24 chandeliers designed to look like concentric opened fans that actually look more like labia or very well-organized fungi. Mr. Joey Buttafuoco is here, accompanying<sup>29</sup> Al Goldstein of *Screw*, who will tonight be receiving a Special Achievement Award for His Lifelong Defense of the First Amendment.

Black is so resoundingly In this year that even the starched linen napkins at everybody's place settings are black. The wine glasses all have little frosted cameos of J. Caesar on them. Humorless men with walkie-talkies stand guard at each of the ballroom's fire doors—apparently last year there were problems with unauthorized Caesars employees sneaking in to catch the gala.

Hecuba and Filth have kept from yr. corpeps. as unpleasant surprise #3 the single chintziest thing about the \$195-a-head 15th AAVNA banquet & gala—beverages are not *compris*. And not just alcoholic beverages either; even a lousy club soda w/ lime<sup>30</sup> is \$3. Worse, it turns out you can't run any sort of tab; you have to pay the waiter in cash when you order the lousy club soda w/ lime, and he (theoretically) brings your change back with the beverage. Thus a separate and memory-intensive transaction is required for each drink that each of the 6-8 persons at each of the approximately 400 tables in the auditorium might order, with additional

complications if certain people are buying drinks for certain tablemates but not for certain other tablemates, etc.<sup>31</sup> The whole situation is incredibly annoying, not only because of the outlandish ticket price but because the ballroom's 100% Middle Eastern waiters (decent & hardworking fellows all, to be sure, who are taking some serious abuse about the pay-as-you-go beverage policy from mooks with cigars at the nearby tables, despite the fact that the waiters don't make the rules and must find having to remember and make change for 6-8 customers per table a piercing pain in the ass<sup>32</sup>) have only rudimentary E.S.L. skills and tend to confuse both drink orders and currency denominations. Dick Filth leans over and shouts: "Now you can maybe see why this is such a multibillion industry—they're tight as the bark on a goddamn tree!"<sup>33</sup>

The crowd lingers over hypersucrotic cake and coffee and \$7 cordials and howls conversation at itself for 90 more minutes before the 15th Annual AVN Awards gala starts. What follows is a kaleidoscopic flux of stilted acceptances and blue one-liners and epileptic strobes and spotlights following winners' serpentine and high-five-studded paths to the stage, of everything from generic Awards Show schmaltz to near-Periclean eloquence:

"Fellow MENSA members and aficionados of Shakespeare!" intones Al Goldstein of *Screw*,

62 and mammoth and white-bearded and crazy-haired and dressed in a sport coat whose lapels are two different primary colors and looking resoundingly like that one certain guy in the neighborhood your mom warned you never to try to sell Cub Scout mints to, and gloying in a Special Achievement Award he confesses to feeling he's long deserved. "I want to thank my mother, who spread her legs and made all this possible!" Large sections of the crowd are on their feet—Goldstein is an industry hero. He was distributing *Screw* on photostat when most of the people in this room were still playing with their toes. He's been a First Amendment ninja. He drinks the applause and loves it and is hard not to sort of almost actually like. He's clearly the pioneer of contemporary porn's *unbashedness*, its modern Yeah-OK-I'm-Scum-But-Underneath-All-Your-Hypocrisy-So-Are-You-And-At-Least-I-Have-The-Guts-To-Admit-It-And-Have-A-Good-Time persona:

"I salute the women with 11 IQs and the men with 11-inch c--ks. The *real* heroes are the c--ks and p---ies who f--k onscreen." Goldstein is less conducted than borne back to his seat.

This has followed Robert Schimmel's intro and a 20-minute "Musical Salute to the History of Adult," in which topeping dancing girls do a medley of Disco, New Wave, and so on. The stage band is ragged and unevenly amplified,

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and they all have flared collars and tight perms— it's like watching *The Brady Bunch's* final season through borrowed binoculars. The stage is lit by spotlights whose colors alternate with a discemible scheme.

The whole 15th AAVNA Show lasts 3.5 hours and resembles nothing so much as an obscene and extremely well-funded high school assembly. The mix of garish self-congratulation and ragged choreography is often so surreal as to be endearing. There are never fewer than six presenters for each award, and they never seem to know whose turn it is to announce a nominee, and there're always a couple who don't get close enough to the mike to be audible and a couple others who get too close to the mike and produce a lot of feedback that sends people and cocktails flying out of chairs in the first rows of tables. *Cracked Pictures' Satyr*, a multiple-category nominee, gets repeatedly pronounced "Sadder." Winners are supposed to exit stage-left after their speeches, but even people who've won and been through the process several times in recent years keep forgetting and trying to exit stage-right and fiddling with the hostesses who are there to escort them leftward. Some of the presenters insert brief rote antidrug messages into their intros, while around them twitch and sniff other presenters—not many, but some—who are clearly hooked to the gills. Probably the most neutral and economical thing to say is that large parts of the ceremony are unintentionally funny. Winning women deliver earnest thanks to various directors and execs for giving them "an opening" or "my big shot," and seem completely unaware of various carnal double entendres involved.

Dick Filth spends the Show's whole second hour trying to track down a waiter who owes him a wage-change. AVN's Gene Ross pays tribute to performer-of-Year Byron by saying "You haven't lived until you've seen Tom Byron's wringed nuts on a 70-inch TV screen." Rob Black's *AVN* wants keeps getting nominated in category category, and time and again there's a frantic caucus at the podium about the correct pronunci-

ation of *miscreant*, complete with a couple of presenters audibly whispering what in the f—k the word's even supposed to f—king mean.<sup>34</sup> To be fair, some of the nominees' titles really are confusing. *Triple Penetration Debutante Sluts 4* is up for Most Outrageous Sex Scene—along with *Wild Bananas on Butt Row and 87 and Still Bangin'*—but loses out to a scene the Program entitles "Anal Food Express"<sup>35</sup> from something called *My Girlfriend's Girlfriend*. Paul Thomas's *Bad Wives* wins Best Film. Evil Angel's *Buda* wins Best Shot-on-Video Feature. *Bad Wives* also wins Best Actress (Film) for Dyanna Lauren, Best Supporting Actress (Film) for Melissa Hill, and Best Anal Sex Scene (Film) for Lauren and Steven St. Croix. Ms. Stephanie Swift wins Best Actress (Video) and tells the crowd: "Thanks, everybody. My gang bang was a blast."<sup>36</sup>

Max Hardcore, to Table 189's immense and unkind delight, doesn't win one single thing.

A surreal and traumatic experience which one of yr. corpses. will not even try to describe consists of standing at a men's room urinal between professional woodmen Alex Sanders and Dave Hardman. Suffice it to say that the urge to look over/down at their penises is overwhelming and the motives behind this urge so complex as to cause anuresis (which in turn ups the trauma). Be informed that male porn stars at urinals create around themselves the same opaque affective privacy-bubble that men at urinals everywhere create. The Caesars men's room is one big angst-festival, take it from us.

**T**HE SHOW'S PLANNERS have obviously studied at the Oscars' feet. Not only are the high-profile AVNA categories held to the end, but the interminable lists of nominees and categories are interspersed with little ent'actes of musical entertainment. Ms. Dyanna Lauren appears between Best-Selling Tape and Best Foreign Release to sing her original composition "Psycho Magnet," a hard-rock ballad about being a porn star who's harassed and stalked by mentally ill mooks. The song's argumentation strikes yr.

corpses. as a bit uneven, but Ms. Lauren struts and contorts and punctuates her phrasing with uppercuts to the air like a genuine MTV diva. The downside is that vocally, even with heavy amplification and digital synthesis, Dyanna Lauren sounds like a scalded cat, although Dick Filth points out that so does Alanis Morissette, and H. Hecuba chimes in by shouting: "Say whatever you want about the song-and-dance numbers here, they sure beat what Wahlberg and Reilly were coming up with in *Boogie Nights*."

Hecuba's claim seems unassailable until right before the Best Boxcover Concept category, when suddenly a piano is wheeled out for a chinless old guy in the same sort of undersized porkpie Art Carney always wore in *The Honeymooners*. This performer, who is introduced as "Doctor Dirty—The Dirtiest Musician in the History of Music," proceeds to belt out obscene parodies of popular ditties that put Table 189 in mind of *Mad* magazine if everyone at *Mad* all lost their mind at the same time. "Goo, goo, goo, droppin' out my backdoor" is the only snatch of lyrics that persists in memory, though titles like "Sit On a Happy Face" and "It's a Small Dick After All" have proved maddeningly hard to forget. Almost everyone agrees that Doctor Dirty is the '98 gala's low point and a credible rival for Scotty Schwartz's 1997 seminuade rendition of "Thank Heaven For Little Girls" as the most repellent AAVNA interlude in modern memory. There's also the '98 Awards stage climax, in which Midori<sup>37</sup> and two other starlets take the stage as "The Spicy Girls" and do a rappish 4/4 number that ends with pretty much every female performer in the crowd<sup>38</sup> up on stage dancing lasciviously and blowing kisses at the AVN cameras. This climactic shindig apparently caps the Awards every year.

Something else happens every year. It's never part of *Adult Video News's* licensed videotape of the Awards, but it's a tradition that finally explains why the ballroom's waiters are willing to spend five hours enduring beverage abuse and scurrying around to find change. After the Show is over and the lights go up, some of the starlets pose for ob-

scure body mispronounces *Sodomania*, though, we notice.) There is no light left to inquire about this (much less about the gyrological logistics of a Triple Penetration); by this time yr. corpses t slumped in opposite directions in their chairs.

ough Ms. Swift won for *Miscreant*, she is here alluding to director Robert Black's first breakthrough video in 1997, *Angels*, which is essentially a one-woman show and features the year's most infamous scene: twelve woodmen line up an about-face, and S. Swift performs analingus on each in turn; she then adopts a prayerful/compliant posture as the twelve do a face and form a patient line and take turns hawking and spitting on her face.

Directors like Black and Gregory Dark are the spearheads of the '90s genre that Dick Filth refers to as "Bizarro-Sleaze." Dark's *Wakeup and The Shocking Truth* do things like seat a statlet in a swivel chair and then have an off-camera inquisitor ask her whether she thinks she's a slut and whether she thinks she's ge- eventually to go to hell for her insatiable sluttness and how she about the sexual attentions of her giggish stepfather, then will an involved S.S. where men dressed stepfatherly in bow tie and garden and all with plastic pig-noses stepped onto their long bang her into a rutpot. And Mr. Robert Black—compared whom Gregory Dark is Frank Capri—offers such innovative en-

tainment as gang bangs of disabled women, women being forced to eat Ritz crackers that have been steaked on, and lines of men taking turns splitting in the face of Ms. Stephanie Swift. (Note that Robert Black wins both Best Director [Video] and the AVN Breakthrough Award Saturday night.)

Your correspondents here advance an opinion: Dark and Black's movies are not for men who want to be aroused and maybe masturbate. They are for men who have problems with women and want to see women humiliated. Whether Bizarro-Sleaze might conceivably help archaic misogynists "work out" some of their anger toward females is irrelevant. Catharsis is not these films' intent. Their intent is to capitalize on a market demand that clearly exists—these directors' films, like Max Hardcore's, are constant presences in AVN's Top 10 Sellers and Renters lists.

Dark and Black are vile. They are meant to be. The truth is that in-your-face vileness is a large part of the schizoid direction U.S. porn has been moving throughout the 1990s. As adult entertainment has become more "mainstream"—meaning more available, more acceptable, more lucrative, more chic: *Boogie Nights*—it has also become more "extreme," and not just on the Bizarro margins. In almost all hetero porn now there is a new emphasis on anal sex, painful penetrations, degradation, and the (at least) psychological abuse of women. In some respects, this extremism may just be tracing Holly-

wood entertainment's own arc; it's hardly news that network TV and legit film have also gone more violent and explicit and raw in the past decade. So maybe. And yet there's something else.

The psychology of porn seems always to have depended on a certain degree of shame, self-loathing, and perception of "sin." This psychology obtains both on the performing end—"I'm a slut," "I'm a little f—k-hole"—and on the consumption end—q.v. the faces of trench-coated men at strip clubs and peep shows and stroke booths. Note, though, that the faces of Fans at the 1998 Adult CES seem different, the affect more complex: There's now an odd sense that a Fan feels slightly ashamed of being slightly ashamed of his enthusiasm for porn, since the performers and producers now appear to have abandoned shame for the steely-eyed evaluation that always attends success in the Big Market. Wherever else it is, porn is no longer in the shadows and slums. (One of Max Hardcore's unpraised crew puts the mainstreaming succinctly: "In a way, it's kind of a drag. Now everybody's watching it. We used to be rebels. Now we're f—king businessmen." [Then Max to crewman: "God Bless America, kid.")

The adult industry's new respectability thus creates a paradox. The more generally acceptable in modern culture it becomes, the further porn will have to go to cultivate the feeling of unacceptability that's so essential to its appeal. The industry's already gone pretty far, and with Triple Penetrations and barely disguised gang rapes now

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scene snapshots with the ballroom's waiters. One waiter stands with his arm around the shoulders of Leanna Hart, who pulls down the starboard side of her strapless taffeta and allows the waiter to cup her right breast while Table 189's own personal waiter<sup>19</sup> takes the snapshot. Variants of this kind of thing are going on all over the ballroom. What the waiters are going to do with these photos is unguessable, but they're visibly thrilled, and the starlets are patient and obliging with them in the same dreamy, distant way they were with the mooks at the CES.

And leaving the gala is another slow process because the hallway just outside is again filled with industry people with Caesar-cameo'd glasses they've forgotten to leave at their tables, all standing in clumps and congratulating each other and making plans for various Insider parties later. But the slowest, scariest part is traversing the long glass vestibule to the hotel's side exit. A mass of Fans and Caesars custodians and assorted civilians are there, and the crowd parts slightly to allow a narrow passage for the Awards' attendees, who must run this gauntlet nearly single file. It's late, and everyone's tired, and this mob has none of the awestruck reticence of the cabstand's spectators earlier. Now it's like every mook has his own special high-volume comment for the passing stars, and there's a weird mix of adulation and derision:

"Love you, Brittany!"

"How'd you get that dress on, baby?"

"Does your mother know where you're at right now?"

One 30ish guy holding a plastic cup of beer now reaches out from the crowd and very deliberately pinches the breast of the B-girl walking just in front of us. She slaps his hand away without a sound. Because we cannot see her face, we don't know whether there is any reaction at all. We have an informed guess, though. ■

*Willem R. deGroot and Matt Rundlet are pseudonyms. This article has been edited for content.*

selling briskly, it is not hard to see where porn is eventually going to have to move in order to retain in edge of true diureptic. Whether it gets there or not, it's clear that the star that late-'90s porn is steering by is the Snuff Film. And—moral issues entirely to the side—this direction is incredibly dangerous for the adult industry. It seems only a matter of time and degree before even the most ultraradical-feminist claims about porn's misogyny begin to seem reasonable, and/or before some conservative politician sees in modern porn a public outrage sufficient to hang his ambitions on. The AVA, after all, is not the only powerful lobby with an interest in social norms. At this point, premillennial porn's internal contradictions (e.g., constantly offending mainstream values—billions that attend mainstream popularity) appear to be the industry's most dangerous enemy.

37. This exotic rookie, nominee for '98's Best New Starlet, is actually the sister of '80s pop star Jodi Watley, and while she's no J. Watley in the singing department, at least she doesn't screech. Mildoni has stated publicly that she views contemporary porn as a stepping-stone to a mainstream career, not unlike becoming Miss America or doing a couple seasons on *SNL*. Harold Hechuba describes Mildoni's career strategy as "grievously ill-advised."

38. No woodmen are invited to join in, or at any rate none do. 39. (Whom Fñth is still hectoring for \$13 in alleged Grand Marnier-change)

DREW BARRYMORE

(Continued from page 77)

Barrymore says she's still close to her "godfather," Steven Spielberg, sixteen years after he made her a star in *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*. Spielberg was the one who gave Drew her first lesson in discipline, when she was six and wanted to get her ears pierced. "He said, 'Okay, I'll make you a deal,'" Barrymore remembers. "If you can wait until you're ten, I'll not only get your ears pierced for you but I'll buy you a bunch of earrings." And I was like, 'All right!' Those were the longest three years of my life. And I had my tenth birthday party, and he was on a set and couldn't get off. So Amy Irving [Spielberg's girlfriend at the time] took me to Cedars-Sinai and got my ears pierced. And I got taken to get some earrings. It was the best day of my life, and I was so glad I'd waited. I had a deal with him, and I was never gonna break it."

## TO THINE OWN SELF, BE DREW

SHE'S GOT ALL the bases covered. "I believe in fate and destiny and karma," Barrymore is saying. "I believe in God. I believe in Buddha, Allah, the Druids..." She's scratch, scratch, scratching the back of her dog Flossy. Both of them are wearing smiles. Suddenly she stops, plucks something from Flossy's coat, jumps up, and runs from the room. Seconds later, she's back. "I hate ticks," she says, shuddering, her bliss buzz squelched. "I'm sorry, anything that embeds himself beneath your skin is not okay with me. Like that Cole Porter song, 'I've Got You Under My Skin'? Well, I don't want you under my skin, how about that?"

Weeks have passed, and Barrymore's bulletin board is clear. Of the original dream cast, only Molly Shannon will appear in *Never Been Kissed*. Barrymore starts shooting in a week, but she's already planning Flower Films' next project, *All She Wanted*. Based on a true story, Barrymore will play a teen runaway who masquerades as a man, seduces a small town, and is eventually murdered. Producer Diane Keaton brought it to Flower Films, "and we just knew automatically it was something we wanted to do," Barrymore says. Having made her fortune in light comedies, the actress can afford to make the leap into more challenging territory. Indeed, she needs to if she's ever going to go for Oscar gold. She's shaving her head for the role. "I just think the story is so interesting because it's true," she says. "And because it is so unbelievable on so many levels."

Just like the Drew Barrymore story, "Endings should be surprising," she says, paraphrasing Flannery O'Connor, "but inevitable." Her sweetheart lips curl into an enigmatic smile. ■

Holly Millea is a senior editor for PREMIERE.

Contributor's Notes, O. Henry Prize Stories, 1999 (reprint of "The Depressed Person")

"This was not a real fun piece to do. For one thing, I kept falling into periods of violent dislike for the protagonist and wanting to have scenes in the story where like huge spikes come out of nowhere and impale her through the right eyesocket. This is not a great head to be in w/r/t one's protagonist, obviously. A couple of 'close friends' of mine have posited that maybe I disliked her so much because she reminded me of certain qualities/tendencies in myself that I reject or deplore, etc. This theory is still under review."

"We're all-- especially those of us who are educated and have read a lot and have watched TV critically-- in a very self-conscious and sort of worldly and sophisticated time, but also a time when we seem terribly afraid of other people's reactions to us and very desperate to control how people interpret us. Everyone is extremely conscious of manipulating how they come off in the media; they want to structure what they say so that the reader or audience will interpret it in the way that is most favorable to them. What's interesting to me is that this isn't all that new. This was the project of the Sophists in Athens, and this is what Socrates and Plato thought was so completely evil. The Sophists had this idea: Forget this idea of what's true or not-- what you want to do is rhetoric; you want to be able to persuade the audience and have the audience think you're smart and cool. And Socrates and Plato, basically their whole idea is, 'Bullshit. There is such a thing as truth, and it's not all just how to say what you say so that you get a good job or get laid, or whatever it is people think they want.'"

Rolling Stone

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2001

# THE BEST AMERICAN MAGAZINE WRITING

MAST

EGES

WEASEL, TWELVE MONKEYS  
AND THE SHRUB



edited by

HAROLD M. EVANS

**Rolling Stone**

**WINNER, FEATURE WRITING**

**The Weasel, Twelve  
Monkeys and the Shrub**

*This story is a rollicking dispatch filed after a week on the road with John McCain's presidential campaign. It updates "The Boys on the Bus" with wit, style, and fierce intelligence. The author lays bare the cynicism many citizens feel—especially the current readers of Rolling Stone—for the American political process and passionately urges those young voters to give a damn.*

David Foster Wallace

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## **The Weasel, Twelve Monkeys and the Shrub**

**Seven days in the life  
of the late, great John  
McCain**

### **Prologue: Who Cares?**

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Since you're reading "Rolling Stone," the chances are you're an American between say 18 and 35, which demographically makes you a Young Voter. And no generation of Young Voters has ever cared less about politics and politicians than yours. There's hard demographic and voter-pattern data backing this up . . . assuming you give a shit about data. In fact, even if you're reading other stuff in RS, it's doubtful you're going to read much of this article—such is the enormous shuddering yawn that the Political Process evokes in us now, in this post-Watergate-post-Iran-Contra-post-White-water-post-Lewinsky era, an era when politicians' statements of principle or vision are understood as self-serving ad copy and judged not for their sincerity or ability to inspire but for their tactical shrewdness, their marketability. And no generation has been marketed and Spun and pitched to as ingeniously and relentlessly as today's demographic Young. So when Senator John McCain says, in Michigan or South Carolina (which is where ROLLING STONE sent the least professional pencil it could find to spend the standard media Week on the Bus with a candidate who'd never

“honor” might really *refer* to, like whether they actually *stood* for something, maybe. About whether anything past well-Spun self-interest might be real, was ever real, and if so then what happened? These, for the most part, are not lines of thinking that the culture we’ve grown up in has encouraged Young Voters to pursue. Why do you suppose that is?

### **Glossary of Relevant Campaign-Trail Vocab**

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*(Mostly Courtesy of Jim C. and the Network-News Techs)*

**22.5** The press corps’ shorthand for McCain’s opening remarks at THMs (see THM), which remarks are always the same and always take exactly 22 and a half minutes.

**BAGGAGE CALL** The grotesquely early a.m. time when you’ve got to have your suitcase back in the bus’s bowels and have a seat staked out and be ready to go or else you get left behind and have to try to wheedle a ride to the first THM (see THM) from Fox News, which is a drag in all kinds of ways.

**BUNDLED MONEY** A way to get around the Federal Election Commission’s \$1,000 limit for individual campaign contributions. A wealthy donor can give \$1,000 for himself, and then can say that yet another \$1,000 comes from his wife, and another \$1,000 from his kid, and another from his Aunt Edna, etc. The Shrub’s (see Shrub) favorite trick is to designate CEOs and other top corporate executives as “Pioneers,” who each pledge to raise \$100,000 for Bush2000—\$1,000 comes from them individually, and the other 99 one-grand contributions come “voluntarily”

from their employees. McCain makes a point of accepting neither bundled money nor soft money (see soft money).

**DT Drive Time**, the slots in the daily schedule set aside for caravanning from one campaign event to another.

**F&F** An hour or two in the afternoon when the campaign provides downtime and an F&F Room for the press corps to File and Feed (see File and Feed).

**FILE AND FEED** What print and broadcast press, respectively, have to do every day, i.e. print reporters have to finish their daily stories and file them via fax or e-mail to their papers, while the techs (see tech) and field producers have to find a satellite or Gunner (see Gunner) and feed their film, standups (see standup), and anything else their bosses might want to the network HQ.

**GUNNER** A portable satellite-uplink rig that the networks use to feed on-scene from some campaign events. Gunner is the company that makes and/or rents out these rigs, which consist of a blinding white van with a boat-trailerish thing on which is an eight-foot satellite dish angled upward 40° at the southwest sky and emblazoned in fiery blue caps **GUNNER GLOBAL UPLINKS FOR NEWS, NETWORKING, ENTERTAINMENT**.

**HEAD** Local or network TV correspondent.

**ODT Optimistic Drive Time**, which refers to the daily schedule's nagging habit of underestimating the amount of time it takes to get from one event to another, causing the Straight Talk Express driver to speed like a maniac and to incur the rabid dislike of the official Bullshit 1 driver, whose name is Jay.

**OTS Opportunity to Smoke.**

**PENCIL** A member of the Trail's print press.

**PRESS-AVAIL** (or **-AVAIL**) Brief scheduled opportunity for traveling press corps to interface as one body w/McCain or staff High Command, often deployed for Reacts (see React).

**REACT** McCain's or McCain2000 High Command's on-record response to a sudden major development in the campaign, usually some tactical move or allegation from the Shrub (see Shrub).

**SCRUM** (*n*) The moving 360° ring of techs (see tech) and heads around the candidate as he makes his way from the Straight Talk Express into an event or vice versa; (*v*) to gather around the candidate in such a ring.

**THE SHRUB** GOP presidential candidate George W. Bush.

**SOFT MONEY** The best-known way to finesse the FEC's limit on campaign contributions. Enormous sums are here given to a certain candidate's political party instead of to the candidate, but the party then by some strange coincidence ends up dispersing those enormous sums to exactly the candidate the donor had wanted to give to in the first place.

**STANDUP** A head giving a remote report from some event McCain's at.

**STICK** A sound tech's (see tech) black telescoping polymer rod (full extension = 9'7") with a boom microphone at the end, used mostly for scrums and always the most distinctive visible feature

thereof because of the way a fully extended stick wobbles and boings when the sound tech (which, again, see tech) walks with it.

**TECH** A TV news camera or sound technician.

**THM** Town Hall Meeting, McCain2000's signature campaign event, where the 22.5 is followed by an hour-long unscreened Q&A with the audience.

**THE TWELVE MONKEYS** (or 12M) The techs' private code-name for the most elite and least popular pencils in the McCain press corps, who on DTs are almost always allowed into the red-intensive salon at the very back of the Straight Talk Express to interface with McCain and political consultant Mike Murphy. The 12M are a dozen marquee journalists and political-analysis guys from the really important papers and weeklies and news services, and tend to be so totally identical in dress and demeanor as to be almost surreal—twelve immaculate and wrinkle-free navy-blue blazers, half-Windsored ties, pleated chinos, oxford-cloth shirts that even when the jackets come off stay 100% buttoned at collar and sleeves, Cole Haan loafers, and tortoiseshell specs they love to take off and nibble the arm of, plus always a uniform self-seriousness that reminds you of every overachieving dweeb you ever wanted to kick the ass of in school. The Twelve Monkeys never smoke or drink, and always move in a pack, and always cut to the front of every scrum and Press-Avail and line for Continental Breakfast in the hotel lobby before Baggage Call, and whenever any of them are rotated however briefly back onto Bullshit I they always sit together identically huffy and pigeon-toed with their attaché cases in their laps and always end up discussing incredibly esoteric books on political theory and public policy in voices that are all the exact same languid honk. The techs (who all wear old

jeans and surplus-store parkas and also all tend to hang in a pack) avoid and try to pretty much ignore the Twelve Monkeys, who in turn treat the techs the way someone in an executive washroom treats the attendant. As you might already have gathered, **ROLLING STONE** dislikes the 12M intensely, for all the above reasons, plus the fact that they're tighter than a duck's butt when it comes to sharing even very basic general-knowledge political information that might help somebody write a slightly better article, plus the issue of two separate occasions at late-night hotel check-ins when one or more of the Twelve Monkeys just out of nowhere turned and handed **ROLLING STONE** their suitcases to carry, as if **ROLLING STONE** were a bellboy or gofer instead of a hard-working journalist just like them even if he didn't have a portable Paul Stuart steamer for his blazer.

**WEASEL** The weird gray fuzzy thing sound techs put over their boom mikes at scrums to keep annoying wind-noise off the audio. It looks like a large floppy mouse-colored version of a certain popular kind of fuzzy bathroom slipper. (N.B.: Weasels, which are also sometimes worn by sound techs as headgear during OTS's when it's really cold, are thus sometimes also known as "tech toupees.")

### **Substantially Farther Behind the Scenes Than You're Apt to Want to Be**

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It's now precisely 1330h. On Tuesday, 8 February '00, aboard **Bullshit 1**, proceeding southeast on I-26 toward Charleston SC. There's so much press and staff and techs and stringers and field producers and photographers and heads and pencils and political columnists and hosts of political radio shows and local media covering John McCain and the McCain2000 phenomenon post-

New Hampshire that there's now more than one campaign bus. Here in South Carolina there are three, a veritable convoy of Straight Talk, plus Fox News's green SUV and the MTV crew's sprightly red Corvette and two much-antennae'd local-TV vans (one of which has severe muffler trouble). On DTs like this McCain's always in his personal red recliner next to political consultant Mike Murphy's red recliner in the little press salon he and Murphy have in the back of the lead bus, the well-known Straight Talk Express, which is up ahead and gaining. Bullshit 1 is the caravan's second bus, a luxury Grumman with good current and workable phone jacks, and a lot of the national pencils use it to pound out copy on their laptops and send faxes and e-mail stuff to their editors. The campaign's logistics are dizzyingly complex, and one of the things the staff has to do is rent different buses and decorate the nicest one with STRAIGHT TALK EXPRESS and MCCAIN2000.COM in each new state. The two press buses in SC are known as Bullshit 1 and Bullshit 2, names conceived as usual by the extremely cool and laid-back NBC News cameraman Jim C. and—to their credit—immediately seized on and used with great glee at every opportunity by McCain's younger Press Liaisons, who are themselves so cool and unpretentious it's tempting to suspect that they are *professionally* cool and unpretentious.

It helps to conceive a campaign week's events in terms of boxes, boxes inside other boxes, etc. The national voting audience is the great huge outer box, then the SC-electorate audience, mediated respectively by the inner layers of national and local press, just inside which lie the insulating boxes of McCain's staff's High Command, who plan and stage events and Spin stuff for the layers of press to interpret for the layers of audience, and the Press Liaisons, who shepherd the pencils and heads and mediate their access to the High Command and control which media get rotated onto the S.T. Express (which is itself a box in motion) to interface with McCain himself, a candidate whose biggest draw of course is

that he's an anticandidate, someone who's open and accessible and "thinks outside the box," but is in fact the campaign's Chinese boxes' central and inscrutable core box, and whose own intracranial thoughts on all these boxes and layers and lenses and whether this new kind of enclosure is anything like Hoa Lo's dark box are pretty much anyone in the media's guess, since all he'll talk about is politics.

Bullshit 1 is also a box, of course, just as anything you can't exit till somebody tells you becomes, and right now there are 27 members of the national political media on board, halfway to Charleston, where a certain percentage of them will get rotated back off the Trail tonight and be gone tomorrow. That's what these pros call it, the Trail, the same way musicians talk about the Road. The schedule is fascist: Wake-up call and backup alarm at 0600h., Express Checkout, Baggage Call at 0700 to throw bags and techs' gear under the bus, DT to McCain's first THM at 0800, then another, then another, maybe an hour off to F&F someplace if ODTs permit, then usually two big evening events, plus hours of dead Interstate DT between functions, finally getting in to the night's Marriott or Hampton Inn at like 2300 just when Room Service closes so you're begging rides from Fox News to find a restaurant still open, then an hour at the hotel bar to try to shut your head off so you can hit the rack at 0130 and get up at 0600 and do it all again. Usually it's four to six days for the average pencil and then you go off home on a gurney and your editor rotates in fresh meat. The network techs, who are old hands at the Trail, stay on for months at a time. The McCain2000 staff has been doing this full-time since Labor Day, and even the young ones look like the walking dead. Only McCain seems to thrive. He's 63 and practically Rockette-kicks onto the Express every morning. It's either inspiring or frightening.

Here's a quick behind-the-scenes tour of everything that's happening on BS1 at 1330h. A few of the press are slumped over sleep-

ing, open-mouthed and twitching, using their topcoats for pillows. The CBS and NBC techs are in their usual place on the couches way up front, their cameras and sticks and boom mikes and boxes of tapes and big Duracells piled around them, discussing obscure stand-up comedians of the early '70s and trading Press badges from New Hampshire and Iowa and Delaware. NBC's Jim C., who looks like a chronically sleep-deprived Elliott Gould, is also watching the Press Liaison's leather bookbag swing metronomically by its oversoulder strap as the Liaison leans against the driver's seat and secretly dozes. All the couches and padded chairs face in, perpendicular to BS1's length, instead of a regular bus's forward-facing seats, so everyone's legs are always in the aisle, but there's none of the normal social anxiety about your legs touching somebody else on a bus's leg because nobody can help it and they're too tired to care. About two-thirds of the way down the aisle is a little area that has the bus's refrigerator and the liquor cabinets (totally empty on BS1) and the bathroom with the hazardous door. There's also a little counter area piled with Krispy Kreme doughnut boxes, plus a sink whose water nobody ever uses (for what turn out to be good reasons). Krispy Kremes are sort of the Deep South equivalent of Dunkin' Donuts, ubiquitous and cheap and great in a sort of what-am-I-doing-eating-dessert-for-breakfast way, and are a cornerstone of what Jim C. calls the Campaign Diet.

Behind the buses' digestive areas is another couch-intensive section, in which right now Mrs. McCain's personal assistant on the Trail, Wendy—who has electric-blue contact lenses and very complex and rigid blond hair and designer outfits and immaculate makeup and accessories and French nails and can perhaps best be described as a very *Republican*-looking young lady indeed—is eating a large styrofoam cup of soup and using her cellphone to try to find someplace in downtown Charleston where Mrs. McCain can get her nails done. Just why Wendy is arranging

for her mistress's manicure on a press bus is unclear, but Mrs. McC.'s sedulous attention to her own person's dress and grooming is already a minor legend among the press corps, and some of the techs speculate that stuff like getting her nails and hair done, together with being almost Siametically attached to Ms. Lisa Graham Keegan (who is AZ's Education Superintendent and supposedly traveling with the Senator as his "Adviser on Issues Affecting Education" but is quite obviously really along because she's Cindy McCain's friend and confidante and the only person in whose presence Mrs. McC. doesn't look like a jacklighted deer), are the only things keeping this extremely fragile person together on the Trail, where she's required to stand under hot lights next to McCain at every speech and THM and Press-Avail and stare cheerfully into the middle distance while her husband speaks to crowds and lenses—in fact some of the cable-network techs have a sort of running debate about what she's really looking at as she stands onstage being scrutinized but never getting to say anything . . . and anyway everybody understands and respects the enormous pressure Wendy's under to help Mrs. McC. keep it together, and nobody makes fun of her for things like getting more and more stressed out as it becomes obvious that there's some special Southeast-U.S. idiom for "manicure" that Wendy doesn't know, because nobody she talks to on the cellphone seems to have any idea what she means by "manicure."

If this all seems really static and dull, by the way, then understand you're getting a bona fide media-eye look at the reality of life on the Trail, 85% of which consists of wandering around killing time on Bullshit 1 while you wait for the slight significant look from the Press Liaison which means that after the next stop you're getting rotated up into the big leagues on the Express to sit squished and paralyzed on the crammed red press-couch in back and to listen to John S. McCain and his aide-de-camp Mike Murphy answer the Twelve Monkeys' questions and to look up-close

and personal at McCain and the way he puts his legs way out on the salon's floor and crosses them at the ankle and sucks absently at his right bicuspid and twirls the coffee in his MCCAIN2000.COM mug and to try to penetrate the innermost box of this man's thoughts on the enormous hope and enthusiasm he's generating in press and voters alike. . . . Which you should be told upfront does not and cannot happen, this penetration, partly for the reason that when you are finally rotated up into the Straight Talk salon you discover that most of the questions the Twelve Monkeys ask back here are too vapid and obvious for McCain to waste time on, and he lets Mike Murphy handle them, and Murphy is so funny and dry and able to make such delicious sport of the 12M—

MONKEY: If, say, you win here in South Carolina, what do you do then?

MURPHY: Fly to Michigan that night.

MONKEY: And what if, hypothetically, you, say, lose here in South Carolina?

MURPHY: Fly to Michigan that night win or lose.

MONKEY: Can you perhaps talk about why?

MURPHY: 'Cause the plane's already paid for.

MONKEY: I mean can you explain why specifically Michigan?

MURPHY: It's the next primary.

MONKEY: I think what we're trying to get you to elaborate on, Mike, is: what will your goal be in Michigan?

MURPHY: To get a whole lot of votes. That's part of our secret strategy for winning the nomination.

—that it's hard even to notice McCain's there or what his face or feet are doing because it takes almost all your concentration not to start giggling like a maniac at Murphy and the way the 12M all nod somberly at him and take whatever he says down in their absolutely identical steno notebooks.

What's hazardous about Bullshit 1's lavatory door is that it opens and closes laterally, sliding with a *Star Trek*ish whoosh at the light touch of the door button just inside—i.e., you go in, lightly push DOOR to close, attend to business, lightly push DOOR again to open: simple—except that the DOOR button's placement puts it only inches away from the left shoulder of any male journalist standing over the commode attending to business, a commode without rails or handles or anything to (as it were) hold on to, and even the slightest leftward lurch or lean makes said shoulder touch said button—which remember this is a moving bus—causing the door to whoosh open while you're right there with business underway, and with the consequences of suddenly whirling to try to stab at the button to reclose the door while you're in *medias res* being too obviously horrid to detail, with the result that by 9 February the great unspoken rule among the regulars on Bullshit 1 is that when any male gets up and goes two-thirds of the way back into the lavatory anybody who's back there clears the immediate area and makes sure they're not in the door's line of sight; and the way you can tell that a journalist is a local or newly rotated onto the Trail and this is their first time on BS1 is the small strangled scream you always hear when they're in the lavatory and the door unexpectedly whooshes open, and usually the grizzled old *Charleston Post and Courier* pencil will give a small smile and call out "Welcome to national politics!" as the new guy stabs frantically at the button, and Jay at the helm will hit the horn with the heel of his hand in mirth, taking these long and mostly mindless DTs' fun where he finds it.

### Who Even Cares Who Cares?

It's hard to get good answers to why Young Voters are so uninterested in politics. This is probably because it's next to impossible

to get someone to think hard about why he's not interested in something. The boredom itself preempts inquiry; the fact of the feeling's enough. Surely one reason, though, is that politics is not cool. Or say rather that cool, interesting, alive people do not seem to be the ones who are drawn to the Political Process. Think back to the sort of kids in high school or college who were into running for student office: dweeby, overgroomed, obsequious to authority, ambitious in a sad way. Eager to play the Game. The kind of kids other kids would want to beat up if it didn't seem so pointless and dull. And now consider some of 2000's adult versions of these very same kids: Al Gore, best described by CNN sound tech Mark A. as "amazingly lifelike"; Steve Forbes, with his wet forehead and loony giggle; G.W. Bush's patrician smirk and mangled cant; even Clinton himself with his big red fake-friendly face and "I feel your pain." Men who aren't enough like human beings even to dislike—what one feels when they loom into view is just an overwhelming lack of interest, the sort of deep disengagement that is so often a defense against pain. Against sadness. In fact the likeliest reason why so many of us care so little about politics is that modern politicians make us sad, hurt us in ways that are hard even to name, much less to talk about. It's way easier to roll your eyes and not give a shit. You probably don't want to hear about all this, even.

One reason a lot of the media on the Trail like John McCain is simply that he's a cool guy. Nondweeby. In school, Clinton was in Student Government and Band, whereas McCain was a Varsity wrestler and a hellraiser whose talents for partying and getting laid are still spoken of with awe by former classmates. At 63, he's funny, and smart, and he'll make fun of himself and his wife and his staff and other pols and the Trail, and he'll tease the press and give them shit in a way they don't ever mind because it's the sort of shit that makes you feel like here's this very cool, important guy who's noticing you and liking you enough to give you shit. Sometimes he'll wink at you for no reason. If all this doesn't sound like

that big a deal, you have to remember that most of these pro reporters have to spend a lot of time around politicians, and most politicians are painful to be around. As one political columnist told *ROLLING STONE* and another pencil new to the Trail, "If you saw more of how the other candidates conduct themselves, you'd be way more impressed with [McCain]. It's that he acts somewhat in the ballpark of the way a real human being would act." And the grateful press on the Trail transmit—maybe even exaggerate—McCain's humanity to their huge audience, the electorate, which electorate in turn seems so paroxysmically thankful for a presidential candidate *somewhat in the ballpark of a real human being* that it has to make you stop and think about how starved voters are for just some minimal level of genuineness in the men who want to "lead" and "inspire" them.

There are, of course, still some groups of Young Voters way, way into modern politics. There's Rowdy Ralph Reed's far-Right Christians, for one, and then way out at the other end of the spectrum there's ACT UP and the sensitive men and angry womyn of the PC Left. What's interesting is that what gives these small fringe blocs so much power is the basic failure of mainstream Young Voters to get off their ass and vote. It's like we all learned in jr. high social studies: if I vote and you don't, my vote counts double. And it's not just the fringes that benefit—the fact is that it's to some very powerful Establishments' advantage that most young people hate politics and don't vote. This, too, deserves to be thought about, if you can stand it.

There's another thing John McCain always says. He makes sure he concludes every speech and THM with it, so the buses' press hear it about 100 times this week. He always pauses a second for effect and then says: "I'm going to tell you something. I may have said some things here today that maybe you don't agree with, and I might have said some things you hopefully do agree with. But I will always. Tell you. The truth." This is McCain's closer, his last big

reverb on the six-string as it were. And the frenzied standing-O it always gets from his audience is something to see. But you have to wonder: why do these crowds from Detroit to Charleston cheer so wildly at a simple promise not to lie?

Well it's obvious why. When McCain says it, the people are cheering not for him so much as for how good it feels to believe him. They're cheering the loosening of a weird sort of knot in the electoral tummy. McCain's résumé and candor, in other words, promise not empathy with voters' pain, but relief from it. Because we've been lied to and lied to, and it hurts to be lied to. It's ultimately just about that complicated: it hurts. It denies you respect for yourself, for the liar, for the world. Especially if the lies are chronic, systemic, if hard experience seems to teach that everything you're supposed to believe in's really a game based on lies. Young Voters have been taught well and thoroughly. You may not personally remember Vietnam or Watergate, but it's a good bet you remember "No new taxes" and "Out of the loop" and "No direct knowledge of any impropriety at this time" and "Did not inhale" and "Did not have sex with that woman" and etc. etc. It's depressing and painful to believe that the would-be "public servants" you're forced to choose between are all phonies whose only real concern is their own care and feeding and who will lie so outrageously with such a straight face that you just know they have to believe you're an idiot. So who wouldn't fall all over themselves for a top politician who actually seemed to talk to you like you were a person, an intelligent adult worthy of respect? A politician who all of a sudden out of nowhere comes on TV as this total longshot candidate and says that Washington is paralyzed, that everybody there's been bought off, and that the only way to really "return government to the people" the way all the other candidates claim they want to do is to outlaw huge unreported political contributions from corporations and lobbies and PACs . . . all of which are obvious truths that everybody knows but no recent politician's

had the stones to say. Who wouldn't cheer, hearing stuff like this, especially from a guy we know chose to sit in a dark box for four years instead of violate a Code? Even in A.D. 2000, who among us is so cynical that he doesn't have some good old corny American hope way down deep in his heart, lying dormant like a spinster's ardor, not dead but just waiting for the Right Guy to give it to? That John S. McCain III opposed making Martin Luther King's birthday a holiday, or that he thinks clear-cut logging is good for America, or that he feels our present gun laws are not clinically insane—this stuff counts for nothing with these Town Hall crowds, all on their feet, cheering their own ability to finally really fucking cheer.

## Negativity

7–13 February is pitched to *ROLLING STONE* as a “down week” on the GOP Trail, an interval almost breathtaking in its political unsexiness. Last week was the NH surprise; next week is the mad dash to SC's 2/19 primary, which the Twelve Monkeys all believe could now make or break both McCain and the Shrub. This week is the trenches: flesh-pressing, fundraising, traveling, poll-taking, strategizing, grinding out eight-event days in Michigan and Georgia and New York and SC. The Daily Press Schedule goes from 12-point type to 10-. Warren MI Town Hall Meeting in Ukrainian Cultural Center. Saginaw County GOP Lincoln Day Dinner. Editorial Meeting w/Detroit News. Press Conference at Weird Meth-Lab-Looking Internet Company in Flint. Redeye to North Savannah on Chartered 707 with Faint *Pan Am* Still Stenciled on Tail. Spartanburg SC Town Hall Meeting. Closed-Circuit TV Reception for McCain Supporters in Three States Broadcast Out of Charleston. AARP Town Forum. North Augusta THM. Live Town Hall Forum at Clemson U. with Chris Matthews of

MSNBC's *Hardball*. Goose Creek THM. Door-to-Door Campaigning with Congressmen Lindsey Graham and Mark Sanford and Senator Fred Thompson (R.-TN) and About 300 Media in Florence SC. NASCAR Tour and Test-Drive at Darlington Raceway. National Guard Armory THM in Fort Mill. Congressman Lindsey Graham Hosts Weird BBQ for a Lot of Flinty-Eyed Men in Down Vests and Trucker's Hats in Seneca SC. Taping of *Tim Russert* show for CNBC. Greer THM. Cyber-Fundraiser in Charleston. *Larry King Live* with Larry King Looking Even More Like a Giant Bug than Usual. Press-Conference in Greenville. Book Signing at Chapter 11 Books in Atlanta. On and on. Breakfast a Krispy Kreme, lunch a sandwich in Saran and store-brand chips, supper anyone's guess. Everyone but McCain is grim and stolid. "We're in maybe a little bit of a trough in terms of excitement," a Press Liaison concedes in his orientation for new pencils on Monday morning. . . .

. . . Until that very day's big tactical shift, which catches the McCain press corps unawares and gets all sorts of stuff underway for midweek's dramatic tactical climax, the Chris Duren Incident, all of which is politically sexy and exciting as hell, though not quite in the kind of way you cheer for.

The big tactical shift starts in the F&F Room of something called the Riverfront Hotel in the almost unbelievably blighted and depressing Flint MI, where all the buses' media are at 1500h. on 2/7 while McCain is huddled with the staff High Command in a suite upstairs. There is no more definitive behind-scene locale in a primary campaign than the F&F Room, which is usually some hotel's little third-string banquet- or meeting room off the lobby that McCain2000 rents (at the media's expense, precisely divided and tallied, just like each day's seat on the buses and plane and the Continental Breakfasts before Baggage Call and even the F&F Rooms' "catered lunches," which today are weird bright-red ham on Wonder Bread, Fritos, and coffee that tastes like warm water

with a brown crayon in it, and the pencils all bitch about the McCain2000 food and wistfully recount rumors that the Bush2000 press lunches are supposedly hot and multi-food-group and served on actual plates by unctuous men with white towels over their arm) so that those media with PM deadlines can finish their stories and File and Feed. By 1515h., each chair is filled by a producer or pencil trying to eat and type and talk on the phone all at once, and the whole F&F Room is up and running and alive with the quaduple ding of Windows booting up, the honk and static of modem connections, the multiphase clicking of forty-plus keyboards, the needly screech of fax machines saying hello to New York and Atlanta and the murmur of people on headset phones doing same.

Outside the Riverfront's side doors off the parking lot, where it's so cold and windy you have to smoke with mittens on, an OTS with Jim C. and his long-time friend and partner Frank C. means getting to bitch about the 12 Monkeys, and here Jim and Frank discourse with no small sympathy on the brutality of these campaign reporters' existence—subsisting on the Campaign Diet, which is basically sugar and caffeine (diabetes is apparently the Black Lung of political journalism), always on the road in some sort of box for weeks at a time, very alone, connected to loved ones only by cellphone and 1-800 answering service. ROLLING STONE—mentions being in hotels every night, which a CBS sound guy on BS2 had said was probably the McCain media's number-one stressor. The Shrub apparently stays in five-star places with putting greens and spurting-nymph fountains and a speed-dial number for the in-house masseur. Not McCain2000, which favors Marriott, Courtyard by Marriott, Hampton Inn, Hilton, Signature Inn, Radisson, Holiday Inn, Embassy Suites, etc. ROLLING STONE, who is in no way cut out to be a road journalist, invokes the soul-killing anonymity of chain hotels, the rooms' terrible transient

sameness: the ubiquitous floral design of the bedspreads, the multiple low-watt lamps, the pallid artwork bolted to the wall, the whisper of ventilation, the sad shag carpet, the smell of alien cleansers, the Kleenex dispensed from the wall, the automated wakeup call, the lightproof curtains, the windows that do not open—ever. RS asks whether it could possibly be coincidence that over half of all indoor suicides take place in chain hotels. Jim and Frank say they get the idea. RS references the terrible oxymoron of “hotel *guest*.” Hell could easily be a chain hotel. Is it any accident that McCain’s POW prison was known as the Hanoi *Hilton*? Jim shrugs; Frank says you get used to it, that it’s better not to dwell.

Monday, the first and only File and Feed in Michigan, is also the day of ROLLING STONE’s introduction to the Cellular Waltz, one of the most striking natural formations of the Trail. There’s a huge empty lobbylike space you have to pass through to get from the Riverfront’s side doors back to the area where the F&F and bathrooms are. It takes a long time to traverse this space, a hundred yards of nothing but flagstone walls and plaques with the sad pretentious names of the Riverfront’s banquet halls and conference rooms—the Oak Room, the Windsor Room—but on return from the OTS now out here are also half a dozen different members of the F&F Room’s press, each fifty feet away from any of the others, for privacy, and all walking in idle counterclockwise circles with a cellphone to their ear. These little orbits are the Cellular Waltz, which is probably the digital equivalent of doodling or picking at yourself as you talk on a regular landline. There’s something oddly lovely about the Waltz’s different circles here, which are of various diameters and stride-lengths and rates of rotation but are all identically counterclockwise and telephonic. We three slow down a bit to watch; you couldn’t not. From above, like if there were a mezzanine, the Waltzes would look like the cogs of some strange, diffuse machine. Frank C. says he can tell by their faces something’s

up. Jim C. says what's interesting is that media south of the equator do the exact same Cellular Waltz but that down there all their circles are reversed.

The reason for all the lobby's Waltzing was that during the OTS word apparently started to spread in the F&F Room that Mr. Mike Murphy of the McCain2000 High Command was coming down to do a surprise impromptu -Avail regarding a fresh two-page Press Release (still slightly warm from the Xerox) which two Press Liaisons are passing out even now, and of which part of the first page is reproduced here:

### **BUSH CAMPAIGN CAUGHT RED-HANDED WITH NEGATIVE ADS, UNETHICAL "PUSH-POLLING"**

**Outraged South Carolinians Unite Against False Advertising,  
Universally-Condemned Negative Polling Practice, McCain  
Volunteer Army Waiting With Tape Recorders to Catch Bush  
in the Act**

**COLUMBIA, SC—Deceptive TV ads and negative "push  
polls" conducted by phone in South Carolina last night by a  
polling firm employed by Texas Governor George W. Bush's  
campaign . . .**

This document is unusual not only because McCain2000's Press Releases are normally studies in bland irrelevance—"MCCAIN TO CONTINUE CAMPAIGNING IN MICHIGAN TODAY"; "MCCAIN HAS TWO HELPINGS OF POTATO SALAD AT SOUTH CAROLINA VFW PICNIC"—but because no less a personage than Mike Murphy has now indeed just come down to Spin this abrupt change of tone in the campaign's rhetoric. Murphy, who is only 37 but seems a lot older, is the McCain campaign's Senior Strategist, a professional political consultant who's already had eighteen

winning Senate and gubernatorial campaigns and is as previously mentioned a constant and acerbic presence in McCain's press salon aboard the Express. Among political pros, Murphy has the reputation of being (1) smart and funny as hell and (2) a real attack-dog, working for clients like Oliver North and Michigan's own John Engler in campaigns that were absolute operas of nastiness, and known for turning out what the *NY Times* rather delicately called "some of the most rough-edged commercials in the business." He's leaning back against a wall and surrounded in a 180° arc by the Twelve Monkeys, all of whom have notebooks or tiny professional tape recorders out and keep clearing their throats and pushing their glasses up with excitement.

Murphy says he's "just swung by" to provide the press corps with "some context" on the strident Press Release and to give the corps advance notice that the McCain campaign is also preparing a special "response ad" which will start airing in South Carolina tomorrow. Murphy uses the words "response" or "response ad" nine times in two minutes, and when one of the Twelve Monkeys interrupts to ask whether it'd be fair to characterize this new ad as Negative Murphy gives him a long styptic look and spells "r-e-s-p-o-n-s-e" out very slowly.

He then tells the hemispheric scrum that the Press Release and new ad reflect the McCain2000 campaign's decision, after much agonizing, to respond to what he says is G.W. Bush's welching on the two candidates' public handshake-agreement in January to run a bilaterally positive campaign. For the past five days, mostly in New York and SC, the Shrub has apparently been running ads that characterize McCain's policy proposals in what Murphy terms a "willfully distorting" way. Plus there's the push-polling, a practice that's regarded as the absolute bottom-feeder of sleazy campaign tactics. But the worst, the most obviously unacceptable, Murphy emphasizes, was the Shrub standing up at a podium in SC a couple days ago with a wild-eyed and apparently notorious

“fringe veteran” who publicly accused John McCain of “abandoning his fellow veterans” after returning from Vietnam, which, Murphy says, without going into McCain’s well-documented personal bio and heroic legislative efforts on behalf of vets for nearly twenty years is just so clearly over the line of even minimal personal decency and honor that it pretty much necessitates some sort of response.

The Twelve Monkeys, who are old pros at this sort of exchange, keep trying to steer Murphy away from what the Shrub’s done and get him to give a quotable explanation of why McCain himself has decided to run this “response ad,” a transcript of which the harried Press Liaisons are now distributing from a fresh copier-box and which features, in part:

*Audio*

MCCAIN: “I guess it was bound to happen.

Governor Bush’s campaign is getting desperate with a negative ad about me.

The fact is, I will use the surplus money to fix Social Security, cut your taxes, and pay down the debt. . . .

His ad twists the truth like Clinton. We’re all pretty tired of that. . . .”

—of which ad-transcript the 12M point out that in particular the “twists the truth like Clinton” part seems Negative indeed, since in ’00 comparing a GOP candidate to Bill Clinton is roughly equivalent to claiming that he wears ladies’ underwear under his black robes while presiding over Satanic masses.

The network techs, while checking their equipment and starting to gear up for the scrum of McCain’s exit at the Riverfront’s main doors, listen to ROLLING STONE’s summary of the Press Release and Murphy’s comments, confirm that the Shrub has indeed gone Negative (they’d heard about all this long before the

'Twelve Monkeys et al., because the techs and field producers are in constant touch with their colleagues on the Shrub's buses, whereas the Monkeys' Bush2000 counterparts are as aloof and niggardly about sharing info as the 12M themselves), and kill the last of the time in the Flint F&F by quietly analyzing Bush's Negativity and McCain's response from a tactical point of view.

Leaving aside their coolness and esprit de corps, be advised that *ROLLING STONE's* single luckiest journalistic accident this week was his bumbling into hanging around with these camera and sound guys. This is because network-news techs—who all have worked countless campaigns, and who have neither the raging egos of journalists nor the self-interested agenda of the McCain2000 staff to muddy their perspective—turn out to be way more acute and sensible political analysts than anybody you'll read or see on TV, and their assessment of today's Negativity developments is so extraordinarily nuanced and sophisticated that only a small portion of it can be ripped off and summarized here.

Going Negative is risky. Countless polls have shown that voters find it distasteful in the extreme, and if a candidate is perceived as going Negative, it usually costs him. So the techs all agree that the first question is why Bush2000 started playing this card. One possible explanation is that the Shrub was so personally shocked and scared by McCain's win in New Hampshire that he's now lashing out like a spoiled child and trying to hurt McCain however he can. The techs reject this, though. Spoiled child or no, G.W. Bush is a creature of his campaign advisers, and these advisers are the best that \$70 million and the full faith and credit of the GOP Establishment can buy, and if Bush2000 has gone Negative there must be solid political logic behind the move.

This logic turns out to be indeed solid, even brilliant, and the NBC, CBS and CNN techs flesh it out while the ABC cameraman puts several emergency sandwiches in his lens bag for tonight's

flight south on a campaign plane whose provisioning is notoriously inconsistent. The Shrub's attack leaves McCain with two options. If he does not retaliate, some SC voters will credit McCain for taking the high road. But it could also come off as wimpy, might compromise McCain's image as a tough, take-no-shit guy with the balls to take on the Washington kleptocracy. So McCain pretty much has to strike back, the techs agree. But this is extremely dangerous, for by retaliating—which of course (despite all Murphy's artful dodging) means going Negative himself—McCain runs the risk of looking like just another ambitious, win-at-any-cost politician. Worse, the CBS cameraman points out, if Bush then turns around and retaliates against the retaliation, and McCain has to re-retaliate against Bush's retaliation, and so on, then the whole GOP race could quickly degenerate into the sort of boring, depressing, cynical charge- and counter-charge contest that turns voters off and keeps them away from the polls. . . . Especially Young Voters, RS and an underage local pencil from one of those weekly things that people can pick up free at Detroit supermarkets point out, both scribbling just as furiously with the techs as the 12M did with Murphy. The techs say well OK maybe but that the really important tactical point here is that John S. McCain *cannot* afford to have voters get turned off, since his whole strategy is based on exciting the people and inspiring them and pulling more voters in, especially those who'd stopped voting because they'd gotten so disgusted and bored with all the Negativity and bullshit of politics. In other words, RS and the Detroit free-weekly kid propose to the techs, it's maybe even in the Shrub's political *self-interest* to let the GOP race get ugly and Negative and have voters get so bored and cynical and disgusted with the whole thing that they don't even bother to vote. Well no shit Sherlock H., the ABC techs in essence respond, good old Frank C. then patiently explaining that, yes, if there's a low voter turnout, then the major-

ity of the people who get off their ass and do vote will be the Diehard Republicans, meaning the Christian Right and the party faithful, and these are the groups that vote as they're told, the ones controlled by the GOP Establishment, an Establishment that's got \$70 million and 100% of its own credibility invested in the Shrub. CNN's Mark A. inserts that this also explains why the amazingly lifelike Al Gore, over in the Democratic race, has been so relentlessly Negative and depressing in his attacks on Bill Bradley: since Gore, like the Shrub, has his party's Establishment behind him, with all its organization and money and the Diehards who'll fall into line and vote as they're told, it's in Big Al's (and his party's bosses') interest to draw as few voters as possible into the Democratic primaries, because the lower the overall turnout, the more the Establishment voters' ballots actually count. Which fact then in turn, the CBS cameraman says, helps explain why, even though our elected representatives are always wringing their hands and making concerned sounds about low voter-turnouts, nothing substantive ever gets done to make politics less ugly or depressing and to actually induce more people to vote: our elected representatives are incumbents, and low turnouts favor incumbents for the same reason soft money does.

Let's pause here one second for a quick ROLLING STONE PSA. If you are demographically a Young Voter, it is again worth a moment of your valuable time to consider the implications of the techs' point. If you are bored and disgusted by politics and don't bother to vote, you are in effect voting for the entrenched Establishments of the two major parties, who are not dumb and are *keenly* aware that it's in their interests to keep you disgusted and bored and cynical and to give you every possible psychological reason to stay at home doing one-hitters and watching *MTV Spring Break* on Primary Day. By all means stay home if you want, but don't bullshit yourself that you're not voting. In reality, there

is *no such thing as not voting*: you either vote by voting, or you vote by staying home and tacitly doubling the value of some Diehard's vote.

But so the techs' assessment, then, is that Bush's going Negative is both tactically sound and politically near-brilliant, and that it forces McCain's own strategists to walk a very tight wire indeed in formulating a response. What McCain has to try to do, then, is retaliate without losing the inspiring high-road image that won him New Hampshire. This is why Mike Murphy took valuable huddle-with-candidate time to come down to the F&F and spoonfeed the Twelve Monkeys all this stuff about Bush's attacks being so far over the line that they have no choice but to "respond." Because the McCain2000 campaign has got to Spin today's retaliation the same way nations Spin war: McCain has to make it appear that he is not being actually aggressive himself but is merely "repelling aggression." It will require enormous discipline and cunning for McCain2000 to pull this off. And tomorrow's "response ad"—in the techs' opinion as the transcript's passed around—this is not a promising start, discipline-and-cunning-wise, especially the "twists the truth like Clinton" part that the 12M jumped on Murphy for. This line's too mean. McCain2000 could have chosen to put together a much softer and smarter ad patiently "correcting" certain "unfortunate errors" in Bush's ads and "respectfully requesting" that the push-polling cease (with everything in quotes here being Jim C.'s suggested terms) and striking just the right high-road tone. The actual ad's "twists like Clinton" does not sound high-road; it sounds pissed off, aggressive. And it will allow Bush to do a React and now say that it's *McCain* who's violated the handshake-agreement . . . which the techs say will of course be bullshit, but that it might be effective bullshit, and that it's McCain's aggressive ad that's giving the Shrub the opening to do it.

The techs' basic analysis of the motivation behind "twists the

truth like Clinton" is that McCain is genuinely, personally pissed off at the Shrub, and that he has taken Murphy's leash off and let Murphy do what Murphy does best, which is gutter-fight. McCain, after all, is known for having a temper (though he's been extremely controlled in the campaign so far and never shown it in public), and Jim C. thinks that maybe the truly ingenious thing the Shrub's strategists did was to find a way to genuinely piss McCain off and make him want to go Negative even though the staff High Command had to have warned him that this was playing right into Bush's strategists' hands. This analysis suddenly reminds ROLLING STONE of the part in *The Godfather* where Sonny Corleone's fatal flaw is his temper, which Barzini and Tattaglia exploit by getting Carlo to beat up Connie and make Sonny so insanely angry that he drives off to kill Carlo and gets assassinated in Barzini's ambush at the tollbooth. Jim C., sweating heavily with forty pounds of gear on, says he supposes there are some similarities, and Randy (the taciturn but cinephilic CNN cameraman) speculates that the Shrub's brain-trust may actually have based their whole strategy on Barzini's ingenious ploy in *The Godfather*, and Frank C. observes that Bush's equivalent to slapping Connie Corleone around was probably his standing up with the wacko vet who claimed McCain dissed his Vietnam comrades, which at first looked stupid and unnecessarily nasty of Bush but from another perspective might have been sheer genius if it made McCain so angry that his desire to retaliate outweighed his political judgment.

And events of the next few days bear out the techs' analysis pretty much 100%. On Tuesday morning, on the Radisson's TV in North Savannah SC, both *Today* and *GMA* lead with "The GOP campaign takes an ugly turn" and show the part of McCain's new ad where he says "twists the truth like Clinton"; and sure enough by midday the Shrub has put out a React where he accuses John S. McCain of violating the handshake-agreement and going Nega-

tive and adds that he is "personally offended and outraged" at being compared to W.J. Clinton; and then at a Press-Avail in Hilton Head the Shrub avers that he knows less than nothing about any so-called push-polling and suggests that the whole thing might have been fabricated as a sleazy political ploy on McCain2000's part; and then on Wednesday a.m. on TV at the Embassy Suites in Charleston there's now an even *more* aggressive ad that Murphy's gotten McCain to let him run, which shows a nighttime shot of 1600 Pennsylvania Ave.'s famous façade with its palisade of blatantly ejaculatory fountains in the foreground and says "Can America afford another politician in the White House that we can't trust?," which grammatical problems aside Frank C. says that that shot of the White House is really going low with the knife and that if McCain loses South Carolina it may very well be because of this ad; and sure enough by Wednesday night focus polls are showing that South Carolina voters are finding the new ad Negative and depressing, and the next couple days' polls then have both McCain's support and the primary's projected voter-turnout falling like a rock, and the daily pencils are having to churn out piece after piece about all the endless picayune charges and counter-charges, and everyone on Bullshit 1 and 2 is starting to get severely dispirited and bored, and even the 12M's strides have lost a certain spring . . .

. . . And then out of nowhere comes the dramatic tactical climax mentioned *supra*, which hits the media like a syringe of Narcan and makes all five networks' news that night. It occurs at the Spartanburg SC THM, whose venue is a small steep theater in the Fine Arts Center of a small college nobody could ever find out the name of, and is so packed by the time the press corps gets there that even the aisles are full, so that everybody except the techs and their producers is out in the lobby.

To be honest, all the national pencils would probably be out here in the lobby even if the theater weren't full, because after a few

days McCain's opening THM 22.5 becomes almost wrist-slittingly dull and repetitive. Journalists who've covered McCain since Christmas report that Mike Murphy and Co. have worked hard on him to become more "Message-Disciplined," which in political-speak means reducing everything important to brief, memory-friendly slogans—"the Iron Triangle of money, lobbyists and legislation," "I'm going to beat Al Gore like a drum"—and then punching those slogans over and over.

In fairness to McCain, he's not an orator and doesn't pretend to be. His *métier* is conversation, back-and-forth. This is because he's bright in a fast, flexible way that most candidates aren't. He also genuinely seems to find people and questions and arguments energizing—the latter maybe because of all his years debating in Congress—which is why he favors Town Hall Q&As and constant chats with press in his rolling salon. So, while the media marvel at his accessibility because they've been trained to equate it with vulnerability, they often don't seem to realize they're playing totally to McCain's strength when they converse with him instead of listening to his speeches. It's McCain's speeches and 22.5's that are canned and stilted, and also sometimes scary and Right-wingish, and when you listen closely to them it's as if some warm pleasant fog suddenly lifts and it strikes you that you're not at all sure it's John McCain you want choosing the head of the EPA or the at least three new Justices who'll be coming onto the Supreme Court in the next term, and you start wondering all over again what makes him so attractive.

But then the doubts again dissolve when McCain starts taking questions at THMs, which by now is what's underway in Spartanburg. The questions always run the great *vox populi* gamut, from Talmudically bearded guys asking about Chechnya and tort reform to high-school kids reading questions off printed sheets their hands shake as they hold, from moms worried about their kids' future SSI to old vets in Legion caps who call McCain "Lieu-

tenant" and want to trade salutes, plus the obligatory walled fundamentalists trying to pin him down on whether Christ considered homosexuality "an abomination," and arcane questions about index-fund regulation and postal privatization, and HMO horror stories, and Internet porn, and tobacco litigation, and people who believe the Second Amendment entitles them to own grenade launchers. The questions are random and unscreened, and the candidate fields them all, and he's never better or more human than in these exchanges, especially when the questioner is angry or wrong—McCain will say "I respectfully disagree" or "We have a difference of opinion" and then detail his objections in lucid English with a gentleness that's never condescending. For a man with a temper, McCain is unbelievably patient and decent with people at THMs, especially when you consider that he's 63, in chronic pain, sleep-deprived, and under enormous pressure not to gaffe or get himself in trouble. He doesn't. No matter how stale and Message-Disciplined the 22.5 at the beginning, in the Town Hall Q&As you get an overwhelming sense that this is a decent, honorable man trying to tell the truth to people he really sees. You will not be alone in this impression.

And so but then in the Spartanburg Q&A, after two China questions and one on taxing Internet commerce, a totally demographically average thirty-something middle-class soccer mom in rust-colored slacks and big round glasses gets picked and stands up and somebody brings her the mike. It turns out her name is Donna Duren, of right here in Spartanburg SC, and she says she has a 14-year-old son named Chris, in whom Mr. and Mrs. Duren have been trying to inculcate family values and respect for authority and a non-cynical idealism about America and its duly elected leaders. They want him to find heroes he can believe in, she says. Donna Duren's whole story takes a while, but nobody's bored, and even on the monitors in the lobby you can sense a change in the theater's voltage, and the national pencils start moving in and

elbowing people aside (which they're really good at) to get close to the monitors. Mrs. Duren says that Chris—clearly a sensitive kid—was “made very very upset” by the Lewinsky scandal and all the R-rated revelations and the appalling behavior of Clinton and Starr and Tripp and pretty much everybody on all sides during the impeachment thing, and Chris had a lot of very upsetting and uncomfortable questions that Mr. and Mrs. D. struggled to answer, and that basically it was a really hard time but they got through it. And then last year, at more or less a trough in terms of idealism and respect for elected authority, she says, Chris discovered John McCain and McCain2000.com, and got interested in the campaign, and his parents apparently read him some G-rated parts of *Faith of My Fathers*, and the upshot is that young Chris finally found a public hero he could believe in: John S. McCain III. It's impossible to know what McCain's face is doing during this story because the monitors are taking CNN's feed, and Randy of CNN's lens is staying hard and steady on Donna Duren, who appears so iconically prototypical and so thoroughly exudes the special quiet dignity of an average American who knows she's average and just wants a decent, non-cynical life for herself and her family that she can say things like “family values” and “hero” without anybody rolling their eyes. But then last night, Mrs. D. says, as they were all watching non-violent TV in the family room, the phone suddenly rang upstairs, and Chris went up and got it, and Mrs. D. says a little while later he came back down into the family room crying and just terribly upset and told them the phone call had been a man who started talking to him about the 2000 campaign and then asked Chris if he knew that John McCain was a liar and a cheater and that anybody who'd vote for John McCain was either stupid or unAmerican or both. That caller had been a push-poller for Bush2000, Mrs. Duren says, knuckles on her mike-hand white and voice almost breaking, and she says she just wanted Senator McCain to know about it, about what hap-

pened to Chris, and wants to know whether anything can be done to keep people like this from calling innocent young kids and plunging them into disillusionment and confusion about whether they're stupid for trying to have heroes they believe in.

At which point (0853h.) two things happen out here in the Fine Arts Center lobby. The first is that the national pencils disperse in a radial pattern, each dialing his cellphone, and the network field producers all come barreling out of the theater doors pulling their cellphone antennas out with their teeth, and everybody tries to find a little empty area to Waltz in while they call the gist of this riveting Negativity-related development in to networks and editors and try to raise their counterparts in the Bush2000 press corps to see if they can get a React from the Shrub on Mrs. Duren's story, at the end of which story the second thing happens, which is that CNN's Randy finally pans to McCain and you can see McCain's facial expression, which is pained and pale and actually looks more distraught even than Mrs. Duren's face had looked. And what McCain does, after looking silently at the floor a second, is—apologize. He doesn't lash out at Bush or at push-polling or appear to try to capitalize politically in any way. He looks sad and compassionate and regretful and says that the only reason he got into this race in the first place was to try to help inspire young Americans to feel better about devoting themselves to something, and that a story like what Mrs. Duren took the trouble to come down here to the THM this morning and tell him is just about the worst thing he could hear, and that if it's OK with Mrs. D. he'd like to call her son and apologize personally on the phone and maybe tell Chris that yes there are some bad people out there but that it's never a mistake to believe in something, that politics is still worthwhile as a Process to get involved in, and he really does look upset, McCain does, and almost as what seems like an afterthought he says that one thing Donna Duren and other concerned parents and citizens can do is call the Bush campaign and tell them to stop this push-

polling, that Governor Bush is a good man with a family of his own and it's difficult to believe he'd ever endorse his campaign doing things like this if he knew about it, and that he (McCain) will be calling Bush again personally for like the umpteenth time to ask him to stop the Negativity, and McCain's eyes look . . . wet, as in teary, which maybe is just a trick of the techs' TV lights but is nevertheless disturbing, the whole thing is disturbing, because McCain seems upset in a way that's almost too dramatic. He takes a couple more THM questions, then stops abruptly and says he's sorry but he's just so incredibly upset about the Chris Duren thing that he's having a hard time concentrating on anything else, and he asks the THM crowd's forgiveness, and thanks them, and forgets his Message Discipline and doesn't finish with he'll always. Tell them. The truth but they applaud like mad anyway, and the lobby's monitors' feed is cut as Randy and Jim C. et al go shoulder-held to join the scrum as McCain starts to exit.

And now none of this is simple at all, especially not McCain's exaggerated-seeming distress about Chris Duren, and a small set of disturbing and possibly very cynical interconnected thoughts and questions start whirling around in the journalistic head. Like the fact that Donna Duren's story was a far more devastating indictment of the Shrub's campaign tactics than anything McCain himself could say, and is it possible that McCain, on the theater's stage, wasn't aware of this? Is it possible that some part of McCain could realize that what happened to Chris Duren is very much to John S. McCain's political advantage, and yet he's still such a decent, uncalculating guy that all he feels is horror and regret that a kid was disillusioned? Was it human compassion that made him apologize first instead of criticizing Bush2000, or is McCain just maybe shrewd enough to know that Mrs. D.'s story had already nailed Bush to the wall and that by apologizing and looking distraught McCain could help underscore the difference between his own human decency and Bush's uncaring Negativity? Is it possi-

ble that he really actually had *tears* in his eyes? And come to think of it hey, why would a push-poller even be interested in trying to push-poll somebody too young to vote? Does Chris Duren maybe have a really deep-sounding phone voice or something? But wouldn't you think a push-poller would ask somebody's age before launching into his spiel? And how come nobody asked this question, not even the jaded 12M, out in the lobby? What were they thinking?

Bullshit 1 is empty except for Jay, who's grabbing a nap on one of the couches, and through the port windows you can see all the techs and heads and talent in a king-size scrum around Mrs. Donna Duren in the gravel courtyard, and there's the additional cynical thought that doubtless some enterprising network crew is even now pulling up in front of poor Chris Duren's junior high (which unfortunately tonight on TV turns out to be just what happened). The bus idles empty for a very long time—the post-event scrums and standups last longer than the whole THM did—and then when the BS1 regulars finally do pile in they're all extremely busy trying to type and phone and file, and all the techs have to get their Sony DVS-series Digital Editors out and help their producers find and time the clip of Mrs. Duren's story and McCain's response so they can feed it to the networks right away, and the Twelve Monkeys have as more or less one body stormed the Straight Talk Express, which is just up ahead on I-85 and riding very low in the stern from all the weight in McCain's rear salon. The point is that none of the usual media pros are available to interface with and help deconstruct the Chris Duren Incident and help try to figure out what to be cynical about and what not to and which of the many disturbing questions the whole Incident provokes are paranoid or irrelevant and which ones might be journalistically valid . . . such as was McCain really serious about calling Chris Duren? How was he going to get the Durens' phone number when Mrs. D. was scrummed solid the whole time he and

the staff were leaving? And where were Mike Murphy and the other High Command through that whole thing, who can usually be seen Cell-Waltzing in the shadows at every THM but today were nowhere in sight? Is it just possible that McCain—maybe not even consciously—played up his reaction to Mrs. Duren's story and framed his distress to give himself a plausible, good-looking excuse to get out of the Negative spiral that's been hurting him so badly in the polls that Jim and Frank say he may well lose SC if things keep on this way? Is it too cynical even to consider such a thing?

Because at the following day's first Press-Avail, John S. McCain issues a plausible, good-looking, highly emotional statement to the whole scrummed corps. This is on a warm, pretty 2/11 morning outside the Embassy Suites (or maybe Hampton Inn) in Charleston, right after Baggage Call. McCain informs the press that the case of young Chris Duren has caused him such distress that after a great deal of late-night soul-searching he's now ordered his staff to cease all Negativity and to pull all the McCain2000 response ads in South Carolina regardless of whether the Shrub pulls his own Negative ads or not.

And of course framed as it is in the distressed context of the Chris Duren Incident, McCain's decision in no way now makes him look wimpy or appeasing, but rather like a truly decent, honorable, high-road guy who doesn't want young people's political idealism fucked with in any way if he can help it. It's a masterful statement, and a stirring and high-impact Press-Avail, and everybody in the scrum seems impressed and in some cases deeply and personally moved, and nobody (including *ROLLING STONE*) ventures to point out aloud that, however unfortunate the phone call was for the Durens, it turned out to be fortunate as *hell* for McCain2000 in terms of this week's tactical battle, that actually the whole thing couldn't have worked out better for McCain2000 if it had been . . . well, like, *scripted*, if like say Mrs. Donna Duren

had been a trained actress or gifted amateur who'd been somehow secretly approached and rehearsed and paid and planted in that crowd of over 300 random unscreened questioners where her raised hand in that sea of average voters' hands was seen and chosen and she got to tell a moving story that made all five networks last night and damaged Bush badly and now has released McCain from this week's tactical box. Any way you look at it (and there's a long DT to think about it), yesterday's Incident and THM were an almost incredible stroke of political luck for McCain, or else a stroke of something else that no one—not ROLLING STONE, not the Twelve Monkeys or even the totally sharp and unsentimental and astute Jim C.—ever once broaches or mentions out loud, which might be understandable, since maybe even considering whether it was even *possible* would be so painful it would just break your heart and make it hard to go on, which is what the press and staff and Straight Talk caravan and McCain himself have to do all day, and the next, and the next—go on.

## Suck It Up

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Paradox: It is impossible to talk about the really important stuff in politics without using terms that have become such awful clichés they make your eyes glaze over and are hard to even hear. One such term is "leader," which all the big candidates use all the time—as in "providing leadership," "a proven leader," "a new leader for a new century," etc.—and have reduced to such a platitude that it's hard to try to think about what "leader" really means and whether indeed what today's Young Voters want is a leader. The weird thing is that the word "leader" itself is cliché and boring, but when you come across somebody who actually is a real leader, that person isn't cliché or boring at all; in fact he's sort of the *opposite* of cliché and boring.

Obviously, a real leader isn't just somebody who has ideas you agree with, nor is it just somebody you happen to think is a good guy. A real leader is somebody who, because of his own particular power and charisma and example, is able to inspire people, with "inspire" being used here in a serious and non-cliché way. A real leader can somehow get us to do certain things that deep down we think are good and want to be able to do but usually can't get ourselves to do on our own. It's a mysterious quality, hard to define, but we always know it when we see it, even as kids. You can probably remember seeing it in certain really great coaches, or teachers, or some extremely cool older kid you "looked up to" (interesting phrase) and wanted to be just like. Some of us remember seeing the quality as kids in a minister or rabbi, or a Scoutmaster, or a parent, or a friend's parent, or a supervisor in a summer job. And yes, all these are "authority figures," but it's a special kind of authority. If you've ever spent time in the military, you know how incredibly easy it is to tell which of your superiors are real leaders and which aren't, and how little rank has to do with it. A leader's real "authority" is a power you voluntarily give him, and you grant him this authority not with resentment or resignation but happily; it feels right. Deep down, you almost always like how a real leader makes you feel, the way you find yourself working harder and pushing yourself and thinking in ways you couldn't ever get to on your own.

Lincoln was, by all available evidence, a real leader, and Churchill, and Gandhi, and King. Teddy and Franklin Roosevelt, and de Gaulle, and certainly Marshall and maybe Eisenhower. (Of course Hitler was a real leader too, a very powerful one, so you have to watch out; all it is is a weird kind of power.)

Probably the last real leader we had as U.S. President was JFK, forty years ago. It's not that Kennedy was a better human being than the seven presidents we've had since: we know he lied about his WWII record, and had spooky Mob ties, and screwed around

more in the White House than poor Clinton could ever dream of. But JFK had that weird leader-type magic, and when he said things like "Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country" nobody rolled their eyes or saw it as just political bullshit. Instead, a lot of them felt inspired. And the decade that followed, however fucked up it was in other ways, saw millions of Young Voters devote themselves to social and political causes that had nothing to do with getting a great job or owning nice stuff or finding the best parties; and the '60s were, by most accounts, a generally cleaner and happier time than now.

So it's worth thinking about why, when John McCain says he wants to be president in order to inspire a generation of young Americans to devote themselves to causes greater than their own self-interest (which means he's saying he wants to be a real leader), a great many of those young Americans will yawn or roll their eyes or make some ironic joke instead of feeling totally inspired the way they did with Kennedy. True, JFK's audience was more "innocent" than we are: Vietnam hadn't happened yet, or Watergate, or the Savings and Loan scandal, etc. But there's also something else. The science of sales and marketing was still in its drooling infancy in 1961 when Kennedy was saying "Ask not . . ." The young people he inspired had not been skillfully marketed to all their lives. They knew nothing of Spin. They were not totally, terribly familiar with salesmen.

Now you have to pay close attention to something that's going to seem real obvious. There is a difference between a great leader and a great salesman. Because a salesman's ultimate, overriding motivation is his own self-interest. If you buy what he's selling, the salesman profits. So even though the salesman may have a very powerful, charismatic, admirable personality, and might even persuade you that buying really is in your interest (and it really might be)—still, a little part of you always knows that what the salesman's ultimately after is something for himself. And this

awareness is painful . . . although admittedly it's a tiny pain, more like a twinge, and often unconscious. But if you're subjected to enough great salesmen and salespitches and marketing concepts for long enough—like from your earliest Saturday-morning cartoons, let's say—it is only a matter of time before you start believing deep down that everything is sales and marketing, and that whenever somebody seems like they care about you or about some noble idea or cause, that person is a salesman and really ultimately doesn't give a shit about you or some cause but really just wants something for himself.

Some people believed that Ronald W. Reagan (1981–88) was our last real leader. But not many of them were young. Even in the '80s, most younger Americans, who could smell a marketer a mile away, knew that what Reagan really was was a great salesman. What he was selling, of course, was the idea of himself as a leader. And if you're under, say, 35 this is what pretty much every U.S. President you've grown up with has been: a very talented salesman, surrounded by smart, expensive political strategists and media consultants and Spinmasters who manage his "campaign" (as in "advertising campaign") and help him sell us on the idea that it's in our interests to vote for him. But the real interests that drove these guys were their own. They wanted, above all, To Be The President, wanted the mind-bending power and prominence, the historical immortality—you could smell it on them. (Young Voters tend to have an especially good sense of smell for this sort of thing.) And this is why these guys weren't real leaders: because their deepest, most elemental motives were selfish, there was no chance of them ever inspiring us to transcend our own selfishness. Instead, they helped reinforce our market-conditioned belief that everybody's ultimately out for himself and that life is about selling and profit and that words and phrases like "service" and "justice" and "community" and "patriotism" and "duty" and "Give government back to the people" and "I feel your pain" and "Compass-

David Wall

sionate Conservatism" are just the politics industry's proven sales-pitches, exactly the same way "Anti-Tartar" and "Fresher Breath" and "Four Out of Five Dentists Surveyed Recommend" are the toothpaste industry's pitches. We may vote for them, the same way we may go buy toothpaste. But we're not inspired. They're not the real thing.

Yes, this is simplistic. All politicians sell, always have. FDR and JFK and MLK and Gandhi were great salesmen. But that's not all they were. People could smell it. That weird little extra something. It had to do with "character" (which, yes, is also a cliché—suck it up).

All of this is why watching John McCain hold Town Hall Meetings and be all conspicuously honest and open and informal and idealistic and no-bullshit and say "I run for president not to Be Somebody, but to Do Something" and "We're on a national crusade to give government back to the people" in front of these cheering crowds just seems so much more goddamn *complicated* than watching old b/w clips of John Kennedy's speeches. It feels impossible, in February '00, to tell whether John McCain is a real leader or merely a very talented political salesman, just another entrepreneur who's seen a new market-niche and devised a way to fill it.

Because here's another paradox: Spring 2000—midmorning in America's hangover from the whole Lewinsky-and-impeachment thing—represents a moment of almost unprecedented cynicism and disgust with national politics, a moment when blunt, I-don't-give-a-shit-if-you-elect-me honesty becomes an incredibly attractive and salable and *electable* commodity. A moment when an anticandidate can be a real candidate. But of course if he becomes a real candidate, is he still an anticandidate? Can you sell someone's refusal to be sold?

There are a lot of elements of the McCain2000 campaign—naming and touting the bus for "Straight Talk," the timely publi-

cation of *Faith of My Fathers*, the much-hyped "openness" and "spontaneity" of the Express's media salon, the Message-Disciplined way McCain thumps "Always. Tell you. The truth"—that indicate some very shrewd, clever marketers are trying to market this candidate's rejection of shrewd, clever marketing. Is this bad? Is it hypocritical? Is it hypocritical that one of McCain's ads' lines in South Carolina is "... telling the truth even when it hurts him politically," which of course since it's an ad means that McCain's trying to get political benefit out of his indifference to political benefit? What's the difference between hypocrisy and paradox? Does the whole thing seem awfully confusing?

The fact of the matter is that if you are a true-blue, marketing-savvy Young Voter, the only real certainty you're going to feel about John McCain's 2000 campaign is that it produces in you a very modern and very *American* kind of confusion, a sort of interior war between your deep need to believe and your deep belief that the need to believe is bullshit, that's there's nothing left anywhere but salesmen. When your cynicism's winning, you'll find it's possible to see even McCain's most attractive qualities as just marketing angles. His famous habit of bringing up his own closet's skeletons, for example—bad grades, messy divorce, indictment as one of the Keating Five—this could be real honesty and openness, or it could just be McCain's shrewd way to preempt criticism by criticizing himself before anyone else gets the chance. The humble way he talks about his heroism as a POW—"It doesn't take much talent to get shot down"; "I wasn't a hero, but I was fortunate enough to serve my time in the company of heroes"—this could be real humility, or it could be McCain's clever way of appearing both heroic *and* humble.

The confusion you'll feel is not all your fault. There's a very real, very American tension between what John McCain's appeal is and the way that appeal must be structured and packaged in order to make him politically viable. To get you to buy. And sometimes

McCain himself seems a little too good at the packaging, as with for example recall 2/10's Chris Duren Incident in Spartanburg and McCain's enormous distress and his promise to phone and apologize personally to the disillusioned kid. So the next afternoon, at a pre-F&F Press-Avail back in North Charleston, the new unilaterally non-Negative McCain informs the corps that he's going up to his hotel room right now to call young Chris. The phone call is to be "a private one between this young man and me," McCain says. Then a Press Liaison steps in looking very serious and announces that only network techs will be allowed in the room, and while they can film the whole call, only the first ten seconds of audio will be permitted. "Ten seconds, then we kill the sound," the Liaison says, looking hard at Frank C. and the other audio guys. "This is a private call, not a media event." So why let TV cameras film McCain making it? And why only ten seconds of sound? Why not either sound or no sound?

The answer is modern and American and shrewd and right out of Marketing 101. McCain's campaign wants to publicize McCain keeping his promise and calling a traumatized kid, but also to publicize the fact that McCain is calling him "privately" and not exploiting Chris Duren for crass political purposes. There's no other possible reason for the ten-second audio cutoff, which of course will require networks that run the film to explain why there's no sound after the initial Hello, which of course will make McCain look doubly good, both caring and nonpolitical. Does the shrewd calculation of appeal here imply that McCain doesn't really care about Chris and want to buck him up and restore the kid's faith in the Political Process? Not necessarily. But what it does mean is that McCain2000 wants to have it both ways, rather like modern corporations who give to charity and then try to reap PR benefits by hyping their altruism in their ads. Does stuff like this mean the gifts and phone call aren't "good"? The answer depends on how gray-area-tolerant you are about sincerity vs. marketing,

or sincerity plus marketing, or leadership plus the packaging and selling of same. Nobody else can tell you how to see it or convince you you shouldn't yawn and turn away in disgust. Maybe McCain deserves the disgust; maybe he's really just another salesman.

But if you, like poor old ROLLING STONE's nonprofessional pencil, have come to a point on the Trail where you've started fearing your own cynicism every bit as much as you fear your credulity and the salesmen who feed on it, you're apt to find your thoughts returning again and again to a certain dark box in a certain Hilton half a world and three careers away, to the torture and fear and offer of reprieve and a certain Young Voter named John McCain's refusal to violate a Code. Because there were no techs' cameras in that box, no aides or consultants, no paradoxes or gray areas; nothing to sell. There was just one guy and whatever in his character sustained him. This is a huge deal. In your mind, that Hoa Lo box becomes sort of a dressing room with a star on the door, the private place behind the stage where one imagines "the real John McCain" still lives. But the paradox here is that this box that makes McCain "real" is: impenetrable. Nobody gets in or out. That's why, however many behind-the-scenes pencils get put on the case, be apprised that a "profile" of John McCain is going to be just that: one side, exterior, split and diffracted by so many lenses there's way more than one man to see. Salesman or leader or neither or both: the final paradox—the really tiny central one, way down deep inside all the other boxes and enigmas that layer McCain—is that whether he's For Real depends now less on what's in his heart than on what might be in yours. Try to stay awake.

RHETORIC AND THE MATH MELODRAMA

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(author's suggested title . . .)

<---- David Foster Wallace

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**\*\* AUTHOR HUMBL Y AVERS THAT ALL NONSTANDARD SYNTAX / PUNCTUATION  
IS INTENTIONAL AND REQUESTS THAT IT BE STETTED \*\***

**The Wild Numbers.** PHILIBERT SCHOGT. Four Walls Eight Windows, New York, 2000. 159 pp. \$18. ISBN 1-56858-166-1. (Herein abbreviated WN)  
**Uncle Petros & Goldbach's Conjecture.** APOSTOLOS DOXIADIS. Bloomsbury USA, New York, 2000. 209 pp. \$23.95. ISBN 1-58234-067-6. (Herein abbreviated UPGC)

Math's cultural stock has risen hard in recent years, no doubt driven by the same booming and metastatic Knowledge Economy that's turned yesterday's *non grata* nerd into today's cyber-tycoon. Call the phenomenon "Geek Chic" or "Hip(2b)<sup>2</sup>" or whatever you will: abstract tech is now sexy, the mathematician a viable commercial hero—see for example the success of recent films like *Good Will Hunting* and *II*.

Or a better instance of math's new cachet here is Amir D. Aczel's *Fermat's Last Theorem: Unlocking the Secret of an Ancient Mathematical Problem*, which made nonfiction bestseller lists in 1996 and transformed Princeton's Andrew Wiles into a weird kind of horrimmed pop icon, and in the wake of which has appeared everything from Paul Hoffman's *The Man Who Loved Only Numbers* and Sylvia Nasar's *A Beautiful Mind*<sup>1</sup> to David Berlinski's *Newton's Gift* and Charles Seife's *Zero: The Biography of a Dangerous Idea*.

Though fiction, Philibert Schogt's *The Wild Numbers* and Apostolos Doxiadis's *Uncle Petros & Goldbach's Conjecture* both draw heavily on Aczel's *Fermat's Last Theorem* (as well as on G.H. Hardy's *A Mathematician's Apology*<sup>2</sup>). And there are other, rather striking similarities between these two novels. Both are set in the world of academic mathematics and feature characters whose specialty is number theory,<sup>3</sup> higher math's most purely abstract branch. Both novels revolve around their protagonists' quests to solve famous and long-standing number-theoretic problems. And both WN and UPGC have been translated by their own authors from foreign-language originals.

The facts of these two novels' close resemblance and near-simultaneous release here in the States, as well as the vigor with which their U.S. publishers are hyping them,<sup>4</sup> appear to signal the inception of a whole new commercial genre—the "Math Melodrama," as it were. This is a development that should come as no surprise, given the success of some of the other titles mentioned *supra*, not to mention the commercial success in recent years of other nascent tech-intensive genres (the cyberpunk of *Neuromancer* et al, the Clancy-style techno-thriller, the plucky-young-hackers-thwarting-evil-monolithic-institutions of *Sneakers*, *Hackers*, *The Matrix*, etc.).

As exemplified by WN and UPGC in fiction and *Fermat's Last Theorem* and *A Beautiful Mind* in non-, the Math Melodrama can be roughly characterized as combining the "Vocational Travelogue"<sup>5</sup> charms of genre authors like Arthur Hailey and Michael Crichton with some of the weightier allegorical

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<sup>1</sup> These are rich and well-written biographies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century mathematicians Paul Erdős and John Nash, respectively.

<sup>2</sup> This classic long essay, originally published in 1940 and re-released by Cambridge in '92, is the unacknowledged father of most of the last decade's math-prose. There is very little that any of the recent books do that Hardy's terse and beautiful *Apology* did not do first, better, and with rather less fuss.

<sup>3</sup> (i.e., the formal study of integers/rationals, the world of Diophantine equations, of Hilbert Problems 9-12, etc.—and also the specialty of both G.H. Hardy and A. Wiles)

<sup>4</sup> WN's cover comes with a blurb from *Fermat's Last Theorem*'s Aczel, who must have been on some kind of euphoriant medication—"I have never read a better fictional description of what it's like to work in pure math"—as well as the breathless marketing tag "THE LINE BETWEEN GENIUS AND MADNESS IS A THIN ONE." UPGC's publisher's big tactic is to offer a \$1,000,000 bounty to anyone who can prove Goldbach's Conjecture before 2002.

<sup>5</sup> "Vocational Travelogue" is a very shorthand way of acknowledging that for a long time one reason people used to read fiction was for a kind of imaginative tourism to places and cultures they'd never get to really see; that modernity's jetliners, TV, etc. have pretty well obsoleted this function; but that modern tech has also created such extreme vocational specialization that few people anymore are in a position to know much about any professional field but their own; and thus that a certain amount of fiction's "touristic" function now consists in giving readers dramatized access to the nuts and bolts of different professional disciplines and specialties. It is not an accident that the first important

functions that other genres and their heroes often serve—the Western sheriff as emblem of Apollonian order, the Noir private eye as existential hero, the plucky young hacker as Odyssean trickster. The Math Melodrama's own allegorical template appears to be more classically Tragic, its hero a kind of Prometheus/Icarus figure whose high-altitude genius is also *hubris* and Fatal Flaw.<sup>6</sup> If this sounds a bit grandiose, well, it is; but it's also a fair description of the way Math Melodramas characterize the project of pure math—as nothing less than the mortal quest for Divine Truth. What's odd here is that whether a particular reader accepts this characterization or sees it as pretentious and silly will often depend less on the qualities of the Math Melodramas themselves than on certain biographical facts about the reader himself, namely how much knowledge and experience of higher math he happens to have.

This sort of oddity is, in fact, a frequent problem in reviewing or assessing "genre fiction," which is a type of narrative it's usually fair to call "the sort of thing someone who likes this sort of thing is apt to like." The evaluative criteria tend to be rather special for genre fiction. Instead of the basically *aesthetic* assay the reviewer gets to make of most literary fiction—"Is this piece of fiction *good*?"—criticism of genre fiction is ultimately more *rhetorical*—"To whom will this piece of fiction *appeal*?" In other words, as is the case with all but the broadest and coarsest genre fiction, the central questions about novels like WN and UPGC concern what rhetoricians call "audience": what is the intended audience for these books? and is this audience apt to find the novels satisfying on the same terms by which it finds other Math Melodramas satisfying? and if not, are there other audiences whom these books are more likely to satisfy? and so on. One reason this is a problem for reviewers is that book reviews are usually supposed to be short, clear, and relatively simple, and rhetorical criteria tend to yield very complex, sometimes even paradoxical conclusions. In the case of *The Wild Numbers* and *Uncle Petros & Goldbach's Conjecture*, the paradox is that the type of audience most likely to accept and appreciate these novels' lofty, encomiastic view of pure math is also the audience most apt to be disappointed by the variously *vague*, *reductive*, or *inconsistent* ways the novels handle the actual mathematics they're concerned with.

To put it in a simpler, more book review-ish way: *Neither of these novels is very good (one, in fact, is downright bad); but the precise ways in which they're not very good will vary directly with how much an individual reader already knows about the extraordinary field these two books are trying to dramatize.*<sup>7</sup>

Not just professional mathematicians, but just about anyone lucky enough ever to have studied higher math understands what a pity it is that most students never pursue the subject past its introductory levels and therefore know only the dry and brutal problem-solving of Calc I or Intro Stats (which is roughly analogous to halting one's study of poetry at the level of grammar and syntax). Modern math is like a pyramid, and the broad fundament is often not fun. It is at the higher and apical levels of geometry, topology, analysis, number theory, and mathematical logic that the fun and profundity start, when the calculators and contextless formulae fall away and all that's left are pencil & paper and what gets called "genius," viz. the particular blend of reason and ecstatic creativity that characterizes what is best about the

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Vocal Travelogues, novels like Hailey's *Airport* and *Hotel* and Ed McBain's "police procedurals," began appearing in the late 50s and early 60s.

<sup>6</sup> (Q.v. here WN's marketing tag about GENIUS and MADNESS in FN4 *supra*, or UPGC's flap-copy's heavy description of the novel as "about the search for truth at all costs, and the heavy price of finding it" [*sic*].)

<sup>7</sup> In fairness to all concerned, this variability in readers' mathematical backgrounds is a problem for pretty much anyone trying to write general-interest prose about math, a problem that Hardy refers to as "... the restrictions under which I am writing. On the one hand my examples must be very simple, and intelligible to a reader who has no specialized mathematical knowledge. . . . And on the other hand my examples should be drawn from 'pukka' mathematics, the mathematics of the working professional mathematician." Note that this sort of thing is a problem even for rather more "special-interest" writing like this book review itself. Is it, for example, necessary to inform or remind the average *Science* reader that Fermat's Last Theorem (c. 1637) states that where  $n$  is an integer and  $n > 2$ , the equation  $x^n + y^n = z^n$  has no nonzero integer solutions? or that Goldbach's Conjecture (or rather the "strong" G.C. as reformulated by Leonhard Euler in 1742) is that every even integer  $\geq 4$  can be expressed as the sum of two prime numbers, etc.? As it happens, this reviewer is not certain whether it's necessary or not, and the fact that these lines have not been deleted by *Science's* editors (i.e., that you are reading them at all) may indicate that the editors are not totally sure either.

human mind. Those who've been privileged (or forced) to study it understand that the practice of higher mathematics is, in fact, an "art"<sup>9</sup> and that it depends no less than other arts on inspiration, courage, toil, etc. . . . but with the added stricture that the "truths" the art of math tries to express are deductive, necessary, *a priori* truths, capable of both derivation and demonstration by logical proof.<sup>9</sup>

It may be that mathematics is not generally recognized as one of the arts precisely because so much pyramidal training and practice is required in order to appreciate its aesthetics; math is perhaps the ultimate in acquired tastes.<sup>10</sup> And it's maybe because of math's absolute, wholly abstract Truth that so many people still view the discipline as dry or passionless and its practitioners as asocial dweebs. Some readers of *Science* will probably know all too well the frustration of trying to describe the beauty and power of Gauss's differential geometry or the Banach-Tarski Paradox to someone who remembers only the drudgery of factoring quadratic equations or the terror of a trig midterm. In fact, the weird fear and distaste that low-level math provokes in so many<sup>11</sup> is part of what makes the emergence of the Math Melodrama exciting: if the genre can find ways to vivify pure math and communicate the discipline's extraordinary beauty and passion to the average reader,<sup>12</sup> both readers and math itself stand to gain.

The ways in which Schogt's and Doxiadis's novels go about trying to humanize and animate math are also kind of similar. Besides both struggling to solve classic problems in number theory (the actual Goldbach Conjecture in UPGC, in WN a fictitious conundrum called "Beauregard's Wild Number Problem"<sup>13</sup>), the books' protagonists also both conceive of their projects almost wholly in terms of personal achievement, glory. WN's Isaac Swift, a once-promising student whose pro career has stagnated, spends much time fantasizing about solving the Wild Number Problem and having "an international symposium held in my honor . . . and, now that I was not just a mathematician, but a famous mathematician, women would suddenly find me attractive, not just eccentric or at best amusing." And UPGC's Petros

<sup>9</sup>Hardy, whose *Apology* talks about this better than anything else ever has, explains that "The mathematician's patterns, like the painter's or poet's, must be beautiful; the ideas, like the colours or the words, must fit together in a harmonious way. Beauty is the first test; there is no permanent place in the world for ugly mathematics."

<sup>9</sup> (The assumption here will be that the typical *Science* reader already knows what "a priori," "deductive truth," and "logical proof" mean and is at least roughly familiar with the relationship between pure math and formal logic . . . if for no other reason than that to gloss tangential stuff like this would take up enormous amounts of space and time and might well also alienate the (presumably large) percentage of *Science*'s readership who already know the stuff and are apt to find such glosses not only otiose but annoying—this reviewer can actually imagine such readers looking increasingly aggrieved and impatient and saying to themselves *Whom does he think he's talking to?* All this is mentioned only to underscore once again the rhetorical dickness of the whole math-prose enterprise, a dickness that lies at the very center of this review's criticisms of the actual novels to be discussed, which critical discussions are upcoming very, very shortly.)

<sup>10</sup> It's worth noting that as so much contemporary poetry, classical music, etc. become ever more abstract and involute and technically complex, their own audiences get ever smaller and more specialized. With very few exceptions, the people who truly "appreciate" a piece of language-poetry or an atonal fugue are people with extensive educations in the history and theory of these arts. And this increasing exclusivity in the U.S. arts has much less to do with good old "cultural elitism" than with our era's tendency toward greater and greater specialization—it is not at all an accident that the majority of people who read contemporary poetry are themselves contemporary poets.

<sup>11</sup>"Math Anxiety" is now a recognized term in educational psychology, and variants of the "I'm-back-in-high-school-and-sitting-in-my-AP-Calc-final-and-I've-forgotten-to-study-or-it-tums-out-all-my-pencils-have-pimento-in-them-instead-of-graphite" nightmare are so common they're almost clichés.

<sup>12</sup> "Average reader" is kind of a synecdoche for "people who read mainly for diversion or entertainment" These people are American genre fiction's basic audience. It is true that Hardy's *Apology*, as well as novels from Don DeLillo's *Rainier's Star* and Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* to Neal Stephenson's *Cryptonomicon* have already deployed higher math in interesting and significant ways—but books like these are *belle lettres*, literature, for which the audience is, again, usually small and rather specialized. Genre books are mass books and are marketed accordingly.

<sup>13</sup> The putative author of this problem, one "Anatole Millechamps de Beauregard" (b. 1791) is also fictitious, a kind of biographical hybrid of von Neumann and Galois, on whose florid life story—"Beauregard had a magnetic personality, and his appetite for wine, women and song was as great as for knowledge"; "One of Beauregard's closest friends caught him in bed with his wife. Blind with rage, he strangled them both"—WN spends most of a chapter. The specular pun of Beauregard's name, by the way, is not an accident: people in this novel are constantly saying stuff to each other like "Your findings lead directly into the high country of number theory. The view you offer is breathtaking."

Papachristos, while already a number-theorist of substantial reputation who holds an endowed chair at U. Munich, nevertheless "sought in mathematics a great, almost transcendent success, a total triumph that would bring him world fame . . . . And to be complete, this triumph should be exclusively his own." Despite their different stations and attainments, the two protagonists suffer almost identically (and at great length) from the insecurity of measuring themselves against their colleagues and the fear that someone else will solve "their" problem first (Petros actually rejoices when Srinivasa Ramanujan<sup>14</sup> dies young of tuberculosis, simply because Ramanujan's "unique intellect was the only force he considered capable of purloining his prize"). Both characters' work is characterized as an anxious race against the clock and calendar; both novels make much of the fact that pure math is a "young man's game" and that the vast majority of important mathematicians do their best work before 35.<sup>15</sup> And both heroes brood and expound at great length about the particular despair of being a good but not immortally great mathematician, i.e. a mathematician brilliant enough truly to appreciate the genius of Riemann, Euler, Poincaré *et al* but not brilliant enough to be their equal. As UPGC's Petros tells his nephew:

Take Hardy and Littlewood, top-class mathematicians both of them. They possibly made the Hall of Fame—a very large Hall of Fame, mind you—but even they did not get their statues erected at the grand entrance alongside Euclid, Archimedes, Newton, Euler, Gauss . . . . That had been my only ambition and nothing short of the proof of Goldbach's Conjecture, which also meant cracking the deeper mystery of the primes, could possibly have led me there. [sic]

while WN's Isaac Swift, quite a bit lower on the academic food chain, carps to himself almost nonstop about being ". . . well on your way to everlasting anonymity, never to be quoted and always to be seated somewhere at the back of a conference, assuming you manage to scrounge together the funds needed to attend in the first place," etc.

Interestingly, though, the most important similarity between the novels concerns the rhetorical problems of audience mentioned *supra*, while the biggest differences between WN and UPGC concern the ways the two books try to handle those problems. Oddly, the better of the two novels is also the one that seems to be the most confused and confusing about just what its audience is.

<sup>14</sup> Like many of UPGC's supporting characters, Ramanujan was a real number-theorist, an Indian savant discovered and mentored by Hardy. Robert Kanigal's *The Man Who Knew Infinity: A Life of the Genius Ramanujan* is another of the post-Fermat math-bios now on the market.

<sup>15</sup> The real source of this insight is Hardy, in his *Apology*'s famous "No mathematician should ever allow himself to forget that mathematics, more than any other art or science, is a young man's game," which UPGC's narrator rips off without any attribution at all (p. 78: "Mathematics, you see, is a young man's game. It is one of the few human endeavors where youth is a necessary requirement [sic] for greatness") Actually, this FN is probably the place to point out that Doxiadis' novel is filled with what appear to be little more than very slight rephrasings of stuff in Hardy's *Apology* and/or C.P. Snow's famous Foreword to it. Flipping through the two books at random, one might, e.g., compare UPGC's "Anybody who claims that scientists—even the purest of the pure, the most abstract, high-flying mathematicians—are motivated exclusively by the Pursuit of Truth for the Good of Mankind, either has no idea what he's talking about or is blatantly lying" with Hardy's "So if a mathematician, or a chemist, or even a physiologist, were to tell me that the driving force in his work had been the desire to benefit humanity, then I should not believe him." Or see Hardy's "Galois died at twenty-one, Abel at twenty-seven, Ramanujan at thirty-three, Riemann at forty," and UPGC's "Riemann had died at thirty-nine, Niels Henrik Abel at twenty-seven and Evariste Galois at a mere tragic twenty . . . ."; or C.P. Snow's description of the Hardy-Littlewood team as "the most famous collaboration in the history of mathematics" vs. Doxiadis's narrator calling it "one of the most renowned partnerships in the history of mathematics." On UPGC pages 129-30, Doxiadis even cribs nearly word for word a deathbed-exchange between Hardy and Ramanujan and tags it with the footnote " <sup>1</sup> Hardy also recounts the incident in his *Mathematician's Apology* without, however, acknowledging my uncle's presence," which is not only intrusive and irritating but wrong, since it is not in the *Apology* but in Snow's Foreword to it that the scene really appears.

It's hard to know just how indictable UPGC is for its reliance on Hardy. It doesn't seem like outright plagiarism, because plagiarism implies sneakiness, and Doxiadis has a fully attributed Hardy-quotation right up front as the novel's epigraph. Plus it's true that much commercial genre fiction has a long history of liberating stuff from established literary works. For the record, though, it's still one of the more irksome things about UPGC.

**The Wild Numbers**, translated from the Dutch *De wilde getallen* and its locale moved from Amsterdam to some nameless U.S. college town, is not the better novel. It's designed to be sort of a schlemiel-comedy à la Thurber's "Mitty" or Amis's *Lucky Jim*. WN's Isaac is a mediocrity who at the start of the novel is under-published and reduced to doing scutwork calculations and "refinements" for his superstar colleague Dimitri Arkanov<sup>16</sup> and at age 35 goes around saying stuff like "I felt old and depressed. There seemed to be no more room for dreams at my age. Everything was measured in terms of success and failure. . . I concluded that I was a lesser human being in every respect." His prospects suddenly change when Isaac stumbles into working on "wild numbers," which are described in the translation this way:

Beauregard had defined a number of deceptively simple operations, which, when applied to a whole number [integer?], at first resulted in fractions [rationals?]. But if the same steps were repeated often enough, the eventual outcome was once again a whole number [huh?]. Or, as Beauregard cheerfully observed: "In all numbers lurks a wild number, guaranteed to emerge when you provoke them long enough." 0 yielded the wild number 11, 1 brought forth 67, 2 itself, 3 suddenly manifested itself as 4769, 4, surprisingly, brought for 67 again.

In an all-nighter of migrainous epiphany, Swift comes to believe he's found the long-sought answer to the Wild Number Problem, which is apparently a fictional variant of number-theoretic puzzles like the Twin Primes Problem<sup>17</sup>: "How many wild numbers are there? Are there a finite number that keep coming up, and if so, how many, or are there an infinite number?" Isaac's proof that the set of all wilds is infinite (a proof which somehow involves FN16's K-reducibility and calibrator sets as well as what are called "tame" and "pseudo-wild numbers") appears at first to be sound, and it is confirmed and lauded by Arkanov and submitted to a prestigious journal, catapulting Swift into the mathematical limelight and prompting all sorts of wacky plot-complications before it is finally discovered that the proof doesn't work after all (but by which time Isaac's found true love with a caustic divorcée who's also had horrible career reverses, so everything works out OK in the end).

The major problem with *The Wild Numbers* looks at first to be artistic but is actually rhetorical. All the book's math is, as mentioned, made up, which is not necessarily a problem—all sorts of great science fiction, from Asimov to Larry Niven, is replete with fictional math and high tech. What is a problem, though, is that the fictional math in WN is extremely important but also extremely vague, comprising mostly repeated and contextless verbiage—"The trick was to construct a series of infinite sets of pseudo-wild numbers such that their intersection contained wild numbers only"; "If I could only establish its K-reducibility with the aid of a suitable calibrator set!"—without any definitions or even cursory fleshing-out, so that the book's math-speak ends up most resembling the absurd pseudo-jargon of bad old low-budget sci fi movies ("Quick, Lieutenant, prepare the antigenic nanomodule for immediate stabilization flux!"). Also vague and kind of bathetic is the novel's depiction of actual mathematical work, which Isaac Swift appears to undertake only very late at night, bleary and unshaven and trembling with fatigue, "my head buzzing with complicated reasoning that led me around in circles," "fiddling around with complex equations that only a handful of people understood."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> The work Isaac's doing for Arkanov is on "calibrator sets" and "K-reducibility," two made-up terms that figure prominently in the plot's math but are never specified or explained.

<sup>17</sup> (Here the reviewer's assumption is that if the T.P.P. is unfamiliar or the analogy unhelpful it can just be passed over with no hard feelings on either side.)

<sup>18</sup> Rather than ever being specific about what all the complicated reasoning and complex equations are, WN employs the metaphor of mountain-climbing to try to evoke and describe what it feels like to do higher math. Actually "employs" is the wrong word; the book repeats, exhausts, strip-mines the metaphor, pounding it again and again—"Every step I took, no matter how small, revealed new mountain-tops and unexpected canyons in this magnificent and bizarre region of mathematics"; "Another part of me had rushed ahead: it stood on the mountain pass, catching its breath as it watched the sun rising over a land that no human eyes had ever yet beheld"—until it becomes first grating—"Having completed the climb, we threw down our heavy backpacks and wiped the sweat from our brows. We were now standing together on the mountain pass, marvelling [*sic*] at the mathematical landscape"—and finally kind of funny—"Every time, I came tumbling back into base camp, dragging an avalanche of mistaken notions down with me."

Apart from its intrinsic weaknesses, the sketchy made-up math here clearly indicates that *The Wild Numbers* is meant to appeal mostly to readers with little or no high-math background, an audience that either won't know that the impressive-sounding terminology is fake or won't mind that the terms never get connected to each other or anything else. This, too, is not necessarily a problem; many successful books, from Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* to James Ellroy's *L.A. Confidential*, use sort of perfunctory genre-conventions as scaffolding for what are really complex and essentially human dramas (i.e., for literature). But it is true that a genre book whose particular genre-elements lack technical depth or resonance must depend, for its appeal, on other, more traditionally literary qualities like plot, character, style, etc. And this is a very real problem for WN, because as any kind of literary narrative it is off-the-charts bad, its characters mere 2D types (the neurotic schlemiel, the kindly mentor, the pompous crank, the vulpine reporter, the fiancée who Doesn't Understand) and its plot howlingly implausible (e.g., for most of the book, both Isaac and Nobel-laureate Arkanov supposedly fail to spot in Isaac's proof a basic, freshman-level logical flaw, the eventual discovery of which is sort of the novel's pie-in-the-schlemiel's-face climax). Worst, or at least most distracting, is the fact that the author-translator's English seems rudimentary at best,<sup>19</sup> and the actual line-by-line prose of WN is often so stiff and clunky—"My isolated measure was making me lose all sense of measure"; "How the tiny, quivering flame of my intuition was able to withstand the numerous onslaughts of my doubts remains a mystery to me"; "She unzipped her dress, and with a few sexy wriggles, let it slide from her shoulders"—or else riddled with ESL-ish solecisms—"She pouted her lip"; "In the distance, the three white lights of the television mast flashed on and off"; "I just don't want to stifle my thoughts to accommodate for the shortcomings of a machine"; "I found back my love for mathematics"—or unintentionally funny—"Her tongue probing deep into my mouth left little room for mathematical reflection"—or just plain bad—"They could not help but open like flowers in the brilliant sunshine of his presence, revealing their innermost secrets to him"—as to make the reader suffer that terrible, embarrassed-for-someone-else feeling on the author's behalf.<sup>20</sup>

It is true that *Uncle Petros & Goldbach's Conjecture* is also self-translated<sup>21</sup> and its prose often awkward or stilted ("The custom of this annual meeting had been initiated by my grandfather and as a consequence had become an inviolable obligation in our tradition-ridden family; "The next few days I played sick so as to be at home at the usual time of mail delivery"; "I was not made of the same mettle as he—this I realized now beyond the shadow of a doubt,"<sup>22</sup> etc.). But here the clunky English is mitigated somewhat by UPGC's Greco-European setting and the fact that much of its action takes place before 1930. The novel's framed (or "nested") structure is itself almost Victorian: the middle-aged narrator, describing in retrospect the history of his childhood relationship with his reclusive uncle, recounts Petros's own life story in a series of flashbacks "as told to him" by the great mathematician himself. The elaborate set-up and frames notwithstanding, it is Petros Papachristos's obsessive and tormented career that drives the novel and comprises its heart.

UPGC is about as far from a schlemiel-comedy as you can get. It's more like a cross between the Myth of Icarus and Goethe's *Werther*, and it's serious as a heart attack.<sup>23</sup> Born in Greece around the turn of the century, Petros Papachristos is recognized as a child math prodigy and shipped across Europe to the University of Berlin, where in 1916 he receives his doctorate with a dissertation on "solving a particular variety of differential equations" that earns young Petros early acclaim because of its applications in WWI

<sup>19</sup> (Schogt's original Dutch prose might, of course, be a thing of wonder)

<sup>20</sup> *The Wild Numbers'* American publisher seems equally culpable for the prose here. If Four Walls Eight Windows, Inc. is going to let an only semi-bilingual Philibert Schogt translate his own Dutch, why didn't the FWEW editor bother to tell him that "television mast" should be "aerial" or "transmitter," that "to pout" is intransitive and "to accommodate" takes a direct object, that phrases like "Shucks" and "city slicker" and "wine, women and song" are now not idioms but glibly clichés, or even that—no kidding—contemporary Americans do not bow to each other in formal greeting? Where was the editor? Was there an editor? Who did they think was going to read this stuff?

<sup>21</sup> (from the original *O Theios Petros kai i Eikasia tou Golbach*)

<sup>22</sup> And again: where was *this* book's editor?

<sup>23</sup> (And it's just about as subtle w/r/t its thematics, with the narrator repeatedly and *sans* irony describing his uncle as an "Ideal Romantic Hero" [caps his] and saying stuff like "Think of the biblical Tree of Knowledge or the Prometheus of mythology. People like him have surpassed the common measure; they've come to know more than is necessary to man, and for this hubris they have to pay.")

artillery targeting. It is also at U. Berlin that Petros has his first and only love affair, with his German-language tutor (a young lady by the rather unsubtle name of *Isolde*), who toys with his affections and then elopes with a Prussian officer. In not its best moment, UPGC tries to establish this (wince) *Isolde* as Petros's initial motive for tackling the Goldbach Conjecture:

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"Which is the most difficult problem in mathematics, Professor?" he asked [his U. Berlin advisor] at their next meeting, trying to feign mere academic curiosity.

Etc., whereupon Petros devotes the remainder of his professional life to the G.C., that Everest of unsolved problems. His twenty-year labor—which ends in failure and devastation—combines periods of seclusion in Germany with extended trips to Cambridge and Vienna, in which latter there are scenes of Papachristos rubbing elbows with some of 20<sup>th</sup>-century math's most important historical figures. The use of this *Forrest Gump*-ish device— i.e., of inserting actual famous mathematicians into the fiction's plot and dialogue—implies that UPGC is written for readers who are at least familiar enough with higher math to know who Hardy, Ramanujan, Gödel, and Turing were; but many of the celebrity-scenes themselves are cheesy and kind of irritating. The complex and sensitive G.H. Hardy readers know from his *Apology*, for instance, gets reduced in Doxiadis's novel to a sort of gouty old curmudgeon who spouts inanities like "Don't you forget it, Papachristos, this blasted Conjecture is *difficult!*"

Its treatment of the "real" Hardy is a good example of UPGC's particular rhetorical problem: the readers who will actually know who Godfrey Harold Hardy is are *also* the readers most likely to be put off by the way the book portrays him.<sup>24</sup> And Doxiadis's novel runs into this sort of logico-rhetorical problem again and again, because its big weakness as genre fiction is its weird, ambivalent confusion about just what kind of audience it's for.

As with Schogt's WN, there's no better instance of this confusion than the way pure math is rendered here, although in *Uncle Petros & Goldbach's Conjecture* the math is 100 percent real and intricately connected to the book's characters and themes. Petros's Herculean labors on his proof are

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But then it gets even worse. Petros supposedly rushes off to Vienna and looks up Gödel—"a thin young man of average height, with small myopic eyes behind thick glasses"—and has a soap-operatic exchange that makes the reader keep wincing on behalf of everyone involved:

"I've spent my whole life trying to prove Goldbach's Conjecture,' he told him in a low, intense voice, 'and now you're telling me it may be unprovable?"

"Gödel's pale face was now totally drained of color [*sic*].

"In theory, yes—"

"Damn theory, man!' Petros' shout made the heads of the Sacher café's distinguished clientèle [*sic*] turn in their direction. 'I need to be *certain*, don't you understand? I have a right to know whether I'm wasting my life!' He was squeezing his arm so hard that Gödel grimaced in pain. . .

"Gödel was shaking. 'I un-understand how you fe-feel, Professor,' he stammered, 'but I-I'm afraid that for the time being there is no way to answer yo-your question.'"

recounted to the reader in the form of fireside declamations to his nephew (i.e., the narrator as a child), who's enough of a mathematical epebe that Petros can plausibly keep stopping to deliver quick little mini-lectures on the history of number theory, from Euclid's *reductio* proof of the infinity of primes to the major theorems of Fermat, Euler, and Gauss on primes' distribution and succession, to the Goldbach Conjecture and his own analytic attack thereon via "the Theory of Partitions (the different ways of writing an integer as a sum)."

It gets more complicated, though, because the narrator as a grown man (i.e., the one narrating the flashbacks with Uncle P. ) now has an extensive math background, and he himself laces the novel with explanatory asides on everything from Cavafy poems to the Riemann Zeta Function. The problem is that Doxiadis's decisions about what needs explicating and what doesn't are often so inconsistent as to seem bizarre, a clear sign that he's confused about audience. It's not just that there are long and irrelevant footnotes on, e.g., Gödel's method of suicide, Poincaré's theory of the unconscious, or the novel properties of the number 1729.<sup>25</sup> It is that the narrator of UPGC will sometimes take time carefully to define very basic terms like "integers" ("the positive whole numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, etc.") and "primes" ("integers that have no divisors other than 1 and themselves, like 2, 3, 5, 7, 11"), or to include patronizing asides like "It should be pointed out to the non-specialist that mathematical [text]books cannot normally be enjoyed like novels, in bed, in the bathtub, sprawled in an easy chair, or perched on the commode"—all of which clearly imply a non-math audience—while on the other hand, UPGC is also studded with rarefied technical phrases, such as e.g. "n's ratio to the natural logarithm," "Peano-Dedekind axiomatic system," "partial differential equation in the Clairaut form," and (no kidding) "The orders of the torsion subgroups of  $\Omega$ , and the Adams spectral sequence," that are tossed around without any kind of explanation, which (especially together with the *à clef* appearances of Gödel, Littlewood, et al) seems to presume a highly math-literate reader.

And if all the narrator's strange elementary definitions are disregarded as mere slips or snafus, and one decides that UPGC's actual intended audience is one with a solid high-math background,<sup>26</sup> there remains an equally strange inconsistency. This lies in the narrative's discussions of the Goldbach Conjecture itself, and of its history in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. For one thing, UPGC makes hardly mention at all of the crucial distinction between Euler's "strong Goldbach Conjecture" (see FN7 *supra*) and the Conjecture's equally famous "weak" version, which states that all odd numbers  $\geq 9$  are the sum of three odd primes. Nor, despite all the detailed descriptions of Petros's labors and all its long excursions on pre-WWII number theory, does the novel ever once mention Euler's *phi* function (a.k.a "totient" function) or the ingenious "sieve"-type methods that real mathematicians were using to attack the G.C. in all its forms and extensions in the 1920s and 1930s. In fact, even though UPGC gives us page after page on Petros's anxiety about Ramanujan's work on the G.C. (which was in reality very slight), there's no mention of any of the actual important published results of the time—e.g. Schnirelmann's 1931 proof of the upper limit of primes an even integer can be the sum of, Estermann's 1938 proof that *almost* all even numbers are the sums of two primes,<sup>27</sup> etc. Strangest of all: Though Doxiadis's narrator spends a lot of time discussing the difference between algebraic and analytic number theory (as well as tracing out Gauss's "asymptotic" hypothesis of the Prime Number Theorem, and Hadamard and Vallée-Poussin's 1896 proof of the P.N.T. using analytic tools), there is not one reference in the book to I. M. Vinogradov, the Russian mathematician who in 1937 revolutionized analytic number theory by introducing a powerful method for getting very

<sup>25</sup> Some of these footnotes are so weird and U.S.-reader inappropriate that it's worth giving a concrete example, such as let's say p. 41's FN to a line about the narrator enrolling in a U.S. college: "According to the American system, a student can go through the first two years of university without being obliged to declare an area of major concentration for his degree or, if he does so, is free to change his mind until the beginning of the Junior (third) year," the very meaning of which is anyone's guess.

<sup>26</sup> N.B. here that the following main-text ¶ itself is geared to a very-strong-math-background audience; nobody else is going to get the ¶'s references, and this reviewer has neither the space nor the expertise to elucidate them. So feel free to skip it if you do not fit the ¶'s demographic.

<sup>27</sup> Interested *Science* readers can find a discussion of Schnirelmann's proof in W. Dunham's *Journey Through Genius: The Great Theorems of Mathematics* (Wiley, 1990) but will probably have to don a miner's helmet and go all the way back to *Proceedings of the London Mathematical Society Series* vol. 2 no. 44, 1938 for T. Estermann's "On Goldbach's Problem: Proof That Almost All Even Positive Integers are Sums of Two Primes."

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"Damn theory, man!" Petros' shout made the heads of the Sacher café's distinguished clientèle [*sic*] turn in their direction. "I need to be *certain*, don't you understand? I have a right to know whether I'm wasting my life!" He was squeezing his arm so hard that Gödel grimaced in pain. . .

"Gödel was shaking. 'I un-understand how you fe-feel, Professor,' he stammered, 'but I-I'm afraid that for the time being there is no way to answer yo-your question.'"

recounted to the reader in the form of fireside declamations to his nephew (i.e., the narrator as a child), who's enough of a mathematical ephebe that Petros can plausibly keep stopping to deliver quick little mini-lectures on the history of number theory, from Euclid's *reductio* proof of the infinity of primes to the major theorems of Fermat, Euler, and Gauss on primes' distribution and succession, to the Goldbach Conjecture and his own analytic attack thereon via "the Theory of Partitions (the different ways of writing an integer as a sum)."

It gets more complicated, though, because the narrator as a grown man (i.e., the one narrating the flashbacks with Uncle P. ) now has an extensive math background, and he himself laces the novel with explanatory asides on everything from Cavafy poems to the Riemann Zeta Function. The problem is that Doxiadis's decisions about what needs explicating and what doesn't are often so inconsistent as to seem bizarre, a clear sign that he's confused about audience. It's not just that there are long and irrelevant footnotes on, e.g., Gödel's method of suicide, Poincaré's theory of the unconscious, or the novel properties of the number 1729.<sup>25</sup> It is that the narrator of UPGC will sometimes take time carefully to define very basic terms like "integers" ("the positive whole numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, etc.") and "primes" ("integers that have no divisors other than 1 and themselves, like 2, 3, 5, 7, 11"), or to include patronizing asides like "It should be pointed out to the non-specialist that mathematical [text]books cannot normally be enjoyed like novels, in bed, in the bathtub, sprawled in an easy chair, or perched on the commode"—all of which clearly imply a non-math audience—while on the other hand, UPGC is also studded with rarefied technical phrases, such as e.g. " $n$ 's ratio to the natural logarithm," "Peano-Dedekind axiomatic system," "partial differential equation in the Clairaut form," and (no kidding) "The orders of the torsion subgroups of  $\Omega$ , and the Adams spectral sequence," that are tossed around without any kind of explanation, which (especially together with the *à clef* appearances of Gödel, Littlewood, et al) seems to presume a highly math-literate reader.

And if all the narrator's strange elementary definitions are disregarded as mere slips or snafus, and one decides that UPGC's actual intended audience is one with a solid high-math background,<sup>26</sup> there remains an equally strange inconsistency. This lies in the narrative's discussions of the Goldbach Conjecture itself, and of its history in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. For one thing, UPGC makes hardly mention at all of the crucial distinction between Euler's "strong Goldbach Conjecture" (see FN7 *supra*) and the Conjecture's equally famous "weak" version, which states that all odd numbers  $\geq 9$  are the sum of three odd primes. Nor, despite all the detailed descriptions of Petros's labors and all its long excursions on pre-WWII number theory, does the novel ever once mention Euler's *phi* function (a.k.a "totient" function) or the ingenious "sieve"-type methods that real mathematicians were using to attack the G.C. in all its forms and extensions in the 1920s and 1930s. In fact, even though UPGC gives us page after page on Petros's anxiety about Ramanujan's work on the G.C. (which was in reality very slight), there's no mention of any of the actual important published results of the time—e.g. Schnirelmann's 1931 proof of the upper limit of primes an even integer can be the sum of, Estermann's 1938 proof that *almost* all even numbers are the sums of two primes,<sup>27</sup> etc. Strangest of all: Though Doxiadis's narrator spends a lot of time discussing the difference between algebraic and analytic number theory (as well as tracing out Gauss's "asymptotic" hypothesis of the Prime Number Theorem, and Hadamard and Vallée-Poussin's 1896 proof of the P.N.T. using analytic tools), there is not one reference in the book to I. M. Vinogradov, the Russian mathematician who in 1937 revolutionized analytic number theory by introducing a powerful method for getting very

<sup>25</sup> Some of these footnotes are so weird and U.S.-reader inappropriate that it's worth giving a concrete example, such as let's say p. 41's FN to a line about the narrator enrolling in a U.S. college: "According to the American system, a student can go through the first two years of university without being obliged to declare an area of major concentration for his degree or, if he does so, is free to change his mind until the beginning of the Junior (third) year," the very meaning of which is anyone's guess.

<sup>26</sup> N.B. here that the following main-text ¶ itself is geared to a very-strong-math-background audience; nobody else is going to get the ¶'s references, and this reviewer has neither the space nor the expertise to elucidate them. So feel free to skip it if you do not fit the ¶'s demographic.

<sup>27</sup> Interested *Science* readers can find a discussion of Schnirelmann's proof in W. Dunham's *Journey Through Genius: The Great Theorems of Mathematics* (Wiley, 1990) but will probably have to don a miner's helmet and go all the way back to *Proceedings of the London Mathematical Society Series vol. 2* no. 44, 1938 for T. Estermann's "On Goldbach's Problem: Proof That Almost All Even Positive Integers are Sums of Two Primes."

accurate estimates of trigonometric sums and using it to prove the weak G.C. for sufficiently large numbers.<sup>28</sup> Historically, it is Vinogradov who would have been Petros's real rival, the "unique intellect" he really feared; and it is not Gödel's but Vinogradov's Theorem that might plausibly have caused Papachristos to despair.<sup>29</sup>

The thing to realize here is that none of these omissions would necessarily matter had not Doxiadis chosen to make UPGC so dependent on actual number-theory and real historical characters. As it stands, though, UPGC again shoots itself in the same rhetorical foot: the audience knowledgeable enough to appreciate all the "real" math and history woven into this novel is also the audience most likely to notice the strange absence in the book of so much *really* real historical work on the Conjecture. Here once again, then, is a form of the weird, contradictory-looking problem (viz., that what are necessary conditions for liking the novel are also a sufficient conditions for disliking it) which pretty much destroys this book, whose author can't decide whom he's writing for.

It would be unfair to Doxiadis, though, not to acknowledge that both his novel and its flaws are far more interesting than Schogt's WN, and moreover that UPGC does include some moving and rather lovely passages—

The loneliness of the researcher doing original mathematics is unlike any other. In a very real sense of the word, he lives in a universe that is totally inaccessible, both to the greater public and to his own immediate environment. Even those closest to him cannot partake of his joys and his sorrows in any significant way, since it is all but impossible for them to understand their content.

—as well as at least one subtheme of genuine insight and originality, one that manages to go beyond anything Hardy had to say about the tragedies of math. This particular thematic line concerns Petros' ambition and his place in the mathematical community; and its allegorical touchstone appears to be not Icarus but Minos, the Cretan king who (recall) so coveted a certain great white bull which the god Poseidon had conjured out of sea-foam to help him win the throne that Minos broke his sworn promise to return it via religious sacrifice and instead kept the bull for himself.<sup>30</sup>

It is true that doing original math is "lonely." But it is also true that professional mathematicians compose a community. The reality that Petros never seems to recognize is that the "fame and immortality" he craves will depend entirely on the value of his work to other mathematicians. The role of professional community is so important in nearly all branches of scientific endeavor, in fact, that most *Science* readers can already probably affirm and appreciate what Lewis Hyde's *The Gift* tries to convey to its own more general audience:

[T]he task of assembling a mass of disparate facts into a coherent whole clearly lies beyond the powers of a single mind or even a single generation. All such broad intellectual undertakings call for a community of scholars, one in which each individual thinker can be awash in the ideas of his comrades so that a sort of "group mind" develops, one that is capable of cognitive tasks beyond the power of any single person.

<sup>28</sup> Unless you are yourself a professional mathematician, the best place to find a non-lethal discussion of this proof (which is known in number theory as "Vinogradov's Theorem"—that's how famous this guy was) is in Section C of R.K. Guy's *Unsolved Problems in Number Theory* (Springer-Verlag, 1994).

<sup>29</sup> N.B.: End of audience-background-and-interest-restrictive main-text ¶.

<sup>30</sup> You might further recall (from, e.g., Ovid's *Metamorphoses*) that this bull ends up begetting on Minos's queen the Minotaur, a hideous teratoid monster who has to be secreted in a special labyrinth and propitiated with human flesh, and who basically symbolizes the moral rot at the heart of Minos' reign. That rot is, as Joseph Campbell describes it, a certain kind of alienated selfishness:

The return of the bull should have symbolized Minos' selfless submission to the functions of his role. By the sacrilege of the refusal of the rite [of sacrifice], however, the individual cuts himself as a unit off from the larger whole of the community. . . . He is the hoarder of the general benefit. He is the monster avid for the greedy rights of "my and mine."

Notwithstanding all the narrator's heavy declarations that "Uncle Petros' sin was Pride" and his retreat into paralyzed seclusion "a form of burnout," "scientific battle fatigue," it emerges in UPGC that the real cause of Petros's tragedy is his progressive withdrawal from the professional community as his ambition to solve the Conjecture becomes a rapacity that transforms his colleagues into first rivals and then enemies. The novel's middle sections trace this progression out nicely. It starts in Cambridge, when Petros rejects an offer of professional collaboration with Hardy and Littlewood because he fears that "Their problems would become his own and, what's worse, their fame would inevitably outshine his," and determines instead to work on the G.C. alone, withdrawing to Munich. There, over years of seclusion and nonstop work, privacy becomes secrecy, and Petros' fear and suspicion of other mathematicians approaches "... the point of paranoia. In order to avoid his colleagues' drawing conclusions from the items he withdrew from the library, he began to ... protect the book he really wanted by including it in a list of three or four irrelevant ones, or he would ask for an article in a scientific journal only in order to get his hands on the issue that also contained *another* article, the one he really wanted," etc. (Q.v. here also Petros's aforementioned "wild joy" at the death of Ramanujan.)

The real Minoan-type crisis, though, comes about halfway through the novel, when Petros achieves an important "intermediate result" in his progress toward the Conjecture—a "deep, pioneering theorem . . . which opened new vistas in the Theory of Numbers"—and has to decide what to do. Petros's internal debate about whether to publish the result (which is really an L. Hyde-vs.-Minos argument about membership in a community) is probably the novel's best moment:

Undoubtedly, its publication would secure him recognition in the mathematical world much greater than that achieved by his method for solving differential equations. In fact, it would probably catapult him to the first ranks of the small but select international community of number theorists, practically on the same level as its great stars. . . . [¶] By making his discovery public, he would also be opening the way into the [Goldbach] problem to other mathematicians who would build on it by discovering new results and expand the limits of the field in a way a lone researcher, however brilliant, could scarcely hope. The results they would achieve would, in turn, aid him in his pursuit of the proof to the Conjecture. In other words . . . , he would be acquiring a legion of assistants in his work. Unfortunately, there was another side to this coin: one of the new unpaid (also unasked for) assistants might conceivably stumble upon a better way to apply his theorem and manage, God forbid, to prove Goldbach's Conjecture before him. . . . [¶] He didn't have to deliberate long. The danger far outweighed the benefit. He wouldn't publish."

From here on, the die is cast. And because he is not a king, it is not his community but Petros himself who receives the inevitable punishment for this "hoarding of the general benefit."<sup>31</sup> What happens is that "his" unpublished result is independently discovered by another mathematician, a development Petros finds out about only years later, from Hardy, who "expressed his amazement that Petros had not been aware of this, since its publication had caused a sensation in the circles of number theorists and brought great acclaim to its young author."<sup>32</sup>

As UPGC's plot unfolds, this sort of Aesopian, reap-just-what-you-sow punishment gets inflicted on Petros again and again, worsening as each ego-blow increases his alienation and paranoia and sends him deeper into a kind of professional solipsism. Far more than any supposed misreading of Gödel's First Incompleteness Theorem, it is this solipsism that leads to Petros's "failure"—as both a mathematician and a person—and he ends up rather like Milton's Satan, not just alone but Alone, sustaining himself on the sort

<sup>31</sup> Clearly, Petros's real "sin" is not "Pride" so much as plain old selfishness, Greed. It's not clear whether UPGC's narrator truly fails to grasp this, or whether he is being presented as naïve, or whether the whole thing's just a translation problem.

<sup>32</sup> Obvious though it is, Doxiadis appears to fear that his audience won't get the compact irony here, so he has Hardy then rather sniffily advise Petros "that it might in the future be more profitable for him to stay in closer contact with his scientific colleagues."

of megalomaniacal self-pity that creative people everywhere know and dread: "I, Petros Papachristos, never having published anything of value, will go down in mathematical history—or rather will *not* go down in it—as having achieved nothing. This suits me fine, you know. I have no regrets. Mediocrity would never have satisfied me. To an ersatz, footnote kind of immortality, I prefer. . . total obscurity!" Despite the confused and confusing math-labyrinth it's hidden inside, the embedded story of Petros' fall is a kind of monstrous gem, one in whose facets readers of many different backgrounds and tastes might see parts of themselves reflected. Apparent implication: If math can be art, so sometimes can genre.

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## Math Melodrama Rings of Reality

Cheers to D. F. Wallace for his spirited, witty, and informative review of the fictional "Math Melodrama" novels by Philibert Schogt (*The Wild Numbers*) and Apostolos Doxiadis (*Uncle Petros & Goldbach's Conjecture*) (*Science's Compass*, 22 Dec., p. 2263). Cheers also to *Science* itself for conveying at some length and with considerable fidelity, through Wallace, some insights into the joys and anxieties associated with attempted sustained mathematical research.

In his review, however, Wallace slightly misrepresents the thrust of Kurt Gödel's First Incompleteness Theorem (FIT); further, Wallace uses unduly harsh language in note 17 when he criticizes Doxiadis for allowing his mathematically savvy protagonist Petros to fear that his chosen problem, the Goldbach Conjecture, may be "one of the [FIT's] formally unprovable propositions." "This is so implausible and reductive as to be almost offensive," writes Wallace. And later: "To believe that the [FIT] could apply to actual number-theoretic problems like the Goldbach Conjecture is so crude and confused that there is no way that a professional mathematician of Petros's attainments could possibly entertain [the thought]." FIT asserts that in any sufficiently rich, effectively axiomatizable first-order system ( $\mathcal{L}$ ), say first-order Peano Arithmetic, some first-order assertions will be undecidable, in the sense that they are true in some models of that system and false in others. In any given model, any (first-order) statement is true or false;

it is the challenge of mathematics to determine in specific cases just which of the two it is, using any legitimate (not necessarily first-order) methods of proof. The character Petros is worried that the Goldbach Conjecture, a first-order statement in the system  $N$  of natural numbers (this is the so-called standard model of Peano Arithmetic), might be true in  $N$  but not provable by the (permissible, first-order) methods of Peano Arithmetic. We do not know, of course, whether the Conjecture is true in  $N$  or false in  $N$  (2). But Petros's worry strikes us (at the very least) as plausible or reasonable, not as crude or confused.

Furthermore, contrary to Wallace's statement that "the formally unprovable propositions [that FIT] succeeds in deriving are all very special self-reference-type cases," by no means is every statement known to be independent of Peano Arithmetic weird, contrived, or artificial. The combinatorial statement attributed to J. Paris (3), as well as the number-theoretic statement of Goodstein's Theorem and the graph/game-theoretic statement of "Hercules and the Hydra" (4), are natural mathematical statements that are easy to formulate (in a first-order way), and they are unprovable in Peano Arithmetic but nevertheless true in  $N$ . These and other non-self-referential propositions are discussed, for example, in (5) and (6).

W. Wistar Comfort

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## References and Notes

1. Here, first-order refers to number-theoretic statements that are formulated in the logic involving the usual connectives such as "and," "or," and "not," as well as quantifiers; the latter, however, may be applied only to numbers (as opposed to sets of numbers, as in second-order arithmetic).
2. If by chance the Goldbach Conjecture should turn out to be false (in  $N$ ), it would be false in all models of Peano Arithmetic, and hence, by Gödel's Completeness Theorem, refutable in Peano Arithmetic. Hence, if the Conjecture is independent of Peano Arithmetic, then it is true in  $N$ .
3. J. Paris and L. Harrington, in *Handbook of Mathematical Logic*, J. Barwise, Ed. (North-Holland, Amsterdam, 1977), pp. 1133-1142.
4. L. A. S. Kirby and J. Paris, *Bull. London Math. Soc.* **14**, 285 (1982).
5. R. Kaye, *Models of Peano Arithmetic*, vol. 15 of *Oxford Logic Guides* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1991).
6. Z. Adamowicz and P. Zbierski, *Logic of Mathematics* (Wiley, New York, 1997).

## Response

The reviewer hereby wincingly acknowledges that Comfort and Rothmaler make a good point. It's maybe possible to niggle with them about whether Doxiadis's Petros is actually freaked about the Goldbach Conjecture's undecidability per se or rather just about the possibility that it's "true but independent"--first, because there's no evidence that Petros knows anything about different models of first-order math (the book makes it clear that he is no logician), and second, because he's too rabidly ambitious to give one fig about the Conjecture's actual truth or falsity; he cares only whether *he* can prove it with first-order deductive tools.

This bit of niggling doesn't affect the really winceworthy point of their letter, though, which is that language like "implausible and reductive" and "crude and confused" that I used to characterize Petros's reaction to the FIT is indeed "unduly harsh" and somewhat misleading. (Worse, my use of the terms "reductive" and "crude" appears itself to have been reductive/crude, so I can understand why it bothered smart readers.)

Though I am grateful that Comfort and Rothmaler have corrected a misleading description of Petros's reaction to the FIT, I believe that what they've actually done here is catch me out in a writing-and-revision error rather than in a mathematical miscue. (This is the inevitable part of the Response where your reviewer tries to offer some kind of explanation/defense for his snafu, but I'll try to keep it maximally brief.) Note 17, which is where the discussion of Petros's horror about the FIT appeared in my book review, was originally longer than it was in *Science*, and the note included stuff about a scene in Doxiadis's novel right after Petros learns about the FIT and bites his wrist in horror. In this scene, Petros actually goes to Vienna and looks up poor little agoraphobic Kurt Gödel and grabs him by the lapels and pretty much demands that K.G. tell him right there on the spot whether the Goldbach Conjecture is one of the Theorem's improvable propositions, Petros saying stuff in the scene like "Damn theory, man!...I have a right to know whether I'm wasting my life!" (1). It is one of the worst scenes in the book--incongruous, soap-operaish, unintentionally funny--and in retrospect I see now that it's really more the Petros-Gödel exchange that is "implausible...offensive," or maybe rather that I let my strong readerly dislike of that scene color the way I saw Petros's whole reaction to the FIT. The problems here were intensified when the account in note 17 of the Petros-Gödel scene got cut by the editor (2), whereupon harsh language evoked by that scene and (yes, unduly) applied to the FIT itself lost not only its proper referent but any possible indication of its real (if, yes, confused) motivation.

All that said, I still contend that the overwhelming majority of things in the book I said were silly and/or confused really are silly and/or confused. *Quandoque bonus dormitat Homerus*.

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## References and Notes

1. This scene is on pp. 140-142 of Doxiadis's *Uncle Petros & Goldbach's Conjecture* (Bloomsbury USA, New York, 2000).
2. This does not mean that errors/misrepresentations were the editor's fault or just the result of cutting. If the reviewer acquiesces to a cut, he is responsible for cleaning up any errors or incongruities that are created by the cut, and this I clearly failed to do here.

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POETRY SOCIETY OF AMERICA 15 GRAMERCY PARK NEW YORK, NY 10003 212 254-9628 FAX 212 673-2352 www.poetrysociety.org

May 24, 2001

David Foster Wallace  
RR 2 Box 361  
Bloomington, IL 61704

Dear David F. W.,

I am writing to ask you for a small contribution to *Crossroads*, the journal of the Poetry Society of America. I am instituting a feature in *Crossroads* wherein fiction writers name their favorite books of poetry. As we began to think of writers we would like to hear from for this project, your name immediately occurred to Alice Quinn and myself. Therefore, if you could send me the title of your all-time, must-have, favorite book of poetry, I would love to publish it in *Crossroads*. I will include your publications and a small photo. I hope that you have the time to do this for us.

This concludes the formal part of this letter, which I had to cut and paste in from another letter because I had no idea how to begin a letter to you. I am a great admirer, and I hope that you can help us out with this project. It is not much, but I would love to know what poetry you love and why. I cannot think of anything more to say that does not sound dopey and hero-worshipy and bad, but I may as well suck it up and say it: It is an honor to be in communication with you. I am grateful for your voice in the world, and glad that you do not mince around certain things that badly need to be said (i.e. the Harper's essay on language, *Up, Simba!*, "edge-first and splashless and sad," everything), and I am going to stop this gusher now before it gets badly out of hand.

At any rate, I wish you the best of luck, and I hope that you can make a contribution to *Crossroads*. Thanks for your time.

Yours,

Michael Haskell  
Membership Director and Programs Associate  
*Crossroads* Editor  
Poetry Society of America

PS- The computer tells me I have achieved a grade-level of 8.9 in this letter. I thought slightly less.

- 3-Way Tie:
- ① Bridges, ed. Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins.
  - ② Zbigniew Herbert, Report From Sidewind City
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This is an inducement?

Will send this part to my Mom.

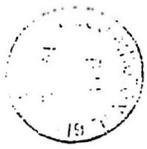
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But E.C. for sheer niceness...

*Huber*  
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Campus Box 4240  
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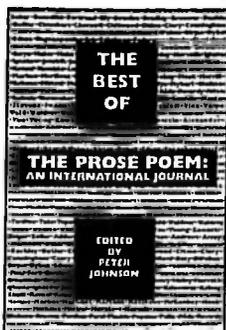
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To: Mr. Michael Haskell  
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10003

1000341705



**THE BEST OF THE PROSE POEM:  
AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL**  
edited by Peter Johnson  
White Pine Press (\$15)



by David Foster Wallace

**P**hysical dimensions of *The Best of The Prose Poem: An International Journal* anthology in cm: 15 X 22.5 X 2.

- ◆ Weight of anthology in grams: 419.
- ◆ Total # of words in anthology: 85,667.
- ◆ Total # of words devoted to actual prose poems: 69,986.
- ◆ *Rain Taxi's* length-limit for review of *Best of The P.P.*: 1,000 words.

- ◆ Form of review: indexical / statistical / schematic.
- ◆ Official name of this new, transgeneric critical form: the Indexical Book Review.

◆ Tactical reason for review form: The words preceding each item's colon technically constitute neither subjective complement nor appositive nor really any recognized grammatical unit at all; hence none of these antecolonial words should count against *R.T.'s* rigid 1,000-word limit.

- ◆ Other, better-known and/or currently fashionable transgeneric literary forms: the Nonfiction Novel, the Prose Poem, the Lyric Essay, etc.

◆ Basic aesthetic/ideological *raison d'être* of the above forms: to comment on, complicate, subvert, defamiliarize, transgress against, or otherwise fuck with received ideas of genre, category, and (especially) formal conventions/constraints. (See by analogy the historical progression *rhymed accentual-syllabic verse* → *blank verse* → *vers libre*, etc.).

◆ Big paradox/oxymoron behind this *raison* and the current trendiness of transgeneric forms: In fact, these putatively "transgressive" forms depend heavily on received ideas of genre, category, and formal conventions, since without such an established context there's nothing much to transgress against. Transgeneric forms are therefore most viable—most interesting, least fatuous—during eras when literary genres themselves are relatively stable and their conventions well-established and -codified and no one seems much disposed to fuck with them. And ours is not such an era.

From eminent prose poet Russell Edson's definition of "Prose poem" in a famous essay on the form called "Portrait of the Writer as a Fat Man: Some Subjective Ideas or Notions on the Care and Feeding of Prose Poems": "A poetry freed from the definition of poetry, and a prose free of the necessities of fiction; a personal form disciplined not by other literature but by unhappiness; thus way to be happy."

From C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon's *A Handbook to Literature, Sixth Edition's* definition of "Prose Poem": "A poem printed as prose, with both margins justified."

Obvious but crucial distinction: between a prose poem as an individual artwork and the Prose Poem as an actual literary genre.

Signs that some person/persons are trying to elevate a certain aggressive literary form or hybrid into an actual genre: Literary journals start having special issues devoted to the form, then whole new journals exclusively devoted to the form spring up

(often with the form's name somewhere in their titles), and various "Best Of" anthologies from these new journals begin hitting the market. A critical literature starts to assemble itself around the form, much of that criticism consisting in apologiae, encomiums, and (paradoxically) definitions, codifications, and lists of formal characteristics (→ conventions). Some writers start identifying themselves professionally as practitioners of the form. Finally, the form begins to get treated as a separate/special category for the purposes of book publishing, prizes and awards, academic appointments, etc.

- ◆ Within pages of *Best of The P.P.*, total number of ads for, references to, and lists of other journals/collections/articles/anthologies/presses devoted to the Prose Poem: 78.

◆ Bio-note on anthology's editor: "Peter Johnson is founder and editor of *The Prose Poem: An International Journal*. His latest books of prose poems are *Pretty Happy!* (White Pine Press, 1997) and *Love Poems for the Millennium* (Quale Press, 1998). He received an NEA for Creative Writing in 1999."

◆ From bio-notes on random *Best of The P.P.* contributors: "Ellen McGrath Smith is a Ph.D. candidate in literature at Duquesne University, where she is completing a doctoral dissertation that deals with the American prose poem."; "Mark Vinz is the author of ... a book of prose poems, *Late Night Calls*. He is also co-editor of *The Party Train: A Collection of North American Prose Poetry*, published by New Rivers Press."

◆ First sentence of Peter Johnson's Introduction to anthology: "In editing *The Best of The Prose Poem: An International Journal*, I feel humble and defensive at the same time."

◆ Total # of pages in anthology, including editor's Intro, prenominate P.P. ads and lists, and bio-notes on contributors: 288.

◆ Total # of pages devoted to actual prose poems: 227.

◆ Total # of prose poems in anthology: 204.

◆ Arrangement of constituent p.p.s: alphabetical by author.

◆ Average number of words in a constituent p.p.: 342.3 (mean), 309 (median).

◆ Longest p.p. in anthology: John Yau's "The Newly Renovated Opera House on Gilligan's Island," 1,049 words.

◆ Shortest p.p. in anthology: G. Chambers & R. Federman's "A Little Request," 53 words.

◆ Constituent p.p.s that, like "The Newly Renovated Opera House on Gilligan's Island," have titles that turn out to be way more interesting than the poems themselves: "T.S. Eliot Was a Negro," "That UFO That Picked on Us," "The Big Deep Voice of God," "The Prodigal Son Is Spotted on the Grassy Knoll," "Lullaby for the Elderly," "The Leopard's Mouth Is Dry and Cold Inside."

◆ Some random relevant questions: Are the pieces in, e.g., Lydia Davis's *Break It Down* or Diane Williams's *Excitability* prose poems? Is Eliot's "Hysteria" a prose poem? What about the three long prose pieces in Ashbery's *Three Poems*? Are the little italicized entr'actes in Hemingway's *In Our Time* prose poems? Are Kawabata's "Palm-of-the-Hand Stories"? Is Kafka's "A Little Fable"? What about Cormac McCarthy's dreamy, anapestic prologue to *Suttree*? What about the innumerable f/s in Faulkner that scan perfectly as iambic-pentameter sonnets? Why are so many tiny and self-consciously lyrical stories published these days as "short-shorts" or "flash fictions" and not as prose poems?

◆ Approximate % of *Best of The P.P.'s* 9-page Introduction that Peter Johnson spends talking about how fiendishly difficult he finds it to define "Prose Poem": 75+.

◆ Representative excerpts from this discussion: "Just as black humor straddles the fine line between comedy and tragedy, so the prose poem plants one foot in prose, the other in poetry, both heels resting precariously on banana peels"; "When I first began writing prose poems and consciously considering prose poetry as a distinct genre, I thought of the platypus, that lovable yet homely Tasmanian hybrid, but then came to see the weakness of that comparison. The platypus's genetic code is predetermined. It can't all of a sudden grow an elephant's trunk out of its backside...."

◆ From Holman and Harmon's *Handbook to Literature's* definition of "Prose Poem": "The point seems to be that a writing in prose, even the most prosaic, is a poem if the author says so."

◆ From anthology's bio-notes on contributors: (1) "Aloysius Bertrand (1807-1841) has sometimes been called 'The Father of the Modern Prose Poem,' though he never used the term to describe his own work"; (2) "Barry Silesky is the author of *One Thing That Can Save Us*, prose poems (called short-short fiction by Coffee House Press)."

◆ Of the 144 contributors to *Best of The PP*, total # who are, like M. Aloysius Bertrand, now dead: 14.

◆ Total # of contributors who have also published work in literary organ called *Flash Fiction*: 6.

◆ Total # of contributors who do/did edit literary journals, anthologies, and/or small presses: 21.

◆ Titles of published books listed in bio-note for anthology contributor Nin Andrews: *The Book of Orgasms and Spontaneous Breasts*.

◆ Average # of prose poems from each *Best of The PP* contributor: 1.42 (mean), 1.58 (median).

◆ Examples of particularly well-known or eminent contributors, with # of included p.p.s from each: Russell Edson, 7; David Ignatow, 4; Charles Simic, 4; James Tate, 4; Robert Bly, 2; Maxine Chernoff, 2; Larry Lewis, 2; Henri Michaux, 2; Stuart Dybek, 1; Bill Knott, 1; Gabriela Mistral, 1; Pablo Neruda, 1.

◆ Total # of above p.p.s that seem like they're anywhere even remotely close to their eminent contributors' best work: 3.

◆ Total # of times Peter Johnson quotes or refers to Russell Edson in his Introduction: 13.

◆ Another typical sentence from Peter Johnson's Intro: "To me, literary theory, like philosophy, provides few answers; instead, and most importantly, it creates an endless internal and external dialogue which forces us to constantly reevaluate our standards."

◆ Highest conceivable grade anthology's Introduction would receive in an average university Lit./Composition class: B-

◆ Total # of anthology's 204 prose poems that are good/alive/powerful/interesting enough to persist in reader's mind more than 60 seconds after completion: 31.

◆ Of these 31, # that are so great you end up not even caring what genre they're supposed to be part of: 9.

◆ Of these 9, # that are by one Jon Davis, a poet whom this reviewer'd never heard of before but whose pieces in this anthology are so off-the-charts terrific that the reviewer has actually gone out and bought the one Jon Davis book mentioned in his bio-note and may very well decide to try to advertise it in this magazine, at reviewer's own expense if necessary\*\*—that's how good this guy is: 5.

◆ Of the remaining 4 great pieces here, # that are by the late David Ignatow and concern his impending death and are so totally beautiful and merciless that you can't forget them even if you want to: 2.

◆ Other contributors, previously unknown to reviewer, who have good/alive/powerful/interesting pieces in anthology: Gary Fincke ("The History of Passion Will Tumble This Week"), Jennifer L. Holley ("The Rubbing"), Jay Meek ("Leaving the Roadside Motel"), Fred Muratori ("From *Nothing In the Dark*"), J. David Stevens ("The Sign"), Helen Tzagoloff ("Mail-Order Bride").

◆ Some of the common features of the 31 g/a/p/i pieces in anthology: (1) Even without line breaks or standard prosodic constraints, the p.p.s seem tightly controlled; they possess both a metrical and a narrative logic. (2) Their sentences tend to be short, almost terse. (3) Many of the p.p.s are subtly iambic; what meter and alliteration there is is unheavy and tends to make the piece read faster rather than slower. (4a) The pieces' realistic imagery is concrete, its descriptions compact and associations tautly drawn. (4b) The pieces' surreal imagery/associations never seem gratuitously weird; i.e., they end up making psychological or emotional sense given what the p.p.s about. (5) Any puns, entendres, metapoetic allusions, or other forms of jeu d'esprit come off as relevant/serious and never seem like their main purpose is to make the writer appear clever. (6) The pieces' tone tends to be intimate rather than formal (meaning, in other words, that the p.p.s exploit one of the big advantages of much good prose, which is the reader's impression of a human being actually sitting right there talking to him). (7) They all have actual narratives and/or Dramatic Situations. (8) If there's an argument, the argument is tight, comprehensible, and if not persuasive then at least interesting. (9) The good 31 are all, without exception, moving.

◆ Examples of opening lines of constituent p.p.s that have some or all of the above qualities: "Only a picture window stands between us and the full force of gusts that lift the branches of the red pine" (Thomas R. Smith's "Windy Day at Kabekona"); "It's of no consequence to the grass that it withers, secure in its identity" (David Ignatow's "Proud of Myself"); "This is not an elegy because the world is full of elegies and I am tired of consoling and being consoled" (Jon Davis's "The Bait").

◆ Total # of anthology contributors who are employed as Poet In Residence at a children's hospital: 1.

◆ # who are described in bio-note as "the *enfant terrible* of Greek Surrealism": 1.

◆ # who have the last names Johnson or Smith: 6.

◆ Total % of anthology prose poems that are primarily about death / loss / life's transience: 57.1.

◆ % about sex: 16.6.

◆ % about love: 0.2.

◆ % about cooking: 0.2.

◆ Square root of book's ISBN: 43,520.065.

◆ Of *Best of The PP*'s 173 unmemorable or otherwise ungreat prose poems, total % that deploy as topoi or include as important characteristics (1) bitter or unhappy childhood memories: 21.3; (2) an object, scene, or tableau that is described, analogized, troped, associated, and ruminated over until the establishment of its status as a metaphor seems to be the p.p.s' only real aim: 50.6; (3) references to or discussions of Poetry itself: 12.1; (4) ultra-rarified allusions to, e.g., Theophile Gautier, Paul Quéré, Sibellius's "Swan of Tuonela," etc.: 13.8; (5) heavy-handed use of anaphora, plocé, repetend, and/or alliteration: 20.7; (6) assorted jeux d'esprit whose main purpose seems to be to make the poet appear clever: 15.5; (7a) surreal/fabulist conceits and descriptions

\* [N.B.: From *The American Heritage Dictionary, Fourth Edition's* definition of "prosaic": "consisting or characteristic of prose"; "lacking in imagination and spirit, dull."]

\*\* [EDITOR'S NOTE: See Page 3, Upper Right Quadrant]

whose obvious point is the psycho-affective disorder of the modern world: 21.8; (7b) surreal/fabulist conceits and descriptions whose point or even relation to anything else in the p.p. is indiscernible: 48.3; (8a) surreal or free-associative transitions between sentences or ¶s: 51.7 ... (8b) which transitions themselves have no discernible point or resonance and make the whole p.p. seem at once pretentious and arbitrary: 46.6; and (9) just plain bad, clunky writing, no matter what genre or era it is: 51.7.

♦ Examples of above feature (9) from randomly selected anthology p.p.s: "I don't know how you feel about it, but for years and years, from the point of view of a person practicing my own, would-be benignly optimistic profession—that of a struggling manufacturer of colorful and sometimes even relatively amusing toys—I've felt that this constant placing of myself into bad moods by the conventional world, practically amounts to theft!" (Michael Benedikt's "The Toymaker Gloomy but Then Again Sometimes Happy"); "She intended to be epic with repercussions this time, so through mostly legal methods she hastened his entrapment" (Brian Swann's "The Director"); "No good, the slow resisting of rage, the kindly cupping of each hand in prayer while facing the shot-up outskirts of the town, as though to hold water out to a thirsty sniper, and see the rifle laid down, and water taken as a final covenant" (Robert Hill Long's "Small Clinic at Kilometer 7").

♦ Total # of zeros in anthology's Library of Congress Control Number: 5.

♦ Total # of postcolonial words left before RT's 1,000-word limit is exceeded: 267, minus this phrase's own 5\* words.

♦ Most common problems with the substantial % of the book's prose poems that are mediocre/bad: (1) The p.p.'s argument / theme / point / project is either too obvious or too obscure; (2) The p.p. lacks formal control, logic; it comes off flabby, arbitrary, dull—see e.g. "All over the world the shooting goes on. Then the doorbell rings and the pain is actually gone. With the notes buried in the counter's daily junk pile, you had no idea you'd even entered. Now it's another city. No paradise, but all the blood, sex, he, she, flushed away. It's not all luck" (Barry Silesky's "Saved").

♦ How problem (2) directly above is related to what reviewer sees as the most serious, paradoxical problem for the Prose Poem per se: Like all self-consciously transgressive poetic forms, the P.P. is, by both definition and intent, anti-formal. That is, it is distinguished as a form primarily by what it lacks, viz. stuff like line breaks, enjambment, formal rhyme- or metrical schemes, etc. At the same time, a prose poem very consciously calls itself a poem, which of course sends the reader a message, namely that this is a particular kind of literary art that demands a particular kind of reading—slow, careful, with extra attention paid to certain special characteristics. Not least of these special characteristics are the compression and multivalence of the poem's syntax and the particular rhythms and tensions of the poem's music. These are what give a poem the weird special urgency that both justifies and rewards the extra work a reader has to put into reading it. And see that it's nearly always formal features that create and convey this poetic urgency: e.g., the tension of the line breaks against the lines' own punctuation and meter, the use of breaks and enjambment and metrical scheme to control speed, emphasis, multivalence of expression, etc. ¶/x/t *Best of The P.P.*, the absence of formal controls seems like

the major reason why so many of its constituent p.p.s seem not just non-urgent but incoherent; most of them literally fall apart under the close, concentrated attention that poetry's supposed to demand.\*

♦ Paradoxical consequence of above paradoxical problem for the 31 p.p.s in the book that really are rich and alive and fine: It makes them seem even better. And not just better in comparison to the dross that surrounds them. It's more like the 173 mediocre/bad p.p.s here help the reader appreciate the terrible, almost impossible disadvantages of the P.P. form, which then makes the pieces from Davis, Ignatow, et al. seem less like just successes than like miracles. The experience of reading a piece like Davis's "The Frogs" or Stevens's "The Sign" or Ignatow's "My Own House," of watching the p.p. somehow achieve poetry's weird blend of logic and magic with hardly any of poetry's regular assets or tools, helps us to understand the allure of transgressive forms for writers,\*\* and maybe to remember that most formal conventions themselves start out as "experiments."

♦ Source of metaphorical description of a prose poem as "a cast-iron aeroplane that can actually fly," which image conveys the miraculous feel of the anthology's best p.p.s way better than the purely expository review ¶ just above does: Russell Edson, as duly quoted by Peter Johnson, whose Introduction however can't leave the perfect image alone to ramify in the reader's head but has to gloss it with "Edson's metaphor and his comment on literary definitions are attractive to poets because he champions the unconscious and the personal imagination in its attempt to escape literary and cultural contamination."

♦ Probability that, if this reviewer were named Peter Johnson, he would publish under either "Pete" or his first two initials: 100%.

♦ Indexical Book Review coda: Another famous R. Edson pronouncement, although this time one that P. Johnson, Ed.—for rather obvious professional reasons†—does not quote in his Introduction: "What makes us so fond of [the P.P.] is its clumsiness, its lack of expectation or ambition. Any way of writing that isolates its writer from worldly acceptance offers the greatest creative efficiency. Isolation from other writers, and isolation from easy publishing."

\* N.B. that this sort of problem is endemic to many of the trendy literary forms that identify/congratulate themselves as transgressive. And it's easy to see why. In regarding formal conventions primarily as "rules" to rebel against, the Professional Transgressor fails to see that conventions often become conventions precisely because of their power and utility, i.e., because of the paradoxical freedoms they permit the artist who understands how to use [not merely "obey"] them.

\*\* [Imagine offering a gymnast the chance to levitate and hang there unsupported, or an astronaut the prospect of a launch w/o rocket.]

† Just in case these reasons [as well as the anthology's real intended audience] are not yet obvious, q.v. the following announcement, variations of which appear in regular font on *Best of The P.P.*'s editorial page, in bold at the end of Johnson's Intro, *again* in bold in an ad for *The P.P.* after the contributors' bio-notes, and yet *again*, in a bold font so big it takes up the whole page, at the very end of the anthology:

*The Prose Poem: An International Journal* will be reading for Volume 10 between December 1, 2001 and March 1, 2002. Unsolicited work submitted before this date will be returned unread. Please include an SASE and a two-sentence biographical note. Please send no more than 3 to 5 poems. †

†† [EDITOR'S NOTE: *The Prose Poem: An International Journal* has ceased publication.] ♦

[Numerals don't count as words either, obviously.]

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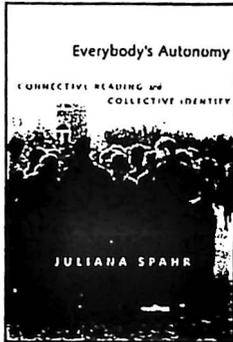
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VOICES OF AMERICA

# THE VIEW FROM

LOCATION: Bloomington, IL

DATES: II-13 Sept. 2001

SUBJECT: Obvious

CAVEAT: *Written very fast and in what probably qualifies as shock*

\*\*\*\*\*

SYNECDOCHE

**I**N TRUE MIDWEST FASHION, Bloomingtonians aren't unfriendly but do tend to be reserved. A stranger will smile warmly at you, but there normally won't be any of that strangerly chitchat in waiting areas or checkout lines. But now there's something to talk about that outweighs all reserve, like we were somehow all standing right there and just saw the same traffic accident. E.g., overheard in the checkout line at Burwell's (which is sort of the Neiman Marcus of gas station/convenience store plazas — centrally located athwart both one-way main drags, and with the best tobacco prices in town, it's a municipal treasure) between a lady in an Osco cashier's smock and a man in a dungaree jacket cut off at the shoulders to make a sort of homemade vest: "With my boys they thought it was all some movie like that *Independence Day* til then after a while they started to notice it was the same movie on all the channels." (The lady didn't say how old her boys were.)

\*\*\*  
WEDNESDAY

**E**VERYBODY HAS flags out. Homes, businesses. It's odd: You never see anybody putting out a flag, but by Wednesday morning there they all are. Big flags, small flags, regular flag-size flags. A lot of homeowners here have those special angled flag-holders by their front door, the kind whose brace takes four Phillips screws. And thousands of those little hand-held flags-on-a-stick you normally see at parades — some yards have dozens all over as if they'd somehow sprouted overnight. Rural-road people attach the little flags to their mailboxes out by the street. Some cars have them wedged in their grille or duct-taped to the antenna. Some upscale people have actual poles; their flags are at half-mast. More than a few large homes around Franklin Park or out on the east side even have enormous multistory flags hanging gonfalon-style down over their facades. It's a total mystery where people get flags this big or how they got them up there.

My own next-door neighbor, a retired CPA and vet whose home- and lawn-care are nothing short of phenomenal, has a regulation-size anodized flagpole secured in 18" of reinforced cement that none of the other neighbors like very much because they think it draws lightning. He says there's a very particular etiquette to having your flag at half-mast: You're supposed to first run it all the way up to the top and then bring it halfway down. Otherwise it's an insult or something. His flag is out straight and popping smartly in the wind. It's far and away the biggest flag on our street. You can also hear the wind in the cornfields just south; it sounds the way light surf sounds when you're two dunes back from it. Mr. N—'s flag's halyard has metal elements that clank loudly against the pole when it's windy, which is something else the other neighbors don't care for. His driveway and mine are almost side by side, and he's out here on a stepladder polishing his pole with some kind of ointment and a chamois cloth — I shit you not — and in fairness it's true that his metal pole does shine like God's own wrath.

"Hell of a nice flag and display apparatus, Mr. N—."

"Ought to be. Cost enough."

# MRS. THOMPSON'S

Journalist and novelist DAVID FOSTER WALLACE, 39, grew up in Urbana, Illinois, and lives in Bloomington. His report on John McCain's 2000 presidential campaign for "Rolling Stone" won a National Magazine Award in Feature Writing. His latest book is "Brief Interviews With Hideous Men."

"Seen all the other flags out everywhere this morning?"

This gets him to look down and smile, if a bit grimly. "Something isn't it?" Mr. N— is not what you'd call the friendliest next-door neighbor. I really only know him because his church and mine are in the same softball league, for which he serves with immense precision as his team's statistician. We are not close. He's nevertheless the first one I ask:

"Say Mr. N—, suppose somebody like a foreign person or TV reporter were to come by and ask you to say what the purpose of all these flags everywhere after the Horror and everything yesterday was, exactly — what do you think you'd say?"

"Why" (after a brief interval of giving me the same sort of look he usually gives my lawn) "to show our support and empathy in terms of what's going on, as Americans."

The point being that on Wednesday here there's a weird accretive pressure to have a flag out. If the purpose of a flag is to make a statement, it seems like at a certain point of density of flags you're making more of a statement if you don't have one out. It's not totally clear what statement this would be. What if you just don't happen to have a flag? Where has everyone gotten these flags, especially the little ones you can put on your mailbox? Are they all from July 4th and people just save them, like Christ-

mas ornaments? How do they know to do this? Even a sort of half-collapsed house down the street that everybody thought was unoccupied has a flag in the ground by the driveway.

The Yellow Pages have nothing under Flag. There's actual interior tension: Nobody walks by or stops their car and says, "Hey, your house doesn't have a flag," but it gets easier and easier to imagine people thinking it. None of the grocery stores in town turn out to stock any flags. The novelty shop downtown has nothing but Halloween stuff. Only a few businesses are open, but even the closed ones are displaying some sort of flag. It's almost surreal. The VFW hall is a good bet, but it can't open til noon if at all (it has a bar). The lady at Burwell's references a certain hideous Qik-n-EZ store out by I-74 at which she was under the impression she'd seen some little plastic flags back in the racks with all the bandannas and Nascar caps, but by the time I get there they turn out to be gone, snapped up by parties unknown. The reality is that there is not a flag to be had in this town. Stealing one out of somebody's yard is clearly out of the question. I'm standing in a Qik-n-EZ afraid to go home. All those people dead, and I'm sent to the edge by a plastic flag. It doesn't get really bad until people ask if I'm OK and I have to lie and say it's a Benadryl reaction (which in fact can happen). . . . Until in one more of the Horror's weird twists of fate and circumstance it's the Qik-n-EZ proprietor himself (a Pakistani, by the way) who offers solace and a shoulder and a strange kind of unspoken understanding, and who lets me go back and sit in the stock room amid every conceivable petty vice and legitimate America has to offer and compose myself, and who only slightly later, over styrofoam cups of a strange kind of tea with a great deal of milk in it, suggests, gently, construction paper and "Magical Markers," which explains my now-beloved homemade flag.

\*\*\*

## AERIAL & GROUND VIEWS

**B**LOOMINGTON IS A CITY of 65,000 in the central part of a state that is extremely flat, so that you can see the town's salients from very far away. Three major interstates converge here, and several rail lines. The town's almost exactly halfway between Chicago and St. Louis, and its origins involve being a big train depot. It has a smaller twin city, Normal, that's built around a university and a slightly different story. Both towns together are like 120,000.

As Midwest cities go, the only remarkable thing about Bloomington is its prosperity. It's recession-proof. Some of this is due to the country's land, which is world-class fertile and so expensive you can't even find out how much it costs. But Bloomington is also the national HQ for State Farm, which is the great dark god of consumer insurance and for all practical purposes owns the town, and because of which Bloomington's east side is all smoked-glass complexes and Build-To-Suit developments and a six-lane beltway of malls and franchises that's killing the old downtown, plus a large and ever-wider split between the town's two basic classes and cultures, so well and truly symbolized by the SUV and pickup truck,<sup>2</sup> respectively.

Winter here is a pitiless bitch, but in the warm months Bloomington's a little like a seaside community except the ocean here is corn, which grows stereoidically and stretches to the earth's curve in all directions. The town itself in summer is intensely green — streets bathed in tree-shade and homes' explosive gardens

<sup>2</sup> Despite some people's impression, the native accent isn't Southern but simply rural, whereas corporate transplants have no accent at all (in Mrs. Bracco's phrase, State Farm people "sound like the folks on TV").

\* Plus selected other responses from various times during the day's flag-and-Magic-Marker-hunt when circumstances allowed the question to be asked without one seeming like a smart-ass or loon:

"To show we're Americans and not going to bow down to anybody."

"The flag is a pseudo-archetype, a reflexive semion designed to pre-empt and negate the critical function" (grad student).

"For pride."

"What they do is symbolize unity and that we're all together behind the victims in this war. That they've fucked with the wrong people this time."

and area-code-size parks and golf courses you almost need eye-protection to look at, and row upon row of broad weedless fertilized lawns all lined up flush to the sidewalk with special edging tools. (People here are deeply into lawn-care; my neighbors tend to mow about as often as they shave.) To be honest, it can be a little creepy, especially in high summer when nobody's out and all that green just sits in the heat and seethes.

Like many Midwest towns, B-N is lousy with churches: four full pages in the phone book. Everything from Unitarian to bug-eyed Pentecostal. There's even a church for agnostics. Except for church — plus I suppose your basic parades, fireworks and a couple corn festivals — there isn't much public community. Everybody pretty much has his family and neighbors and tight little circle of friends. By New York standards folks keep to themselves.\* They play golf and grill out and go to mainstream movies.

... And they watch massive, staggering amounts of TV. I'm not just talking about the kids. Something that's obvious but still crucial to keep in mind re: Bloomington and the Horror is that reality — any really felt sense of a larger world — is televisual. New York's skyline, for instance, is as recognizable here as any place else, but what it's recognizable from is TV. TV's also more social here than on the East Coast, where in my experience people are almost constantly leaving home to go meet other people face-to-face in public places. There don't tend to be parties or mixers per se here; what you do in Bloomington is all get together at somebody's house and watch something.

Here, therefore, to have a home without a TV is to become a kind of constant and Kramer-like presence in others' homes, a perpetual guest of folks who can't understand why you would choose not to have a TV but are completely respectful of your need to watch TV and offer you access to their TV in the same instinctive way they'd bend to lend a hand if you tripped in the street. This is especially true of some kind of must-see, Crisis-type situation like the 2000 election snafu or this week's Horror. All you have to do is call somebody you know and say you don't have a TV: "Well shoot, boy, get over here."

TUESDAY

**T**HERE ARE MAYBE ten days a year when it's gorgeous here, and this is one of them. It's clear and temperate and wonderfully dry after several straight weeks of what felt like living in somebody's armpit. It's just before serious harvesting starts, when the pollen's at its worst; a good percentage of the city is stoned on Bensdryl, which as you probably know tends to give the early morning a kind of dreamy, under-water quality. Timewise, we're an hour behind the East Coast. By 8:00 everybody with a job is at it, and just about everybody else is home drink-

ing coffee and blowing their nose and watching Today or one of the other A.M. shows that broadcast (it goes without saying) from New York. At 8:00 I personally was in the shower trying to listen to a Bears postmortem on WSCR sports radio in Chicago.

The church I belong to is on the south side of Bloomington, near where I live. Most of the people I know well enough to ask if I can come over and watch their TV are members of my church. It's not one of those Protestant churches where people throw Jesus's name around or talk about the End Times, which is to say that it's not loony or vulgar, but it's fairly serious, and people in the congregation get to know each other well and to be pretty tight. Most of the congregants are working-class or retirees; there are some small-business owners. A fair number are veterans or have kids in the military or — especially — the various Reserves, because for many of these families that's simply what you do to pay for college.

The house I end up sitting with clots of dried shampoo in my hair watching most of the actual unfolding Horror at belongs to Mrs. Thompson,<sup>1</sup> who is one of the world's cooler 74-year-olds and exactly the kind of person who in an emergency even if her phone is busy you know you can just come on over. Her house is about a mile away, on the other side of a mobile home park. The streets are not crowded but they're not yet as empty as they're going to get. Mrs. Thompson's is a tiny immaculate one-story home that on the West Coast would be called a bungalow and on the south side of Bloomington is simply called a house. Mrs. Thompson is a longtime church member and a leader in the congregation, and her living room tends to be kind of a gathering place. She's also the mom of one of my best friends here, F—, who was a Ranger in Vietnam and got shot in the knee and now works kind of unhappily for a contractor installing Victoria's Secret franchises in malls. He's in the middle of a divorce (long story) and living with Mrs. T. while the court decides on the disposition of his house. F— is one of those for-real combat veterans who doesn't talk about the war or even belong to the VFW but is sometimes somber in a haunted way, and always goes quietly off to camp by himself over Memorial Day weekend, and you can tell that he carries some very heavy shit in his head. Like most construction guys he has to get to his job site early and was long gone by the time I got to his mom's, which was just after the second plane hit the South Tower, meaning probably around 8:10. In retrospect, the first sign of shock was the fact that I didn't ring the bell but just came on in, which normally here one would never do. Thanks to her son's trade connections, Mrs. T. has a 42" flat-panel Philips TV on which Dan Rather appears for a second in shirtsleeves with his hair slightly mussed. (People in Bloomington seem overwhelmingly to prefer CBS News; it's unclear why.) Several other ladies from church are already over here, but I don't know if I ex- [Cont. on 132]

† EDITOR'S NOTE: SOME NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED, AND SOME DETAILS HAVE BEEN ALTERED.

\* The native term for conversation is *whin*.



The Science Part.

... science. But to ask a that  
 ... the world's cooler 74-year-olds  
 ... the kind of person who in an emergency  
 ... the various Reserves, because  
 ... the actual unfolding Horror at belongs to Mrs. Thompson,<sup>1</sup>

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SALT LAKE 2002



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## WALLACE

[Cont. from 95] changed greetings with anyone because I remember when I came in everybody was staring in transfixed horror at one of the very few pieces of video CBS never reran, which was a distant wide-angle shot of the North Tower and its top floors' exposed steel lattice in flames and of dots detaching from the building and moving through smoke down the screen, which then that jerky tightening of the shot revealed to be actual people in coats and ties and skirts with their shoes falling off as they fell, some hanging onto ledges or girders and then letting go, upside-down or writhing as they fell and one couple almost seeming (unverifiable) to be hugging each other as they fell all those stories and shrank back to dots as the camera then all of a sudden pulled back to the long view — I have no idea how long the clip took — after which Rather's mouth seemed to move for a second before any sound emerged, and everyone in the room sat back and looked at one another with expressions that seemed somehow both childlike and horribly old. I think one or two people made some sort of sound. It's not clear what else to say. It seems grotesque to talk about being traumatized by a video when the people in the video were dying. Something about the shoes also falling made it worse. I think the older ladies took it better than I did. Then the hideous beauty of the rerun clip of the second plane hitting the tower, the blue and silver and black and spectacular orange of it, as more little moving dots fell. Mrs. Thompson was in her chair, which is a rocker with floral cushions. The living room has two other chairs, and a huge corduroy sofa that F— and I had had to take the front door off its hinges to get in the house. All the seats were occupied, meaning five or six other people, most women, all over fifty, and there were more voices in the kitchen, one of which was very upset-sounding and belonged to the psychologically delicate Mrs. R—, who I don't know very well but is said to have once been a beauty of great local repute. Many of the people are Mrs. T.'s neighbors, some still in robes, and at various times people leave to go home and use the phone and come back, or leave altogether (one younger lady went to go get her children out of school), and other people come. At one point, around the time the South Tower was falling so perfectly-seeming down into itself — I remember thinking it was falling sort

of the way an elegant lady faints, but it was Mrs. Bracero's normally pretty much useless and irritating son, Duane, who pointed out that what it really looked like is if you took some film of a NASA liftoff and ran it backward, which now after several re-viewings does seem dead-on — there were at least ten people in the house. The living room was dim because in the summer everyone keeps their drapes pulled.\*

Is it normal not to remember things very well after only a couple days, or at any rate the order of things? I know at some point for a while there was the sound of somebody mowing his lawn, which seemed totally bizarre, but I don't remember if anyone said anything. Sometimes it seems like nobody speaks and sometimes like everybody's talking at once. There's also a lot of telephonic activity. None of these women carry cell phones (Duane has a pager whose point is unclear), so it's just Mrs. T.'s old wall-mount in the kitchen. Not all the calls make rational sense. One side effect of the Horror seems to be an overwhelming desire to call everybody you love. It was established early on that you couldn't reach New York; 212 yields only a weird whooping sound. People keep asking Mrs. T.'s permission until she tells them to knock it off and for heaven's sake just use the phone. Some of the ladies reach their husbands, who are apparently all gathered around TVs and radios at their workplaces; for a while bosses are too shocked to think to send people home. Mrs. T. has coffee on, but another sign of Crisis is that if you want some you have to get it yourself — usually it just sort of appears. From the door to the kitchen I remember seeing the second tower fall and being confused about whether it was a replay of the first tower falling. Another thing about the hay fever is that you can't ever be totally sure someone's crying, but over the two hours of first-run Horror, with bonus reports of the crash in PA and Bush getting rushed to a secret SAC bunker and a car-bomb that's gone off in Chicago (the latter

then retracted), pretty much everybody either cries or not, according to his or her relative abilities. Mrs. Thompson says less than almost anybody. I don't think she cries, but she doesn't rock her chair as usual, either. Her first husband's death was apparently sudden and grisly, and I know at times during the war F— would be in the field and she wouldn't hear from him for weeks at a time and had no idea whether he was even alive. Duane Bracero's main contribution is to keep iterating how much like a movie it is. Duane, who's at least 25 but still lives at home while supposedly studying to be an arc welder, is one of these people who always wear camouflage T-shirts and paratrooper boots but would never dream of actually enlisting (as, to be fair, neither would I). He has also kept his hat on in Mrs. Thompson's house. It always seems to be important to have at least one person to hate.

It turns out the cause of poor old tendency Mrs. R—'s meltdown in the kitchen is that she has a grandniece or something who's doing some kind of internship at Time, Inc. in the Time Life Bldg or whatever it's called, about which Mrs. R— and whoever she's managed to call know only that it's a vertiginously tall skyscraper someplace in New York, and she's out of her mind with worry, and two other ladies have been out here the whole time holding both her hands and trying to decide whether they should call a doctor (Mrs. R— has kind of a history), and I end up doing pretty much the only good I do all day by explaining to Mrs. R— where midtown is. If thereupon emerges that none of the people here I'm watching the Horror with — not even the few ladies who'd gone to see *Cats* as part of some group tour thing through the church in 1991 — have even the vaguest notion of Manhattan's layout and don't know, for example, how far south the financial district and Statue of Liberty are; they have to be shown via pointing out the water in the foreground of the skyline they all know so well (from TV).

This is the beginning of the vague but progressive feeling of alienation from these good people that builds throughout the part of the Horror where people flee rubble and dust. These ladies are not stupid, or ignorant. Mrs. Thompson can read both Latin and Spanish, and Ms. Voigtlander is a certified speech therapist who once explained to me that the strange gulping sound that makes Tom Brokaw so distracting to listen to is an actual speech impediment

\* Mrs. T.'s living room is prototypical working-class Bloomington sue, by the way: double-pane windows, white Sears curtains w/ valance, catalogue clock with a background of mallards, magazine rack with *CSM* and *Reader's Digest*, inset bookshelves used for Franklin collectibles and framed photos of relatives and their families, two small tattered knit lampshades w/ the "Decidrate" and *Prayer of St. Francis*, antimacassar on every good chair and neutral, well-to-do carpeting so thick that you can't see your feet (people take their shoes off at the door; it's basic common courtesy)

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O. Henry Prize Stories 2002 Contributor Notes about "Good Old Neon"

"Is it Didion who has that thing about writers always selling somebody out? Or is it Pauline Kael? I always have trouble keeping these two straight, which is strange, since they're about as dissimilar as you can get."

"Save up to 50%—and More!" Between you and I. On accident. Somewhat of a. Kustom Kar Kite Autowash. "The cause was due to numerous factors." "Orange Crush—A Taste That's All It's Own." "Vigorex: Helping men conquer sexual issues." "Equal numbers of both men and women oppose the amendment." Feedback. "As drinking water becomes more and more in short supply." "IMATION—Borne of 3M Innovation." Point in time. Time frame. "At this point in time, the individual in question was observed, and subsequently apprehended by authorities." "Here for you, there for you." Fail to comply with for violate. Comprised of. From whence. Quate for quotation. Nauuseou for nauseated. Besides the point. To mentor, to parent, to partner. To partner. To partner. To partner. Parameters for limits and options for choices and viable options for options and workablesolution for solution. In point of fact. Prior to this time. At this point in the time frame. Serves to. Tends to be. Convince for persuade. Append for attach, portion for part. Commence, cease. Expedite. Request for ask. Eventuate for happen. Subsequent to this time. Productive. Facilitate. Aid in. Utilize. Derimental. Equates with. In regards

Between you and I?

to. Tragic, tragedy. Grow as transitive. Keep for stay. "To demonstrate the power of Epson's new Stylus Color Inkjet Printer with 144.0 d.p.i., just listen!" Could care less. Issues, core issues. Fellow colleagues. Goal-oriented. Resources. Unproductive. Feelings. Share for speak. Nurture, empower, recover. Valid for true. Authentic. Productive, unproductive. "I choose to view my opponent's negative attacks as unproductive to the real issues facing the citizens of this campaign." Incumbent upon. Mandate. Plurality. Per anum. Consecutive adverbs in general. Instantaneous. Quality as adj. Proactive. Proactive Mission-Statement. Positive feedback. A positive role-model. Compensation. Validation. As for example. True facts are often impactful. "Call now for your free gift!" I only wish. Not too good of a. Pay the consequences of. At this juncture. "Third-leading cause of death of both American men and women." To reference. To process. The process. The healing process. The grieving process. "Processing of feelings is a major component of the grieving process." Commensurate. "Till the stars fall from the sky/For you and I." Working together. Efficacious, effectual. Lifestyle. This phenomena, these criterion. Irregardless. If for whether. "Both sides are working together to achieve a workable consensus." Functional, dysfunctional. Family of origin. S.O. To nest. Relationship. Merge together. KEEP IN LANE. Whomever wants it. "My wife and myself wish to express our gratitude and thanks to you for being here to support us at this difficult time in our life." Eventuate. Diversity. Quality time. Values, family values. To conference. "French provincial twin bed with canopy and box spring, \$150." Take a wait-and-see attitude. Cum-N-Go Quik Mart. Travelodge. Self-confessed. Precise estimate.



# Tense Present

## Democracy, English, and the Wars over Usage

BY DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

presways are reflective of its still being had out there." Budget. EZPAY. RENTDOWN. MENS' ROOM. LADY'S ROOM. Individual for person. Whom for who, that for who. "The accident equated to a lot of damage." /pse ditte. Falderol. "Waiting on" is a dialectical locution on the rise and splitting its meaning. "Staunch the flow. A.M. in the morning. Forte as 'forté.' Advice. Most especially. Sum total. Final totals. Complete dearth. "You can donate your used car or truck in any condition." "DiBlasi" work shows how sex can bring people together and pull them apart." "Come in and take advantage of our knowledgeable staff." "We get the job done, not make excuses." "Chances of rain are prevalent." "National Highway Traffic Safety Administration Rule and Regulation Amendment" Task Force. Further for farther. "The Fred Pryor Seminar has opened my eyes to better time management techniques. Also it has given real life situations and how to deal with them effectively." Hands-on, can-do. "Each of the variants indicated in boldface type count as an entry." Visualization. "Insert and tighten metric calibrated hexscrews (K) into arc (C) comprised of intersecting vertical pieces (A) along transverse section of Structure. (see Diagram for #3-4inv.)" Creative, creativity. To message, to send a message, to bring our message to. To reach out to. Context. Straightlaced. A factor, a decisive factor. Myriads of decisive factors. "It is a federal requirement to comply with all safety regulations on this flight." In this context, of this context. On a \_\_\_ly basis. From the standpoint of. Contextualization. Within the parameters of this context. Decontextualization. Defamiliarize. Orientated. "The artist's employment of a radical visual idiom serves to decontextualize both conventional modes of representation and the patriarchal contexts on which such traditional hegemonic notions as representation, tradition, and even conventional contextualization have come to be seen as depending for their privileged status as aestheto-interpretive mechanisms." I don't feel well and hope I recoup. "As parents, the responsibility of talking to your kids about drugs is up to you." Who would of thought? Last and final call. As to. Achieve. Achievement. Competitive. Challenge, challenged, challenges. Excellence. Pursuit of a standard of total excellence. An astute observance. Misrepresent for lie. A longstanding tradition of achievement in the arena of excellence. "All copier stores are not the same." Visible to the eye. Which for that, I for me. That which. In regards to. Data as singular, media as singular, graffiti as singular. Remain for stay. On-task. Escalate as transitive. Closure. Community. "Iran must realize that it cannot flout with impunity the expressed will and law of the world community." Community support. Community-based. Broad appeal. Rally support. Outpourings of support. "Tried to lay the cause at the feet of Congress." Epidemic proportions. Proportionate response. Feasibility. "This anguishing national ordeal." Bipartisan, non-partisan. Widespread outbreaks. To appeal to. To impact. Author's Foreword. Hew and cry. From this aspect. Hayday. Appropriate, inappropriate. Contingency. Contingent upon. Every possible contingency. Audible to the ear. As for since. Palpably. "The enormity of his accomplishment." Frigid temperatures. Loud volume. Surrounding on all sides, my workable options are at this time few in number. Chaise longue, nautical, deep-seeded, bed-room suit, reek havoc. Her ten-year rein stop the competition. The reason is because the still continues to hue (to) the basic fundamentals. Ouster. Lucrative salaries, expensive prices. Forbear for forbear, forgo for forgo. Breach of conduct. Award for meretricious service. Substantiate, unsubstantiated, substantial. Relected to another term. Fulsome praise. Service. Public service. "A tradition of servicing your needs." A commitment to accountability in a lifetime of public service. As best as we can. WAVE ALL INTEREST FOR 90 DAYS "But I also want to have—the president that protects the rights of, of people to, to have arms. And that—so you don't go so far that the legitimate rights on some legislation are, are, you know, impinged on." "Dr. Charles Friesel." Conflict. Conflict-resolution. The mutual advantage of both sides in this widespread conflict. "We will make a determination in terms of an appropriate response." Future plans. Don't go there! PLEASE WAIT HERE UNTIL NEXT AVAILABLE CLERK. I thought to myself. Fellow countrymen. "Your efforts to recover from the experience of growing up in an alcoholic family may be very difficult and threatening for your family to hear about and accept, especially if they are still in the midst of their own survival." Misappropriate for steal. Notorious. I'll be there momentarily. At some later point in time. I'm not adverse to that. "Hello-o?" Have a good one. Luu Ya. )

### Not too good of a

appropriate, inappropriate. Contingency. Contingent upon. Every possible contingency. Audible to the ear. As for since. Palpably. "The enormity of his accomplishment." Frigid temperatures. Loud volume. Surrounding on all sides, my workable options are at this time few in number. Chaise longue, nautical, deep-seeded, bed-room suit, reek havoc. Her ten-year rein stop the competition. The reason is because the still continues to hue (to) the basic fundamentals. Ouster. Lucrative salaries, expensive prices. Forbear for forbear, forgo for forgo. Breach of conduct. Award for meretricious service. Substantiate, unsubstantiated, substantial. Relected to another term. Fulsome praise. Service. Public service. "A tradition of servicing your needs." A commitment to accountability in a lifetime of public service. As best as we can. WAVE ALL INTEREST FOR 90 DAYS "But I also want to have—the president that protects the rights of, of people to, to have arms. And that—so you don't go so far that the legitimate rights on some legislation are, are, you know, impinged on." "Dr. Charles Friesel." Conflict. Conflict-resolution. The mutual advantage of both sides in this widespread conflict. "We will make a determination in terms of an appropriate response." Future plans. Don't go there! PLEASE WAIT HERE UNTIL NEXT AVAILABLE CLERK. I thought to myself. Fellow countrymen. "Your efforts to recover from the experience of growing up in an alcoholic family may be very difficult and threatening for your family to hear about and accept, especially if they are still in the midst of their own survival." Misappropriate for steal. Notorious. I'll be there momentarily. At some later point in time. I'm not adverse to that. "Hello-o?" Have a good one. Luu Ya. )

David Foster Wallace is a contributing editor to Harper's Magazine and the author of the novel Infinite Jest and other works. His most recent piece for this magazine, "Brief Interviews with Hideous Men," appeared in the October 1998 issue.

Discussed in this essay:

*A Dictionary of Modern American Usage*, by Bryan A. Garner. Oxford University Press, 1998. 723 pages. \$35.

*A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, by H. W. Fowler. Oxford University Press, 1926. Rev. by Sir Ernest Gowers, 1965. 725 pages.

*The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language*, by Steven Pinker. William Morrow and Company, 1994. 494 pages.

*Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*, E. W. Gilman, ed. Merriam-Webster Inc., 1989. 978 pages.

*Usage and Abuse: A Guide to Good English*, by Eric Partridge. Hamish Hamilton, 1957. 392 pages.

*Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language*, Philip Gove, ed. G. & C. Merriam Company, 1961. 2,662 pages.

*Dilige et quod vis fac.*

—ST. AUGUSTINE

**D**id you know that probing the seamy underbelly of U.S. lexicography reveals ideological strife and controversy and intrigue and nastiness and fervor on a nearly hanging-chad scale? For instance, did you know that some modern dictionaries are notoriously liberal and others notoriously conservative, and that certain conservative dictionaries were actually conceived and designed as corrective responses to the "corruption" and "permissiveness" of certain liberal dictionaries? That the oligarchic device of having a special "Distinguished Usage Panel . . . of outstanding professional speakers and writers" is an attempted compromise between the forces of egalitarianism and traditionalism in English, but that most linguistic liberals dismiss the Usage Panel as mere sham-populism?

Did you know that U.S. lexicography even had a seamy underbelly?

**T**he occasion for this article is Oxford University Press's semi-recent release of Bryan A. Garner's *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage*. The fact of the matter is that Garner's

dictionary is extremely good, certainly the most comprehensive usage guide since E. W. Gilman's *Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*, now a decade out of date.<sup>1</sup> Its format, like that of Gilman and the handful of other great American usage guides of the last century, includes entries on individual words and phrases and expostulative small-cap MINI-ESSAYS on any issue broad enough to warrant more general discussion. But the really distinctive and ingenious features of *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* involve issues of rhetoric and ideology and style, and it is impossible to describe why these issues are important and why Garner's management of them borders on genius without talking about the historical context<sup>2</sup> in which ADMAU appears, and this context turns out to be a veritable hurricane of controversies involving everything from technical linguistics to public education to political ideology, and these controversies take a certain amount of time to unpack before their relation to what makes Garner's usage guide so eminently worth your hard-earned reference-book dollar can even be established; and in fact there's no way even to begin the whole harrowing polymeric discussion without taking a moment to establish and define the highly colloquial term SNOOT.

From one perspective, a certain irony attends the publication of any good new book on American usage. It is that the people who are going to be interested in such a book are also the people who are least going to need it, i.e., that offering counsel on the finer points of U.S. English is Preaching to the Choir. The relevant Choir here comprises that small percentage of American citizens who actually care about the current status of double modals and ergative verbs. The same sorts of people who watched *Story of English* on PBS (twice) and read W. Safire's column with their half-caff every Sunday. The sorts of people who feel that special blend of wincing despair and sneering superiority when they see EXPRESS LANE—10 ITEMS OR LESS or hear *dialogue* used as a verb or realize that the founders of the Super 8 motel chain must surely have been ignorant of the meaning

### Precise estimate

comprehensive and good, but its emphasis is on British usage.)

<sup>2</sup> Sorry about this phrase; I hate this phrase, too. This happens to be one of those very rare times when "historical context" is the phrase to use and there is no

equivalent phrase that isn't even worse. (I actually tried "lexical-temporal backdrop" in one of the middle drafts, which I think you'll agree is not preferable.)

### INTERPOLATION

The above ¶ is motivated by

the fact that this reviewer almost always sneers and/or winces when he sees "historical context" deployed in a piece of writing and thus hopes to head off any potential sneers/winces from the reader here, especially in an article about felicitous usage.

<sup>1</sup> With the advent of online databases, Garner has access to far more examples of actual usage than did Gilman, and he deploys them to great effect. (FYI, Oxford's 1996 *New Fowler's Modern English Usage* is also extremely

of *suppurate*. There are lots of epithets for people like this—Grammar Nazis, Usage Nerds, Syntax Snobs, the Language Police. The term I was raised with is SNOOT.<sup>3</sup> The word might be slightly self-mocking, but those other terms are outright dysphemisms. A SNOOT can be defined as somebody who knows what *dysphemism* means and doesn't mind letting you know it.

I submit that we SNOOTS are just about the last remaining kind of truly elitist nerd. There are, granted, plenty of nerd-species in today's America, and some of these are elitist within their own nerdy purview (e.g., the skinny, carbuncular, semi-autistic Computer Nerd moves instantly up on the totem pole of status when your screen freezes and now you need his help, and the bland condescension with which he performs the two occult keystrokes that unfreeze your screen is both elitist and situationally 'valid'). But the SNOOT's purview is interhuman social life itself. You don't, after all (despite withering cultural pressure), have to use a computer, but you can't escape language: Language is everything and everywhere; it's what lets us have anything to do with one another; it's what separates us from the animals; Genesis 11:7-10 and so on. And we SNOOTS know when and how to hyphenate phrasal adjectives and to keep participles from dangling, and we know that we know, and we know

how very few other Americans know this stuff or even care, and we judge them accordingly.

In ways that certain of us are uncomfortable about, SNOOTS' attitudes about contemporary usage resemble religious/political conservatives' attitudes about contemporary culture:<sup>4</sup> We combine a missionary zeal and a near-natural faith in our beliefs' importance with a curmudgeonly hell-in-a-handbasket despair at the way English is routinely manhandled and corrupted by supposedly educated people. The Evil is all around us: boners and clunkers and solecistic howlers and bursts of voguish linguistic methane that make any SNOOT's cheek twitch and forehead darken. A fellow SNOOT I know likes to say that listening to most people's English feels like watching somebody use a Stradivarius to pound nails. We's are the Few, the Proud, the Appalled at Everyone Else.

#### THIS STATEMENT FOR WHOLE ARTICLE

Issues of tradition vs. egalitarianism in U.S. English are at root political issues and can be effectively addressed only in what this article hereby terms a "Democratic Spirit." A Democratic Spirit is one that combines rigor and humility, i.e., passionate conviction plus sedulous respect for

KEEP IN LANE

<sup>3</sup> SNOOT (n) (*highly colloq*) is this reviewer's nuclear family's nickname à clef for a really extreme usage fanatic, the sort of person whose idea of Sunday fun is to look for mistakes in Saffire's column's prose itself. This reviewer's family is roughly 70 percent SNOOT, which term itself derives from an acronym, with the big historical family joke being that whether S.N.O.O.T. stood for "Sprachgefühl Necessitates Our Ongoing Tendence" or "Syntax Nudniks of Our Time" depended on whether or not you were one.

<sup>4</sup> This is true in my own case at any rate—plus also the "uncomfortable" part. I teach college English part-time—mostly Lit, not Comp. But I am also so pathologically anal about usage that every semester the same thing happens: The minute I have read my students' first set of papers, we immediately abandon the regular Lit syllabus and have a three-week Emergency Remedial Usage Unit, during which my demeanor

is basically that of somebody teaching HIV prevention to intravenous-drug users. When it emerges (as it does, every time) that 95 percent of these intelligent upscale college students have never been taught, e.g., what a clause is or why a misplaced only can make a sentence confusing, I all but pound my head on the blackboard; I exhort them to sue their hometown school boards. The kids end up scared, both of me and for me.

*"Editor's Note: Author insisted this phrase replace "obsessed with" and took umbrage at the suggestion that this change clearly demonstrated the very quality he wished to denigrate.*

<sup>5</sup> Please note that the strategically repeated I-P pronoun is meant to iterate and emphasize that this reviewer is very much one too; a SNOOT, plus to connote the nuclear family mentioned supra. SNOOTitude runs in families. In ADMAU's Preface, Bryan Garner mentions both his father and

grandfather and actually uses the word *genetic*, and it's probably true: 95 percent of the SNOOTS I know have at least one parent who is, by profession or temperament or both, a SNOOT. In my own case, my mom is a Comp teacher and has written remedial usage books and is a SNOOT of the most rabid and intractable sort. At least part of the reason I am a SNOOT is that for years Mom brainwashed us in all sorts of subtle ways. Here's an example. Family suppers often involved a game: If one of us children made a usage error, Mom would pretend to have a coughing fit that would go on and on until the relevant child had identified the relevant error and corrected it. It was all very self-ironic and lighthearted; but still, looking back, it seems a bit excessive to pretend that your child is actually denying you oxygen by speaking incorrectly. But the really chilling thing is that I now sometimes find myself playing this same "game" with my own students, complete with pretend perturbation.

#### INTERPOLATION

As something I'm all but sure Harper's will excise, I'll also insert that we even had a lighthearted but retrospectively chilling little family song that Mom and we little SNOOTlets would sing in the car on long trips while Dad silently rolled his eyes and drove (you have to remember the title theme of *Underdog* in order to follow the song):

*When idiots in this world appear  
And fail to be concise or clear  
And solecisms rend the ear  
The cry goes up both far and near  
For Blunder Dog  
Blunder Dog  
Blunder Dog  
Blunder Dog  
[etc.]*

<sup>\*</sup>(Since this'll almost surely get cut, I'll admit that, yes, I, as a kid, was the actual author of this song. But by this time I'd been thoroughly brainwashed. And just about the whole car sang along. It was sort of our family's version of "100 Bottles . . . Wall.")

the convictions of others. As any American knows, this is a very difficult spirit to cultivate and maintain, particularly when it comes to issues you feel strongly about. Equally tough is a D.S.'s criterion of 100 percent intellectual integrity—you have to be willing to look honestly at yourself and your motives for believing what you believe, and to do it more or less continually.

This kind of stuff is advanced U.S. citizenship. A true Democratic Spirit is up there with religious faith and emotional maturity and all those other top-of-the-Maslow-Pyramid-type qualities people spend their whole lives working on. A Democratic Spirit's constituent rigor and humility and honesty are in fact so hard to maintain on certain issues that it's almost irresistibly tempting to fall in with some established dogmatic camp and to follow that camp's line on the issue and to let your position harden within the camp and become inflexible and

to believe that any other camp is either evil or insane and to spend all your time and energy trying to shout over them.

I submit, then, that it is indisputably easier to be dogmatic than Democratic, especially about issues that are both vexed and highly charged. I submit further that the issues surrounding "correctness" in contemporary American usage are both vexed and highly charged, and that the fundamental questions they involve are ones whose answers have to be "worked out" instead of simply found.

A distinctive feature of *ADMAU* is that its author is willing to acknowledge that a usage dictionary is not a bible or even a textbook but rather just the record of one smart person's attempts to work out answers to certain very difficult questions. This willingness appears to me to be informed by a Democratic Spirit. The big question is whether such a spirit compromises Garner's ability to present himself as a genuine "authority" on issues of usage. Assessing Garner's book, then, involves trying to trace out the very weird and complicated relationship between Authority and Democracy in what we as a culture have decided is English. That relationship is, as many educated Americans would say, still in process at this time.

**A** *Dictionary of Modern American Usage* has no Editorial Staff or Distinguished Panel. It's conceived, researched, and written *ab ovo usque ad mala* by Bryan Garner. This is an interesting guy. He's both a lawyer and a lexicographer (which seems a bit like being both a narcotics dealer and a DEA agent). His 1987 *A Dictionary of Modern Legal Usage* is already a minor classic; now, instead of practicing law anymore, he goes around conducting writing seminars for J.D.'s and doing prose-consulting for various judicial bodies. Garner's also the founder of something called the H. W. Fowler Society,<sup>6</sup> a worldwide group of usage-Trekkies who like to send one another linguistic boners clipped from different periodicals. You get the idea. This Garner is one serious and very hard-core SNOOT.

The lucid, engaging, and extremely sneaky Preface to *ADMAU* serves to confirm Garner's SNOOTitude in fact while undercutting it in tone. For one thing, whereas the traditional usage pundit cultivates a sort of remote and imperial persona—the kind who uses *one* or *we* to refer to himself—Garner gives us an almost Waltonishly endearing sketch of his own background:

I realized early—at the age of 15<sup>7</sup>—that my primary intellectual interest was the use of the English language. . . . It became an all-consuming passion. . . . I read everything I could find on the subject. Then, on a wintry evening while visiting New Mexico at the age of 16, I discovered Eric Partridge's *Usage and Abuse*. I was enthralled. Never had I held a more exciting book. . . . Suffice it to say that by the time I was 18, I had committed to memory most of Fowler, Partridge, and their successors. . . .

Although this reviewer regrets the bio-sketch's failure to mention the rather significant social costs of being an adolescent whose overriding passion is English usage,<sup>8</sup> the critical hat is off to yet another personable section of the Preface, one that Garner entitles "First Principles": "Before going any further, I should explain my approach. That's an unusual thing for the author of a usage dictionary to do—unprecedented, as far as I know. But a guide to

## Goal-orientated

<sup>6</sup> If Samuel Johnson is the Shakespeare of English usage, think of Henry Watson Fowler as the Eliot or Joyce. His 1926 *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* is the granddaddy of modern usage guides, and its dusty wit and blurbless imperiousness have been models for every

subsequent classic in the field, from Eric Partridge's *Usage and Abuse* to Theodore Bernstein's *The Careful Writer* to Wilson Follett's *Modern American Usage* to Gilman's '89 Webster's.

<sup>7</sup> (Garner prescribes spelling out only numbers under ten. I was

taught that this rule applies just to Business Writing and that in all other modes you spell out one through nineteen and start using cardinals at 20. *De gustibus non est disputandum.*)

<sup>8</sup> Editor's Note: The Harper's style manual prescribes spelling out all numbers up to 100.

<sup>8</sup> From personal experience, I can assure you that any kid like this is going to be at best marginalized and at worst savagely and repeatedly Wedgided.

Could care less

good writing is only as good as the principles on which it's based. And users should be naturally interested in those principles. So, in the interests of full disclosure . . ."<sup>9</sup>

The "unprecedented" and "full disclosure" here are actually good-natured digs at Garner's Fowlerite predecessors, and a subtle nod to one camp in the wars that have raged in both lexicography and education ever since the notoriously liberal *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* came out in 1961 and included such terms as *height* and *irregardless* without any honorary labels on them. You can think of *Webster's Third* as sort of the Fort Sumter of the contemporary Usage Wars. These Wars are both the context and the target of a very subtle rhetorical strategy in *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage*, and without talking about them it's impossible to explain why Garner's book is both so good and so sneaky.

We regular citizens tend to go to The Dictionary for authoritative guidance.<sup>10</sup> Rarely, however, do we ask ourselves who decides what gets in The Dictionary or what words or spellings or pronunciations get deemed "sub-standard" or "incorrect." Whence the authority of dictionary-makers to decide what's OK<sup>11</sup> and what isn't? Nobody elected them, after all. And simply appealing to precedent or tradition won't work, because what's considered correct changes over time. In the 1600s, for instance, the second-singular pronoun took a singular conjugation—"You is." Earlier still, the standard 2-S pronoun wasn't *you* but *thou*. Huge numbers of now acceptable words like *clever*, *fun*, *banter*, and *prestigious* entered English as what usage authorities considered errors or egregious slang. And not just usage conventions but English itself changes over time; if it didn't, we'd all still be talking like Chaucer. Who's to say which changes are natural and which are corruptions? And when Bryan Garner or E. Ward Gilman do in fact presume to say, why should we believe them?

These sorts of questions are not new, but they do now have a certain urgency. America is in the midst of a protracted Crisis of Authority in matters of language. In brief, the same sorts of political upheavals that produced everything from

Kent State to Independent Counsels have produced an influential contra-SNOOT school for whom normative standards of English grammar and usage are functions of nothing but custom and superstition and the ovine docility of a populace that lets self-appointed language authorities boss them around. See for example MIT's Steven Pinker in a famous *New Republic* article—"Once introduced, a prescriptive rule is very hard to eradicate, no matter how ridiculous. Inside the writing establishment, the rules survive by the same dynamic that perpetuates ritual genital mutilations"—or, at a somewhat lower pitch, Bill Bryson in *Mother Tongue: English and How It Got That Way*:

Who sets down all those rules that we all know about from childhood—the idea that we must never end a sentence with a preposition or begin one with a conjunction, that we must use *each other* for two things and *one another* for more than two . . . ? The answer, surprisingly often, is that no one does, that when you look into the background of these "rules" there is often little basis for them.

In ADMAU's Preface, Garner himself addresses the Authority Question with a Trumanesque simplicity and candor that simultaneously disguise the author's cunning and exemplify it:

As you might already suspect, I don't shy away from making judgments. I can't imagine that most readers would want me to. Linguists don't like it, of course, because judgment involves subjectivity.<sup>12</sup> It isn't scientific. But rhetoric and usage, in the view of most professional writers, aren't scientific endeavors. You don't want dispassionate descriptions; you want sound guidance. And that requires judgment.

Whole monographs could be written just on the masterful rhetoric of this passage. Note for example the ingenious equivocation of *judgment* in "I don't shy away from making judgments" vs. "And that requires judgment." Suffice it to say that Garner is at all times keenly aware of the Authority Crisis in modern usage; and his response to this crisis is—in the best Democratic Spirit—rhetorical.

So . . .

<sup>9</sup> What follow in the Preface are "...the ten critical points that, after years of working on usage problems, I've settled on." These points are too involved to treat separately, but a couple of them are slippery in the extreme—e.g., "10. Actual Usage. In the end, the actual usage of educated speakers and writers is the over-

arching criterion for correctness," of which both "educated" and "actual" would require several pages of abstract clarification and qualification to shore up against Usage Wars-related attacks, but which Garner rather ingeniously elects to define and defend via their application in his dictionary itself.

<sup>10</sup> There's no better indication of The Dictionary's authority than that we use it to settle wagers. My own father is still to this day laying down the outcome of a high-stakes bet on the correct spelling of *meringue*, a wager made on 14 September 1978.

<sup>11</sup> *Editor's Note: The Harper's style manual prescribes okay.*

<sup>12</sup> This is a clever half-truth. Linguists compose only one part of the anti-judgment camp; and their objections to usage judgments involve way more than just "subjectivity."

EZpay

COROLLARY TO  
THESIS STATEMENT  
FOR WHOLE ARTICLE

**T**he most salient and timely feature of Garner's book is that it's both lexicographical and rhetorical. Its main strategy involves what is known in classical rhetoric as the Ethical Appeal. Here the adjective, derived from the Greek *ethos*, doesn't mean quite what we usually mean by *ethical*. But there are affinities. What the Ethical Appeal amounts to is a complex and sophisticated "Trust me." It's the boldest, most ambitious, and also most distinctively American of rhetorical Appeals, because it requires the rhetor to convince us not just of his intellectual acuity or technical competence but of his basic decency and fairness and sensitivity to the audience's own hopes and fears.<sup>13</sup>

These are not qualities one associates with the traditional SNOOT usage-authority, a figure who pretty much instantiates snobbishness and bow-tied anality, and one whose modern image is not improved by stuff like *American Heritage Dictionary Distinguished Usage Panelist Morris Bishop's* "The arrant solacisms of the ignoramus are here often omitted entirely, 'irregardless' of how he may feel about this neglect" or critic John Simon's "The English language is being treated nowadays exactly as slave traders once handled their merchandise. . . ." Compare those lines' authorial personas with Garner's in, e.g., "English usage is so challenging that even experienced writers need guidance now and then."

The thrust here is going to be that *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* earns Garner pretty much all the trust his Ethical Appeal asks us for. The book's "feel-good" spirit (in the very best sense of "feel-good") marries rigor and humility in such a way as to allow Garner to be extremely prescriptive without any appearance of evangelism or elitist put-down. This is an extraordinary accomplishment. Understanding why it's basically a rhetorical accomplishment, and why this is both historically significant and (in this reviewer's opinion) politically redemptive, requires a more detailed look at the Usage Wars.

**Y**ou'd sure know lexicography had an underbelly if you read the little introductory essays in modern dictionaries—pieces like *Webster's DEU's* "A Brief History of English Usage" or *Webster's Third's* "Linguistic Advances and Lexicography" or *AHD-3's* "Usage in the American Heritage Dictionary: The Place of Criticism." But almost nobody ever bothers with these little intros, and it's not just their six-point type or the fact that dictionaries tend to be hard on the lap. It's that these intros aren't actually written for you or me or the average citizen who goes to The Dictionary just to see how to spell (for instance) *meringue*. They're written for other lexicographers and critics, and in fact they're not really introductory at all but polemical. They're salvos in the Usage Wars that have been under way ever since editor Philip Gove first sought to apply the value-neutral principles of structural linguistics to lexicography in *Webster's Third*. Gove's famous response to conservatives who howled<sup>14</sup> when *Webster's Third* endorsed OK and described ain't as "used orally in most parts of the U.S. by many cultivated speakers [sic]" was

**I thought to myself**

this: "A dictionary should have no traffic with . . . artificial notions of correctness or superiority. It should be descriptive and not prescriptive." These terms stuck and turned epithetic, and linguistic conservatives are now formally known as Prescriptivists and linguistic liberals as Descriptivists.

The former are far better known. When you read the columns of William Safire or Morton Freeman or books like Edwin Newman's *Strictly Speaking* or John Simon's *Paradigms Lost*, you're actually reading Popular Prescriptivism, a genre sideline of certain journalists (mostly older ones, the vast majority of whom actually do wear bow ties) whose bemused irony often masks a Colonel Blimp's rage at the way the beloved English of their youth is being trashed in the decadent present. The plutocratic tone and sly wit of Safire and Newman and the best of the Prescriptivists is often modeled after the mandarin-Brit personas of Eric Partridge and H. W. Fowler, the same Twin Towers of scholarly

<sup>13</sup> In this last respect, recall for example W. J. Clinton's famous "I feel your pain," which was a blatant if not particularly masterful Ethical Appeal.

<sup>14</sup> Really, howled: blistering reviews and outraged editorials from across the country—from the *Times* and *The New Yorker* and good old *Life*, or q.v. this from the January '62 *Atlantic*: "We have

seen a novel dictionary formula improvised, in great part, out of snap judgments and the sort of theoretical improvement that in practice impairs; and we have seen the gates propped wide open in enthusiastic hospitality to mis-

cellaneous confusions and corruptions. In fine, the anxiously awaited work that was to have crowned cisatlantic linguistic scholarship with a particular glory turns out to be a scandal and a disaster."

Prescriptivism whom Garner talks about revering as a kid.<sup>15</sup>

Descriptivists, on the other hand, don't have weekly columns in the *Times*. These guys tend to be hard-core academics, mostly linguists or Comp theorists. Loosely organized under the banner of structural (or "descriptive") linguistics, they are doctrinaire positivists who have their intellectual roots in the work of Auguste Comte and Ferdinand de Saussure and their ideological roots firmly in the U.S. sixties. The brief explicit mention Garner's Preface gives this crew—

Somewhere along the line, though, usage dictionaries got hijacked by the descriptive linguists,<sup>16</sup> who observe language scientifically. For the pure descriptivist, it's impermissible to say that one form of language is any better than another: as long as a native speaker says it, it's OK—and anyone who takes a contrary stand is a dunderhead. . . . Essentially, descriptivists and prescriptivists are approaching different problems. Descriptivists want to record language as it's actually used, and they perform a useful function—though their audience is generally limited to those willing to pore through vast tomes of dry-as-dust research.

—is disingenuous in the extreme, especially the "approaching different problems" part, because it vastly underplays the Descriptivists' influence on U.S. culture. For one thing, Descriptivism so quickly and thoroughly took over English education in this country that just about everybody who started junior high after c. 1970 has been taught to write Descriptively—via "freewriting," "brainstorming," "journaling," a view of writing as self-exploratory and -expressive rather than as communicative, an abandonment of systematic grammar, usage, semantics, rhetoric, etymology. For another thing, the very language in which today's socialist, feminist, minority, gay, and environmentalist movements frame their sides of political debates is informed by the Descriptivist belief that traditional English is conceived and perpetuated by Privileged WASP Males<sup>17</sup> and is thus inherently capitalist, sexist, racist, xenophobic, homophobic, elitist: unfair. Think Ebonics. Think of the involved contortions

people undergo to avoid *he* as a generic pronoun, or of the tense deliberate way white males now adjust their vocabularies around non-w.m.'s. Think of today's endless battles over just the names of things—"Affirmative Action" vs. "Reverse Discrimination," "Pro-Life" vs. "Pro-Choice," "Undercount" vs. "Vote Fraud," etc.

The Descriptivist revolution takes a little time to unpack, but it's worth it. The structural linguists' rejection of conventional usage rules depends on two main arguments. The first is academic and methodological. In this age of technology, Descriptivists contend, it's the Scientific Method—clinically objective, value-neutral, based on direct observation and demonstrable hypothesis—that should determine both the content of dictionaries and the standards of "correct" English. Because language is constantly evolving, such standards will always be fluid. Gove's now classic introduction to *Webster's Third* outlines this type of Descriptivism's five basic edicts: "1—Language changes constantly; 2—Change is normal; 3—Spoken language is the language; 4—Correctness rests upon usage; 5—All usage is relative."

These principles look *prima facie* OK—commonsensical and couched in the bland simple s.-v.-o. prose of dispassionate Science—but in fact they're vague and muddled and it takes about three seconds to think of reasonable replies to each one of them, viz.:

1—OK, but how much and how fast?

2—Same thing. Is Heraclitean flux as normal or desirable as gradual change? Do some changes actually serve the language's overall pizzazz better than others? And how many people have to deviate from how many conventions before we say the language has actually changed? Fifty percent? Ten percent?

3—This is an old claim, at least as old as Plato's *Phaedrus*. And it's specious. If Derrida and the infamous Deconstructionists have done nothing else, they've debunked the idea that speech is language's primary instantiation.<sup>18</sup> Plus consider

Hands-on,  
can-do

<sup>15</sup> Note for example the mordant pith (and royal we) of this random snippet from Partridge's *Usage and Abuse*:

anxious of. I am not hopeless of our future. But I am profoundly anxious of it, Beverly Nichols, *News of England*, 1938; which made us profoundly anxious for (or about)—not of—Mr Nichols's literary future.

Or see the near-Himalayan condensation of Fowler, here on some other people's use of words to mean things the words don't really mean:

alphabet extension . . . is especially likely to occur when some accident gives currency among the uneducated to words of learned origin, & the more if they are isolated or have few relatives in the vernacular. . . . The original meaning

of *feasible* is simply doable (L. *facere* do); but to the unlearned it is a mere token, of which he has to infer the value from the contexts in which he hears it used, because such relatives as it has in English—*fast*, *feature*, *faction*, &c.—either fail to show the obvious family likeness to which he is accustomed among families of indigenous words, or are (like *malfaisance*) outside his range.

<sup>16</sup> Utter bushwa: As ADMAU's body makes clear, Garner knows exactly when the Descriptivists started influencing language guides.

<sup>17</sup> (which in fact is true)

<sup>18</sup> (Q.v. "The Pharmakon" in Derrida's *La dissemination*—but you'd probably be better off just trusting me.)

the weird arrogance of Gove's (3) w/r/t correctness. Only the most mullahlike Prescriptivists care very much about spoken English; most Prescriptive usage guides concern Standard Written English.<sup>19</sup>

4—Fine, but whose usage? Gove's (4) begs the whole question. What he wants to imply here, I think, is a reversal of the traditional entailment-relation between abstract rules and concrete usage: Instead of usage ideally corresponding to a rigid set of regulations, the regulations ought to correspond to the way real people are actually using the language. Again, fine, but which people? Urban Latinos? Boston Brahmins? Rural Midwesterners? Appalachian Neogaels?

### "French provincial twin bed with canape and box spring, \$150."

5—*Huh?* If this means what it seems to mean, then it ends up biting Gove's whole argument in the ass. (5) appears to imply that the correct answer to the above "which people?" is: "All of them!" And it's easy to show why this will not stand up as a lexicographical principle. The most obvious problem with it is that not everything can go in The Dictionary. Why not? Because you can't observe every last bit of every last native speaker's "language behavior," and even if you could, the resultant dictionary would weigh 4 million pounds and have to be updated hourly.<sup>20</sup> The fact is that any lexicographer is going to have to make choices about what gets in and what doesn't. And these choices are based on . . . what? And now we're right back where we started.

It is true that, as a SNOOT, I am probably neurologically predisposed to look for flaws in Gove et al.'s methodological argument. But these flaws seem awfully easy to find. Probably the biggest one is that the Descriptivists' "scientific lexicography"—under which, keep in mind, the ideal English dictionary is basically number-crunching; you somehow observe every linguistic act by every native/naturalized speaker of English and put the sum of all these acts between two covers and call it The Dictionary—involves an incredibly simplistic and outdated understanding of what *scientific* means. It requires a naive belief in scientific objectivity,

for one thing. Even in the physical sciences, everything from quantum mechanics to Information Theory has shown that an act of observation is itself part of the phenomenon observed and is analytically inseparable from it.

If you remember your old college English classes, there's an analogy here that points up the trouble scholars get into when they confuse observation with interpretation. Recall the New Critics.<sup>21</sup> They believed that literary criticism was best conceived as a "scientific" endeavor: The critic was a neutral, careful, unbiased, highly trained observer whose job was to find and objectively describe meanings that were right there—literally inside—pieces of literature. Whether you know what happened to the New Criticism's reputation depends on whether you took college English after c. 1975; suffice it to say that its star has dimmed. The New Critics had the same basic problem as Gove's Methodological Descriptivists: They believed that *scientific* meant the same thing as *neutral* or *unbiased*. And that linguistic meanings could exist "objectively," separate from any interpretive act.

The point of the analogy is that claims to objectivity in language study are now the stuff of jokes and shudders. The epistemological assumptions that underlie Methodological Descriptivism have been thoroughly debunked and displaced—in Lit by the rise of post-structuralism, Reader-Response Criticism, and Jausian Reception Theory; in linguistics by the rise of Pragmatics—and it's now pretty much universally accepted that (a) meaning is inseparable from some act of interpretation and (b) an act of interpretation is always somewhat biased, i.e., informed by the interpreter's particular ideology. And the consequence of (a) and (b) is that there's no way around it—decisions about what to put in The Dictionary and what to exclude are going to be based on a lexicographer's ideology. And every lexicographer's got one. To presume that dictionary-making can somehow avoid or transcend ideology is simply to subscribe to a particular ideology, one that might aptly be called Unbelievably Naive Positivism.

There's an even more important way Descriptivists are wrong in thinking that the Scientific Method is appropriate to the study of language:

<sup>19</sup> Standard Written English (SWE) is also sometimes called Standard English (SE) or Educated English, but the indiment-emphasis is the same.

#### SEMI-INTERPOLATION

Plus note that Garner's Preface explicitly names ADMAU's

intended audience as "writers and editors." And even ads for the dictionary in such organs as *The New York Review of Books* are built around the slogan "If you like to WRITE . . . Refer to us."

\**(Yr. SNOOT rev. cannot help observing, w/r/t these ads, that the opening r in Refer here should not*

*be capitalized after a dependent clause + ellipsis—Quandogue bonus dormitat Homerus.)*

<sup>20</sup> True, some sort of 100 percent compendious real-time Megadictionary might be possible online, though it'd take a small army of lexical webmasters and a much larger army of *in situ* actual-use

reporters and surveillance techs; plus it'd be GNP-level expensive.

<sup>21</sup> *New Criticism* refers to T. S. Eliot and I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis and Cleanth Brooks and Wimsatt & Beardsley and the whole "close reading" school that dominated literary criticism from WWI well into the seventies.

Even if, as a thought experiment, we assume a kind of nineteenth-century scientific realism—in which, even though some scientists' interpretations of natural phenomena might be biased,<sup>22</sup> the natural phenomena themselves can be supposed to exist wholly independent of either observation or interpretation—no such realist supposition can be made about "language behavior," because this behavior is both *human* and fundamentally *normative*. To understand this, you have only to accept the proposition that language is by its very nature public—i.e., that there can be no such thing as a Private Language<sup>23</sup>—and then to observe the way Methodological Descriptivists seem either ignorant of this fact or oblivious to its consequences, as in for example one Charles Fries's introduction to an epigone of Webster's Third called *The American College Dictionary*:

A dictionary can be an "authority" only in the sense in which a book of chemistry or of physics or of botany can be an "authority"—by the accuracy and the completeness of its record of the observed facts of the field examined, in accord with the latest principles and techniques of the particular science.

This is so stupid it practically drools. An "authoritative" physics text presents the results of *physicists'* observations and *physicists'* theories about those observations. If a physics textbook operated on Descriptivist principles, the fact that some Americans believe that electricity flows

better downhill (based on the observed fact that power lines tend to run high above the homes they serve) would require the Electricity Flows Better Downhill Theory to be included as a "valid" theory in the textbook—just as, for Dr. Fries, if some Americans use *infer* for *imply*, the use becomes an ipso facto "valid" part of the language. Structural linguists like Gove and Fries are not, finally, scientists but census-takers who happen to misconstrue the importance of "observed facts." It isn't scientific phenomena they're tabulating but rather a set of human behaviors, and a lot of human behaviors are—to be blunt—moronic. Try, for instance, to imagine an "authoritative" ethics textbook whose principles were based on what most people actually do.

Norm-wise, let's keep in mind that language didn't come into being because our hairy ancestors were sitting around the veldt with nothing better to do. Language was invented to serve certain specific purposes:<sup>24</sup> "That mushroom is poisonous"; "Knock these two rocks together and you can start a fire"; "This shelter is mine!" And so on. Clearly, as linguistic communities evolve over time, they discover that some ways of using language are "better" than others—meaning better with respect to the community's purposes. If we assume that one such purpose might be communicating which kinds of food are safe to eat, then you can see how, for example, a misplaced modifier might violate an important norm:

22 ("EVIDENCE OF CANCER LINK REFUTED BY TOBACCO INSTITUTE RESEARCHERS")

23 This proposition is in fact true, as is interpolatively demonstrated below, and although the demonstration is extremely persuasive it is also, as you can see from the size of this FN, lengthy and involved and rather, umm, dense, so that again you'd probably be better off simply granting the truth of the proposition and forgoing on with the main text.

#### INTERPOLATIVE DEMONSTRATION OF THE FACT THAT THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A PRIVATE LANGUAGE

It's sometimes tempting to imagine that there can be such a thing as a Private Language. Many of us are prone to lay-philosophizing about the weird privacy of our own mental states, for example, and from the fact that when my knee hurts only I can feel it, it's tempting to conclude that for me the word *pain* has a very

subjective internal meaning that only I can truly understand. This line of thinking is sort of like the adolescent pot-smoker's terror that his own inner experience is both private and unverifiable, a syndrome that is technically known as Cannabis Solipsism. Eating Chips! Aboyl! and staring very intently at the television's network PGA event, for instance, the adolescent pot-smoker is struck by the ghastly possibility that, e.g., what he sees as the color green and what other people call "the color green" may in fact not be the same color-experiences at all. The fact that both he and someone else call Pebble Beach's fairways green and a stoplight's GO signal green appears to guarantee only that there is a similar consistency in their color experience of fairways and GO lights, not that the actual subjective quality of those color-experiences is the same; it could be that what the ad. pot-smoker experiences as green everyone else actually experiences as blue, and what we "mean" by the word *blue* is what he "means" by green, etc.,

etc., until the whole line of thinking gets so vexed and exhausting that the a.p.s. ends up slumped crumb-strewn and paralyzed in his chair.

The point here is that the idea of a Private Language, like Private Colors and most of the other solipsistic conceits with which this particular reviewer has at various times been afflicted, is both deluded and demonstrably false.

In the case of Private Language, the delusion is usually based on the belief that a word such as *pain* has the meaning it does because it is somehow "connected" to a feeling in my knee. But as Mr. L. Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* proved in the 1950s, words actually have the meanings they do because of certain rules and verification tests that are imposed on us from outside our own subjectivities, viz., by the community in which we have to get along and communicate with other people. Wittgenstein's argument, which is admittedly very complex and gnomic and opaque, basically centers on the

fact that a word like *pain* means what it does for me because of the way the community I'm part of has tacitly agreed to use *pain*.

If you're thinking that all this seems not only abstract but also pretty irrelevant to the Usage Wars or to anything you have any real interest in at all, you are very much mistaken. If words' meanings depend on transpersonal rules and these rules on community consensus, language is not only conceptually non-Private but also irreducibly public, political, and ideological. This means that questions about our national consensus on grammar and usage are actually bound up with every last social issue that millennial America's about-class, race, gender, morality, tolerance, pluralism, cohesion, equality, fairness, money. You name it.

24 Norms, after all, are just practices people have agreed on as optimal ways of doing things for certain purposes. They're not laws, but they're not *laissez-faire*, either.

"People who eat that kind of mushroom often get sick" confuses the recipient about whether he'll get sick only if he eats the mushroom frequently or whether he stands a good chance of getting sick the very first time he eats it. In other words, the community has a vested practical interest in excluding this kind of misplaced modifier from acceptable usage; and even if a certain percentage of tribesmen screw up and use them, this still doesn't make m.m.'s a good idea.

Maybe now the analogy between usage and ethics is clearer. Just because people sometimes lie, cheat on their taxes, or scream at their kids, this doesn't mean that they think those things are "good." The whole point of norms is to help us evaluate our actions (including utterances) according to what we as a community have decided our real interests and purposes are. Granted, this analysis is oversimplified; in practice it's incredibly hard to arrive at norms and to keep them at least minimally fair or sometimes even to agree on what they are (q.v. today's Culture Wars). But the Descriptivists' assumption that all usage norms are arbitrary and dispensable leads to—well, have a mushroom.

The connotations of *arbitrary* here are tricky, though, and this sort of segues into the second argument Descriptivists make. There is a sense in which specific linguistic conventions are arbitrary. For instance, there's no particular metaphorical reason why our word for a four-legged mammal that gives milk and goes Moo is *cow* and not, say, *brummpf*. The uptown phrase for this is "the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign," and it's used, along with certain principles of cognitive science and generative grammar, in a more philosophically sophisticated version of Descriptivism that holds the conventions of SWE to be more like the niceties of fashion than like actual norms. This "Philosophical Descriptivism" doesn't care much about dictionaries or method; its target is the standard SNOOT claim *supra*—that prescriptive rules have their ultimate justification in the community's need to make its language meaningful.

The argument goes like this. An English sentence's being *meaningful* is not the same as its being *grammatical*. That is, such clearly ill-formed constructions as "Did you see the car keys of me?" or "The show was looked by many people" are nevertheless comprehensible; the sentences do, more or less, communicate the information they're trying to get across. Add to this the fact that

nobody who isn't damaged in some profound Oliver Sacksish way actually ever makes these sorts of very deep syntactic errors<sup>25</sup> and you get the basic proposition of Noam Chomsky's generative linguistics, which is that there exists a Universal Grammar beneath and common to all languages, plus that there is probably an actual part of the human brain that's imprinted with this Universal Grammar the same way birds' brains are imprinted with Fly South and dogs' with Sniff Genitals. There's all kinds of compelling evidence and support for these ideas, not least of which are the advances that linguists and cognitive scientists and A.I. researchers have been able to make with them, and the theories have a lot of credibility, and they are adduced by the Philosophical Descriptivists to show that since the really important rules of language are at birth already hardwired into people's neocortex, SWE prescriptions against dangling participles or mixed metaphors are basically the linguistic equivalent of whalebone corsets and short forks for salad. As Descriptivist Steven Pinker puts it, "When a scientist considers all the high-tech mental machinery needed to order words into everyday sentences, prescriptive rules are, at best, inconsequential decorations."

This argument is not the barrel of drugged trout that Methodological Descriptivism was, but it's still vulnerable to some objections. The first one is easy. Even if it's true that we're all wired with a Universal Grammar, it simply doesn't follow that *all* prescriptive rules are superfluous. Some of these rules really do seem to serve clarity and precision. The injunction against two-way adverbs ("People who eat this often get sick") is an obvious example, as are rules about other kinds of misplaced modifiers ("There are many reasons why lawyers lie, some better than others") and about relative pronouns' proximity to the nouns they modify ("She's the mother of an infant daughter who works twelve hours a day").

Granted, the Philosophical Descriptivist can question just how absolutely necessary these rules are—it's quite likely that a recipient of clauses like the above could figure out what the sentences mean from the sentences on either side or from the "overall context" or whatever. A listener can usually figure out what I really mean when I misuse *infer* for *imply* or *say* indicate for *say*, too. But many of these solecisms require at least a couple extra nanoseconds of cognitive effort, a kind of rapid sift-and-discard process, before the recipient



<sup>25</sup> In his *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language*

(1994), Steven Pinker puts it this way: "No one, not even a valley girl, has to be told not to say

*Apples the cat boy or The child seems sleeping or Who did you meet John and? or the vast, vast*

majority of the millions of trillions of mathematically possible combinations of words."

ent gets it. Extra work. It's debatable just how much extra work, but it seems indisputable that we put *some* extra neural burden on the recipient when we fail to follow certain conventions. W/t confusing clauses like the above, it simply seems more "considerate" to follow the rules of correct SWE... just as it's more "considerate" to de-slob your home before entertaining guests or to brush your teeth before picking up a date. Not just more considerate but more *respectful* somehow—both of your listener and of what you're trying to get across. As we sometimes also say about elements of fashion and etiquette, the way you use English "Makes a Statement" or "Sends a Message"—even though these Statements/Messages often have nothing to do with the actual information you're trying to transmit.

We've now sort of bled into a more serious rejoinder to Philosophical Descriptivism: From the fact that linguistic communication is not strictly dependent on usage and grammar it does *not* necessarily follow that the traditional rules of usage and grammar are nothing but "inconsequential decorations." Another way to state the objection is that just because something is "decorative" does not necessarily make it "inconsequential." Rhetorically, Pinker's flip dismissal is bad tactics, for it invites the very question it begs: inconsequential to *whom*?

Take, for example, the Descriptivist claim that so-called correct English usages such as *brought* rather than *brung* and *felt* rather than *feeled* are arbitrary and restrictive and unfair and are supported only by custom and are (like irregular verbs in general) archaic and incommodious and an all-around pain in the ass. Let us concede for the moment that these objections are 100 percent reasonable. Then let's talk about pants. Trousers, slacks. I suggest to you that having the "correct" subthoracic clothing for U.S. males be pants instead of skirts is arbitrary (lots of other cultures let men wear skirts), restrictive and unfair (U.S. females get to wear pants), based solely on archaic custom (I think it's got something to do with certain traditions about gender and leg position, the same reasons girls' bikes don't have a crossbar), and in certain ways not only incommodious but illogical (skirts are more comfortable than pants; pants ride up; pants are hot; pants can squish the genitals and reduce fertility; over time pants chafe and erode irregular sections of men's

leg hair and give older men hideous half-denuded legs, etc. etc.). Let us grant—as a thought experiment if nothing else—that these are all reasonable and compelling objections to pants as an androsartorial norm. Let us in fact in our minds and hearts say yes—shout yes—to the skirt, the kilt, the toga, the sarong, the jupe. Let us dream of or even

in our spare time work toward an America where nobody lays any arbitrary sumptuary prescriptions on anyone else and we can all go around as comfortable and aerated and unchafed and un-squished and motile as we want.

And yet the fact remains that, in the broad cultural mainstream of millennial America, men do not wear skirts. If you, the reader, are a U.S. male, and even if you share my personal objections to pants and dream as I do of a cool and genitally un-squishy American Tomorrow, the odds are still 99.9 percent that in 100 percent of public situations you wear pants/slacks/shorts/trunks. More to the point, if you are a U.S. male and also have a U.S. male child, and if that child were to come to you one evening and announce his desire/intention to wear a skirt rather than pants to school the next day, I am 100-percent confident that you are going to discourage him from doing so. Strongly discourage him. You could be a Molotov-tossing anti-pants radical or a kilt manufacturer or Steven Pinker himself—you're going to stand over your kid and be prescriptive about an arbitrary, archaic, uncomfortable, and inconsequentially decorative piece of clothing. Why? Well, because in modern America any little boy who comes to school in a skirt (even, say, a modest all-season midi) is going to get stared at and shunned and beaten up and called a Total Geekoid by a whole lot of people whose approval and acceptance are important to him.<sup>26</sup> In our culture, in other words, a boy who wears a skirt is Making a Statement that is going to have all kinds of gruesome social and emotional consequences.

You see where this is going. I'm going to describe the intended point of the pants analogy in terms I'm sure are simplistic—doubtless there are whole books in Pragmatics or psycholinguistics or something devoted to unpacking this point. The weird thing is that I've seen neither Descriptivists nor SNOOTS deploy it in the Wars.<sup>27</sup>

*Wave all interest  
for 90 days!*

<sup>26</sup> In the case of Steve Pinker Jr., those people are the boy's peers and teachers and crossing guards, etc. In the case of adult cross-dressers and drag queens who have jobs in the Straight World and

wear pants to those jobs, it's co-workers and clients and people on the subway. For the die-hard slob who nevertheless wears a coat and a tie to work, it's mostly his boss, who himself doesn't want his employee's clothes to send

clients "the wrong message." But of course it's all basically the same thing.

<sup>27</sup> In fact, the only time one ever hears the issue made explicit is in radio ads for tapes that promise

to improve people's vocabulary. These ads are extremely ominous and intimidating and always start out with "DID YOU KNOW PEOPLE JUDGE YOU BY THE WORDS YOU USE?"

When I say or write something, there are actually a whole lot of different things I am communicating. The propositional content (the actual information I'm trying to convey) is only one part of it. Another part is stuff about me, the communicator. Everyone knows this. It's a function of the fact that there are uncountably many well-formed ways to say the same basic thing, from e.g. "I was attacked by a bear!" to "Goddamn bear tried to kill me!" to "That ursine juggernaut bethought to sup upon my person!" and so on. And different levels of diction and formality are only the simplest kinds of distinction; things get way more complicated in the sorts of interpersonal communication where social relations and feelings and moods come into play. Here's a familiar sort of example. Suppose that you and I are acquaintances and we're in my apartment having a conversation and that at some point I want to terminate the conversation and not have you be in my apartment anymore. Very delicate social moment. Think of all the different ways I can try to handle it: "Wow, look at the time"; "Could we finish this up later?"; "Could you please leave now?"; "Go"; "Get out"; "Get the hell out of here"; "Didn't you say you had to be someplace?"; "Time for you to hit the dusty trail, my friend"; "Off you go then, love"; or that sly old telephone-conversation ender: "Well, I'm going to let you go now"; etc.\* And then think of all the different factors and implications of each option.

The point here is obvious. It concerns a phenomenon that SNOOTS blindly reinforce and that Descriptivists badly underestimate and that scary vocab-tape ads try to exploit. People really do "judge" one another according to their use of language. Constantly. Of course, people judge one another on the basis of all kinds of things—weight, scent, physiognomy, occupation, make of vehicle<sup>28</sup>—and, again, doubtless it's all terribly complicated and occupies whole battalions of sociolinguists. But it's clear that at least one component of all this interpersonal semantic judging involves *acceptance*, meaning not some touchy-feely emotional affirmation but actual acceptance or rejection of somebody's bid to be

## Who would of thought?

regarded as a peer, a member of somebody else's collective or community or Group. Another way to come at this is to acknowledge something that in the Usage Wars gets mentioned only in very abstract terms: "Correct" English usage is, as a practical matter, a function of whom you're talking to and how you want that person to respond—not just to your utterance but also to you. In other words, a large part of the agenda of any communication is rhetorical and depends on what some rhet-scholars call "Audience" or "Discourse Community."<sup>29</sup> And the United States obviously has a huge number of such Discourse Communities, many of them regional and/or cultural dialects of English: Black English, Latino English, Rural Southern,

Urban Southern, Standard Upper-Midwest, Maine Yankee, East-Texas Bayou, Boston Blue-Collar, and on and on. Everybody knows this. What not everyone knows—especially not certain Prescriptivists—is that many of these non-SWE dialects have their own highly developed and internally consistent grammars, and that some of these dialects' usage norms actually make more linguistic/aesthetic sense than do their Standard counterparts (see INTERPOLATION). Plus, of course, there are innumerable sub- and subsubdialects based on all sorts of things that have nothing to do with locale or ethnicity—Medical-School English, Peorians-Who-Follow-Pro-Wrestling-Closely English, Twelve-Year-Old-Males-Whose-Worldview-Is-Deeply-Informed-By-South-Park English—and that are nearly incomprehensible to anyone who isn't inside their very tight and specific Discourse Community (which of course is part of their function<sup>30</sup>).

### INTERPOLATION:

EXAMPLE OF GRAMMATICAL ADVANTAGES OF A NON-STANDARD DIALECT THAT THIS REVIEWER ACTUALLY KNOWS ABOUT FIRSTHAND

**T**his rev. happens to have two native English dialects—the SWE of my hypereducated parents and the hard-earned Rural Midwestern of most of my peers. When I'm talking to R.M.'s, I usually

<sup>28</sup> (... not to mention color, gender, creed—you can see how fraught and charged all this is going to get)

<sup>29</sup> *Discourse Community* is an example of that rare kind of academic jargon that's actually a valuable addition to SWE because it

captures something at once very complex and very specific that no other English term quite can.\*

\*(The above is an obvious attempt to preempt readerly sneers/voices at the term's continued deployment in this article.)

<sup>30</sup> (Plus it's true that whether something gets called a "subdialect" or "jargon" seems to depend on how much it annoys people outside its Discourse Community. Garner himself has midwesternisms on AIRLINESE, COMPUTERESE, LEGALESE, and BUREAUCRATESSE, and he more or less

calls all of them jargon. There is no ADMAU miniessey on DIALECTS, but there is one on JARGON, in which such is Garner's self-restraint that you can almost hear his tendons straining, as in "[jargon] arises from the urge to save time and space—and occasionally to conceal meaning from the uninitediated.")

use, for example, the construction "Where's it at?" instead of "Where is it?" Part of this is a naked desire to fit in and not get rejected as an egghead or fag (see *sub*). But another part is that I, SNOOT or no, believe that this and other R.M.isms are in certain ways superior to their Standard equivalents.

For a dogmatic Prescriptivist, "Where's it at?" is double-damned as a sentence that not only ends with a preposition but whose final preposition forms a redundancy with *where* that's similar to the redundancy in "the reason is because" (which latter usage I'll admit makes me dig my nails into my palms). Rejoinder: First off, the avoid-terminal-prepositions rule is the invention of one Fr. R. Lowth, an eighteenth-century British preacher and indurate pedant who did things like spend scores of pages arguing for *hath* over the trendy and degenerate *has*. The a.-t.-p. rule is antiquated and stupid and only the most ayatolloid SNOOT takes it seriously. Garner himself calls the rule "stuffy" and lists all kinds of useful constructions like "the man you were listening to" that we'd have to discard or distort if we really enforced it.

Plus the apparent redundancy of "Where's it at?"<sup>31</sup> is offset by its metrical logic. What the *at* really does is license the contraction of *is* after the interrogative adverb. You can't say "Where's it?" So the choice is between "Where is it?" and "Where's it at?", and the latter, a strong anapest, is prettier and trips off the tongue better than "Where is it?", whose meter is either a clunky monosyllabic-foot + trochee or it's nothing at all.

This is probably the place for your SNOOT reviewer openly to concede that a certain number of traditional prescriptive rules really are stupid and that people who insist on them (like the legendary assistant to P.M. Margaret Thatcher who refused to read any memo with a split infinitive in it, or the jr-high teacher I had who automatically graded you down if you started a sentence with *Hopefully*) are that very most pathetic and dangerous sort of SNOOT, the SNOOT Who Is Wrong. The injunction against split infinitives, for instance, is a consequence of the weird fact that English grammar is modeled

on Latin even though Latin is a synthetic language and English is an analytic language.<sup>32</sup> Latin infinitives consist of one word and are impossible to split, and the earliest English Prescriptivists—so enthralled with Latin that their English usage guides were actually written in Latin<sup>33</sup>—decided that English infinitives shouldn't be split either. Garner himself takes out after the s.i. rule in both SPLIT INFINITIVES and SUPERSTITIONS.<sup>34</sup> And *Hopefully* at the beginning of a sentence, as a certain cheeky eighth-grader once pointed out to his everlasting social cost, actually functions not as a misplaced modal auxiliary or as a manner adverb like *quickly* or *angrily* but as a "sentence adverb" that indicates the speaker's attitude about the state of affairs described by the sentence (examples of perfectly OK sentence adverbs are *Clearly*, *Basically*, *Luckily*), and only SNOOTS educated in the high-pedantic years up to 1960 blindly proscribe it or grade it down.

The cases of split infinitives and *Hopefully* are in fact often trotted out by dogmatic Descriptivists as evidence that all SWE usage rules are arbitrary and stupid (which is a bit like pointing to Pat Buchanan as evidence that all Republicans are maniacs). Garner rejects *Hopefully*'s knee-jerk proscription, too, albeit grudgingly, including the adverb in his miniesay on SKUNKED TERMS, which is his phrase for a usage that is "hotly disputed . . . any use of it is likely to distract some readers." (Garner also points out something I'd never quite realized, which is that *hopefully*, if misplaced/mispunctuated in the body of a sentence, can create some of the same two-way ambiguities as other adverbs, as in the clause "I will borrow your book and hopefully read it soon.")

Whether we're conscious of it or not, most of us are fluent in more than one major English dialect and in a large number of subdialects and are probably at least passable in countless others. Which dialect you choose to

<sup>31</sup> (a redundancy that's a bit arbitrary, since "Where's it from?" isn't redundant [mainly because *whence* has vanished into semi-archaism])

<sup>32</sup> A synthetic language uses inflections to dictate syntax, whereas an analytic language uses word order. Latin, German, and Russian

are synthetic; English and Chinese, analytic.

<sup>33</sup> (Q.v. for example Sir Thomas Smith's cortex-withering *De Rectis et Emendatis Linguae Anglicae Scripturae Dialogus* of 1568.)

<sup>34</sup> But note that he's sane about it. Some split infinitives really are clunky and hard to parse,

especially when there are a whole bunch of words between *to* and the verb—"We will attempt to swiftly and to the best of our ability respond to these charges"—which Garner calls "wide splits" and sensibly discourages. His overall verdict on s.i.'s—which is that some are "perfectly proper" and some iffy and some just totally bad news, and that no one wide

tidy dogmatic ukase can handle all s.i. cases, and thus that "knowing when to split an infinitive requires a good ear and a keen eye"—is a good example of the way Garner distinguishes sound and helpful Descriptivist objections from wacky or dogmatic objections and then incorporates the sound objections into a smarter and more flexible Prescriptivism.

rent2own

use depends, of course, on whom you're addressing. More to the point, I submit that the dialect you use depends mostly on what sort of Group your listener is part of and whether you wish to present yourself as a fellow member of that Group. An obvious example is that traditional upper-class English has certain dialectal differences from lower-class English and that schools used to have courses in Elocution whose whole point was to teach people how to speak in an upper-class way. But usage-as-inclusion is about much more than class. Here's another thought experiment: A bunch of U.S. teenagers in clothes that look far too large for them are sitting together in the local mall's Food Court, and a 53-year-old man with a combver and clothes that fit comes over to them and says that he was scoping them and thinks they're totally rad and/or phat and is it cool if he just kicks it and does the hang here with them. The kids' reaction is going to be either scorn or embarrassment for the guy—most likely a mix of both. Q: Why? Or imagine that two hard-core urban black guys are standing there talking and I, who am resoundingly and in all ways white, come up and greet them with "Yo" and call them "Brothers" and ask "s'up, s'goin on," pronouncing on with that

NYCish  $\delta\delta$ - $\delta$  diphthong that Young Urban Black English deploys for a standard  $\delta$ . Either these guys are going to be offended or they are going to think I am simply out of my mind. No other reaction is

remotely foreseeable. Q: Why?

Why: A dialect of English is learned and used either because it's your native vernacular or because it's the dialect of a Group by which you wish (with some degree of plausibility) to be accepted. And although it is the major and arguably the most important one, SWE is only one dialect. And it is never, or at least hardly ever, anybody's only dialect. This is because there are—as you and I both know and yet no one in the Usage Wars ever seems to mention—situations in which faultlessly correct SWE is clearly not the appropriate dialect.

Childhood is full of such situations. This is one reason why SNOOTlets tend to have a very hard so-

cial time of it in school. A SNOOTlet is a little kid who's wildly, precociously fluent in SWE (he is often, recall, the offspring of SNOOTS). Just about every class has a SNOOTlet, so I know you've seen them—these are the sorts of six- to twelve-year-olds who use *whom* correctly and whose response to striking out in T-ball is to cry out "How incalculably dreadful!" etc. The elementary-school SNOOTlet is one of the earliest identifiable species of academic Geekoid and is duly despised by his peers and praised by his teachers. These teachers usually don't see the incredible amounts of punishment the SNOOTlet is receiving from his classmates, or if they do see it they blame the classmates and shake their heads sadly at the vicious and arbitrary cruelty of which children are capable.

But the other children's punishment of the SNOOTlet is not arbitrary at all. There are important things at stake. Little kids in school are learning about Group-inclusion and -exclusion and about the respective rewards and penalties of same and about the use of dialect and syntax and slang as signals of affinity and inclusion.<sup>35</sup> They're learning about Discourse Communities. Kids learn this stuff not in English or Social Studies but on the playground and at lunch and on the bus. When his peers are giving the SNOOTlet monstrous quadruple Wedgies or holding him down and taking turns spitting on him, there's serious learning going on . . . for everyone except the little SNOOT, who in fact is being punished for precisely his *failure* to learn. What neither he nor his teacher realizes is that the SNOOTlet is *deficient* in Language Arts. He has only one dialect. He cannot alter his vocabulary, usage, or grammar, cannot use slang or vulgarity; and it's these abilities that are really required for "peer rapport," which is just a fancy Elementary-Ed term for being accepted by the most important Group in the little kid's life.

This reviewer acknowledges that there seems to be some, umm, personal stuff getting dredged up and worked out here;<sup>36</sup> but the stuff is relevant. The point is that the little A+ SNOOTlet is actually in the same dialectal position as the class's "slow" kid who can't learn to stop using *ain't* or *bringed*. One is punished in class, the other on the playground, but both are deficient in the same linguistic skill—viz.,

## Cum-N-Go Quik Mart

<sup>35</sup> The SNOOTlet is, as it happens, an indispensable part of other kids' playground education. The kids are learning that a Group's identity depends as much on exclusion as inclusion. They are, in other words, starting to learn

about Us and Them, and about how an Us always needs a Them because being not-Them is essential to being Us. Because they're kids and it's school, the obvious Them is the teachers and all the values and appurtenances of the teacher world. This teacher-Them

helps the kids see how to start to be an Us, but the SNOOTlet completes the puzzle by providing the as it were missing link: He is the Traitor, the Us who is in fact not Us but Them.

In sum, the SNOOTlet is teaching his peers that the criteria for

membership in Us are not just age, station, inability to stay up past 9:00, etc.—that in fact Us is primarily a state of mind and a set of sensibilities. An ideology.

<sup>36</sup> (The skirt-in-school scenario was not personal stuff, FYI.)

the ability to move between various dialects and levels of "correctness," the ability to communicate one way with peers and another way with teachers and another with family and another with Little League coaches and so on. Most of these dialectal adjustments are made below the level of conscious awareness, and our ability to make them seems part psychological and part something else—perhaps something hardwired into the same motherboard as Universal Grammar—and in truth this ability is a far better indicator of a kid's "Verbal I.Q." than test scores or grades, since U.S. English classes do far more to retard dialectal talent than to cultivate it.

**W**ell-known fact: In neither K-12 nor college English are systematic SWE grammar and usage much taught anymore. It's been this way for more than 20 years. The phenomenon drives Prescriptivists nuts, and it's one of the big things they cite as evidence of America's gradual murder of English. Descriptivists and English-Ed specialists counter that grammar and usage have been abandoned because scientific research proved that studying SWE grammar and usage simply doesn't help make kids better writers. Each side in the debate tends to regard the other as mentally ill or/and blinded by political ideology. Neither camp appears ever to have considered whether maybe the way prescriptive SWE was traditionally taught had something to do with its inutilty.

By way here I'm referring not so much to actual method as to spirit or attitude. Most traditional teachers of English grammar have, of course, been dogmatic SNOOTS, and like most dogmatists they've been incredibly stupid about the rhetoric they used and the Audience they were addressing.<sup>37</sup> I refer specifically to their assumption that SWE is the sole appropriate English dialect and that the only reasons anyone could fail to see this are ignorance or amnesia or grave deficiencies in character. As rhetoric, this sort of attitude works only in sermons to the Choir, and as pedagogy it's just disastrous. The reality is that an average U.S. student is going to go to the trouble of mastering the difficult conventions of SWE only if he sees SWE's relevant Group or Discourse Community as one he'd like to be part of. And in the absence of any sort of argument for why the correct-SWE Group is a good or desirable one (an argument

that, recall, the traditional teacher hasn't given, because he's such a dogmatic SNOOT he sees no need to), the student is going to be reduced to evaluating the desirability of the SWE Group based on the one obvious member of the Group he's encountered, namely the SNOOTY teacher himself.

*Please Wait Here Until  
Next Available Clerk*

I'm not suggesting here that an effective SWE pedagogy would require teachers to wear sunglasses and call students "Dude." What I am suggesting is that the rhetorical situation of an English class—a class composed wholly of young people whose Group identity is rooted in defiance of Adult-Establishment values, plus also composed partly of minorities whose primary dialects are different from SWE—requires the teacher to come up with overt, honest, compelling arguments for why SWE is a dialect worth learning.

These arguments are hard to make—not intellectually but emotionally, politically. Because they are baldly elitist.<sup>38</sup> The real truth, of course, is that SWE is the dialect of the American elite. That it was invented, codified, and promulgated by Privileged WASP Males and is perpetuated as "Standard" by same. That it is the shibboleth of the Establishment and an instrument of political power and class division and racial discrimination and all manner of social inequity. These are shall we say rather delicate subjects to bring up in an English class, especially in the service of a pro-SWE argument, and extra-especially if you yourself are both a Privileged WASP Male and the Teacher and thus pretty much a walking symbol of the Adult Establishment. This reviewer's opinion, though, is that both students and SWE are better served if the teacher makes his premises explicit and his argument overt, presenting himself as an advocate of SWE's utility rather than as a prophet of its innate superiority.

Because this argument is both most delicate and (I believe) most important with respect to students of color, here is one version of a spiel I've given in private conference<sup>39</sup> with certain black students who were (a) bright and inquisitive and (b) deficient in what U.S. higher education considers written English facility:

I don't know whether anybody's told you this or not, but when you're in a college English class you're, basically studying a foreign dialect. This

37 There are still some of these teachers around, at least here in the Midwest. You know the type:

hipless, tweedy, cancrine—Old Maids of both genders. If you had one (as I did, 1976-77), you surely remember him.

38 (Or rather the arguments require us openly to acknowledge and talk about elitism; whereas a

dogmatic SNOOT's pedagogy is merely elitism in action.)

39 (I'm not a total idiot.)

dialect is called Standard Written English. [Brief overview of major U.S. dialects à la p. 50.] From talking with you and reading your essays, I've concluded that your own primary dialect is [one of three variants of SBE common to our region]. Now, let me spell something out in my official Teacher-voice: The SBE you're fluent in is different from SWE in all kinds of important ways. Some of these differences are grammatical—for example, double negatives are OK in Standard Black English but not in SWE, and SBE and SWE conjugate certain verbs in totally different ways. Other differences have more to do with style—for instance, Standard Written English tends to use a lot more subordinate clauses in the early parts of sentences, and it sets off most of these early subordinates with commas, and, under SWE rules, writing that doesn't do this is "choppy." There are tons of differences like that. How much of this stuff do you already know?

[STANDARD RESPONSE: some variation on "I know from the grades and comments on my papers that English profs don't think I'm a good writer."] Well, I've got good news and bad news. There are some otherwise smart English profs who aren't very aware that there are real dialects of English other than SWE, so when

they're reading your papers they'll put, like, "Incorrect conjugation" or "Comma needed" instead of "SWE conjugates this verb differently" or "SWE calls for a comma here." That's the good news—it's not that you're a bad writer, it's that you haven't learned the special rules of the dialect they want you to write in. Maybe that's not such good news, that they were grading you down for mistakes in a foreign language you didn't even know was a foreign language. That they won't let you write in SBE. Maybe it seems unfair. If it does, you're not going to like this news: I'm not going to let you write in SBE either. In my class, you have to learn and write in SWE. If you want to study your own dialect and its rules and history and how it's different from SWE, fine—there are some great books by scholars of Black English, and I'll help you find some and talk about them with you if you want. But that will be outside class. In class—in my English class—you will have to master and write in Standard Written English, which we might just as well call "Standard White English," because it was developed by white people and is used by white people, especially educated, powerful white people.

[RESPONSES by this point vary too widely to standardize.] I'm respecting you enough here to give you what I believe is the straight truth. In this country, SWE is perceived as the dialect of education and intelligence and power and prestige, and anybody of any race, ethnicity, religion, or gender who wants to succeed in American culture has got to be able to use SWE. This is How It Is. You can be glad about it or sad about it or deeply pissed off. You can believe it's racist and unjust and decide right here and now to spend every waking minute of your adult life arguing against it, and maybe you should, but I'll tell you something: If you ever want those arguments to get listened to and taken seriously, you're going to have to communicate them

in SWE, because SWE is the dialect our country uses to talk to itself. African Americans who've become successful and important in U.S. culture know this; that's why King's and X's and Jackson's speeches are in SWE, and why Morrison's and Angelou's and Baldwin's and Wideman's and West's books are full of totally ass-kicking SWE, and why black judges and politicians and journalists and doctors and teachers communicate professionally in SWE. Some of these people grew up in homes and communities where SWE was the native dialect, and these black people had it much easier in school, but the ones who didn't grow up with SWE realized at some point that they had to learn it and become able to write in it, and so they did. And [INSERT NAME HERE], you're going to learn to use it, too, because I am going to make you.

I should note here that a couple of the students I've said this stuff to were offended—one lodged an Official Complaint—and that I have had more than one colleague profess to find my spiel "racially insensitive." Perhaps you do, too. My own humble opinion is that some of the cultural and political realities of American life are themselves racially insensitive and elitist and offensive and unfair, and that pussyfooting around these realities with euphemistic doublespeak is not only hypocritical but toxic to the project of ever actually changing them. Such pussyfooting has of course now achieved the status of a dialect—one powerful enough to have turned the normal politics of the Usage Wars sort of inside out.

I refer here to Politically Correct English (PCE), under whose conventions failing students become "high-potential" students and poor people "economically disadvantaged" and people in wheelchairs "differently abled" and a sentence like "White English and Black English are different and you better learn White English if you don't want to flunk" is not blunt but "insensitive." Although it's common to make jokes about PCE (referring to ugly people as "aesthetically challenged" and so on), be advised that Politically Correct English's various pre- and proscriptions are taken very seriously indeed by colleges and corporations and government agencies, whose own institutional dialects now evolve under the beady scrutiny of a whole new kind of Language Police.

From one perspective, the history of PCE evinces a kind of Lenin-to-Stalinesque irony. That is, the same ideological principles that informed the original Descriptivist revolution—namely, the sixties-era rejections of traditional authority and traditional inequality—have now actually produced a far more inflexible Prescriptivism, one unencumbered by tradition or complexity and backed by the threat of real-world sanctions (termination, litigation) for those who fail to conform. This is sort of funny in a dark way, maybe, and most

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criticism of PCE seems to consist in making fun of its trendiness or vapidness. This reviewer's own opinion is that prescriptive PCE is not just silly but confused and dangerous.

Usage is always political, of course, but it's complexly political. With respect, for instance, to political change, usage conventions can function in two ways: On the one hand they can be a reflection of political change, and on the other they can be an instrument of political change. These two functions are different and have to be kept straight. Confusing them—in particular, mistaking for political efficacy what is really just a language's political symbolism—enables the bizarre conviction that America ceases to be elitist or unfair simply because Americans stop using certain vocabulary that is historically associated with elitism and unfairness. This is PCE's central fallacy—that a society's mode of expression is productive of its attitudes rather than a product of those attitudes—and of course it's nothing but the obverse of the politically conservative SNOOT's delusion that social change can be retarded by restricting change in standard usage.<sup>40</sup>

Forget Stalinization or Logic 101—level equivocations, though. There's a grosser irony about Politically Correct English. This is that PCE purports to be the dialect of progressive reform but is in fact—in its Orwellian substitution of the euphemisms of social equality for social equality itself—of vastly more help to conservatives and the U.S. status quo than traditional SNOOT prescriptions ever were. Were I, for instance, a political conservative who opposed taxation as a means of redistributing national wealth, I would be delighted to watch PCE progressives spend their time and energy arguing over whether a poor person should be described as "low-income" or "economically disadvantaged" or "pre-prosperous" rather than constructing effective public arguments for redistributive legislation or higher marginal tax rates on corporations. (Not to mention that strict codes of egalitarian euphemism serve to burke the sorts of painful, unpretty, and sometimes offensive discourse that in a pluralistic democracy leads to actual political change rather than symbolic political change. In other

words, PCE functions as a form of censorship, and censorship always serves the status quo.)

As a practical matter, I strongly doubt whether a guy who has four small kids and makes \$12,000 a year feels more empowered or less ill-used by a society that carefully refers to him as "economically disadvantaged" rather than "poor." Were I he, in fact, I'd probably find the PCE term insulting—not just because it's patronizing but because it's hypocritical and self-serving. Like many forms of Vogue Usage,<sup>41</sup> PCE functions primarily to signal and congratulate certain virtues in the speaker—scrupulous egalitarianism, concern for the dignity of all people, sophistication about the political implications of language—and so serves the selfish interests of the PC far more than it serves any of the persons or groups renamed.

## CLOSURE

INTERPOLATION ON A RELATED ISSUE IN  
THE FACE OF WHOSE GHASTLY MALIGNANCY  
THIS REVIEWER'S DEMOCRATIC SPIRIT JUST  
GIVES OUT ALTOGETHER, ADMITTEDLY

This issue is Academic English, a cancer that has metastasized now to afflict both scholarly writing—

If such a sublime cyborg would insinuate the future as post-Fordist subject, his palpably masochistic locations as ecstatic agent of the sublime superstate need to be decoded as the "now all-but-unreadable DNA" of the fast industrializing Detroit, just as his Robocop-like strategy of carceral negotiation and street control remains the tirelessly American one of inflicting regeneration through violence upon the racially heteroglossic wilds and others of the inner city.<sup>42</sup>

—and prose as mainstream as *The Village Voice's*:

At first encounter, the poems' distanced cerebral surfaces can be daunting, evading physical location or straightforward emotional arc. But this seeming remoteness quickly reveals a very real passion, centered in the speaker's struggle to define his evolving self-construction.

Maybe it's a combination of my SNOOTitude

<sup>40</sup> E.g., this is the reasoning behind many Pop Prescriptivists' complaint that shoddy usage signifies the Decline of Western Civilization.

<sup>41</sup> *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* includes a minisurvey on VOEGUE WORDS, but it's a disappointing one in that Garner does

little more than list VW's that bug him and say that "vogue words have such a grip on the popular mind that they come to be used in contexts in which they serve little purpose." This is one of the rare places in *ADMAU* where Garner is simply wrong. The real problem is that every sentence blends and balances at least two different communicative functions—one the

transmission of raw info, the other the transmission of certain stuff about the speaker—and Vogue Usage throws this balance off. Garner's "serve little purpose" is exactly incorrect; vogue words serve too much the purpose of presenting the speaker in a certain light (even if this is merely as with-it or hip), and people's subliminal B.S.-antennae pick this imbalance up.

and that's why even nonSNOOTS often find Vogue Usage irritating and creepy.

<sup>42</sup> FYI, this passage, which appears in *ADMAU's* entry on OBSCURITY, is quoted from a 1997 *Sacramento Bee* article entitled "No Contest: English Professors Are Worst Writers on Campus."

and the fact that I end up having to read a lot of it for my job, but I'm afraid I regard Academic English not as a dialectal variation but as a grotesque debasement of SWE, and loathe it even more than the stilted incoherences of Presidential English ("This is the best and only way to uncover, destroy, and prevent Iraq from reengineering weapons of mass destruction") or the mangled pieties of BusinessSpeak ("Our Mission: to proactively search and provide the optimum networking skills and resources to meet the needs of your growing business"); and in support of this utter contempt and intolerance I cite no less an authority than Mr. G. Orwell, who 50 years ago had AE pegged as a "mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence" in which "it is normal to come across long passages which are almost completely lacking in meaning."<sup>43</sup>

It probably isn't the whole explanation, but, as with the vogueish hypocrisy of PCE, the obscurity and pretension of Academic English can be attributed in part to a disruption in the delicate rhetorical balance between language as a vector of meaning and language as a vector of the writer's own résumé. In other words, it is when a scholar's vanity/insecurity leads him to write primarily to communicate and reinforce his own status as an Intellectual that his English is deformed by pleonasm and pretentious diction (whose function is to signal the writer's erudition) and by opaque abstraction (whose function is to keep anybody from pinning the writer down to a definite assertion that can maybe be refuted or shown to be silly). The latter characteristic, a level of obscurity that often makes it just about impossible to figure out what an AE sentence is really saying, so closely resembles political and corporate doublespeak ("revenue enhancement," "downsizing," "pre-owned," "proactive resource-allocation restructuring") that it's tempting to think AE's real purpose is concealment and its real motivation fear.

The insecurity that drives AE, PCE, and vocab-tape ads is far from groundless, though. These are tense linguistic times. Blame it on Heisenbergian Uncertainty or postmodern rela-

tivism or Image Over Substance or the ubiquity of advertising and P.R. or the rise of Identity Politics or whatever you will—we live in an era of terrible preoccupation with presentation and interpretation. In rhetorical terms, certain long-held distinctions between the Ethical Appeal, Logical Appeal (= an argument's plausibility or soundness), and Pathetic Appeal (= an argument's emotional impact) have now pretty much collapsed—or rather the different sorts of Appeals now affect and are affected by one another in ways that make it almost impossible to advance an argument on "reason" alone.

A vividly concrete illustration here concerns the Official Complaint a black undergraduate filed against this rev. after one of my little in camera spiels described on pages 53–54. The complainant was (I opine) wrong, but she was not crazy

or stupid; and I was able later to see that I did bear some responsibility for the whole nasty administrative swivet. My culpability lay in gross rhetorical naïveté. I'd seen my speech's primary Appeal as Logical: The aim was to make a conspicuously blunt, honest argument for SWE's utility. It wasn't pretty, maybe, but it was true, plus so manifestly bullshit-free that I think I anticipated not just acquiescence but gratitude for my candor.<sup>44</sup> The problem I failed to see, of course, lay not with the argument per se but with the person making it—namely me, a Privileged WASP Male in a position of power, thus someone whose statements about the primacy and utility of the Privileged WASP Male dialect appeared not candid/horroratory/authoritative/true but elitist/high-handed/authoritarian/racist. Rhetoric-wise, what happened was that I allowed the substance and style of my Logical Appeal to completely torpedo my Ethical Appeal: What the student heard was just another PWM rationalizing why his Group and his English were top dog and ought "logically" to stay that way (plus, worse, trying to use his academic power over her to coerce her assent<sup>45</sup>).

If for any reason you happen to find yourself sharing this particular student's perceptions and

*A Taste That's  
All It's Own!*

<sup>43</sup> This was in his 1946 "Politics and the English Language," an essay that despite its date (and its title's basic redundancy) remains the definitive SNOOT statement on Academes. Orwell's famous AE translation of the gorgeous "I

saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift" in Ecclesiastes as "Objective considerations of contemporary phenomena compel the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate ca-

capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account" should be tattooed on the left wrist of every grad student in the anglophone world.

<sup>44</sup> Please just don't even say it.

<sup>45</sup> (She professed to have been especially traumatized by the climactic "I am going to make you," which in retrospect was indeed a mammoth rhetorical boner.)

reaction.<sup>46</sup> I would ask that you bracket your feelings long enough to recognize that the PWM instructor's very modern rhetorical dilemma in that office was really no different from the dilemma faced by a male who makes a Pro-Life argument, or an atheist who argues against Creation Science, or a Caucasian who opposes Affirmative Action, or an African American who decries Racial Profiling, or anyone over eighteen who tries to make a case for raising the legal driving age to eighteen, etc. The dilemma has nothing to do with whether the arguments themselves are plausible or right or even sane, because the debate rarely gets that far—any opponent with sufficiently strong feelings or a dogmatic bent can discredit the arguments and pretty much foreclose all further discussion with a single, terribly familiar rejoinder: "Of course you'd say that"; "Easy for you to say"; "What right do you have . . . ?"

Now (still bracketing) consider the situation of any reasonably intelligent and well-meaning SNOOT who sits down to prepare a prescriptive usage guide. It's the millennium, post-Everything: Whence the authority to make any sort of credible Appeal for SWE at all?

#### ARTICLE'S CRUX:

WHY BRYAN A. GARNER  
IS A GENIUS, THOUGH OF A  
RATHER PARTICULAR KIND

It isn't that *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* is perfect. It doesn't seem to cover *conversant* in vs. *conversant with*, for example, or *abstruse* vs. *obtuse*, or to have anything on *hereby* and *herewith* (which I tend to use interchangeably but always have the uneasy feeling I'm screwing up). Garner's got a good discussion of *used* to but nothing on *supposed* to. Nor does he give any examples to help explain irregular participles and transitivity ("The light shone" vs. "I shined the light," etc.), and these would seem to be more important than, say, the correct spelling of *huzzah* or the plural of *animalculum*, both of which get discussed. Plus there's the VOGUE WORDS snafu and the absence of a pro-

nunciation entry on *trough*.<sup>47</sup> In other words, a SNOOT is going to be able to find stuff to quibble about in any usage dictionary, and ADMAU is no exception.

But it's still really, really good—and not just lexicographically but rhetorically, politically (if it even makes sense to distinguish these any more). As a collection of judgments, ADMAU is in no way Descriptivist, but Garner structures his judgments very carefully to avoid the elitism and anality of traditional SNOOTitude. He does not deploy irony or scorn or caustic wit, nor tropes or colloquialisms or contractions . . . or really any sort of verbal style at all. In fact, even though Garner talks openly about himself and uses the I-S pronoun throughout the whole dictionary, his personality is oddly effaced, neutralized. It's like he's so bland he's barely there. E.g., as this reviewer was finishing the book's final entry,<sup>48</sup> it struck me that I had no idea whether Bryan Garner was black or white, gay or straight, Democrat or Dittohead. What was even more striking was that I hadn't once wondered about any of this up to now; something about Garner's lexical persona kept me ever from asking where the guy was coming from or what particular agendas or ideologies were informing what he had admitted right up front were "value judgments."

Bryan Garner is a genius because *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* pretty much resolves the Usage Wars' Crisis of Authority. Garner manages to control the comprehension of rhetorical Appeals so cleverly that he appears able to transcend both Usage Wars camps and simply tell the truth, and in a way that does not torpedo his own credibility but actually enhances it. His argumentative strategy is totally brilliant and totally sneaky, and part of both qualities is that it usually doesn't seem like there's even an argument going on at all.

Garner recognizes something that neither of the dogmatic camps appears to get: Given 40 years of the Usage Wars, "authority" is no longer something a lexicographer can just presume *ex officio*. In fact, a large part of the project of any contemporary usage dictionary will consist in establishing this authority. If that

<sup>46</sup> (The Dept. head and Dean did not, as it happens, share her reaction . . . though it would be disingenuous not to tell you that they happened also to be PWM's, which fact did not go unremarked by the complainant, such that the whole proceeding got pretty darn tense, indeed, before it was all over.)

<sup>47</sup> To be honest, I noticed this omission only because midway through working on this article I happened to use the word *trough* in front of the same SNOOT friend who likes to compare public English to violin-hammering, and he fell sideways out of his chair,

and it emerged that I have somehow all my life misheard *trough* as ending with a *th* instead of an *f* and thus have publicly mispronounced it God knows how many scores of times, and I all but burned rubber getting home to see whether perhaps the error was so common and human and

understandable that Garner himself had a good-natured entry on it, but no such luck, which in fairness I don't suppose I can really blame Garner for.

<sup>48</sup> (on *zweibackva*, *zweiback*)

seems rather obvious, be apprised that nobody before Garner seems to have figured it out—that the lexicographer's challenge now is to be not just accurate and comprehensive but *credible*. That in the absence of unquestioned Authority in language, the reader must now be moved or persuaded to *grant* a dictionary its authority, freely and for what appear to be good reasons.

Garner's *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* is thus both a collection of information and a piece of Democratic rhetoric.<sup>49</sup> Its goal is to recast the Prescriptivist's persona: The author presents himself as an authority not in an *auto-critic* sense but in a *technocratic* sense. And the technocrat is not only a thoroughly modern and palatable image of Authority but also immune to the charges of elitism/classism that have hobbled traditional Prescriptivism.

Of course, Garner really is a technocrat. He's a lawyer, recall, and in *ADMAU* he consciously projects a sort of wise juridical persona: knowledgeable, dispassionate, fair, with an almost Enlightenment-grade passion for reason. His judgments about usage tend to be rendered like legal opinions—exhaustive citation of precedent (other dictionaries' judgments, published examples of actual usage) combined with clear, logical reasoning that's always informed by the larger consensual purposes SWE is meant to serve.

Also thoroughlygoingly technocratic is Garner's approach to the issue of whether anybody's even going to be interested in his 700 pages of fine-pointed counsel. Like any specialist, he simply presumes that there are practical reasons why some people choose to concern themselves with SWE usage; and his attitude about the fact that most Americans "could care less" isn't scorn or disapproval but the phlegmatic resignation of a doctor or lawyer who realizes that he can give good advice but can't make you take it:

The reality I care about most is that some people still want to use the language well.<sup>50</sup> They want to write effectively; they want to speak effectively. They want their language to be graceful at times and powerful at times. They want to understand how to use words well, how to manipulate sentences, and how to move about in the language without seeming to flail. They want good grammar, but they want more: they want

rhetoric<sup>51</sup> in the traditional sense. That is, they want to use the language deftly so that it's fit for their purposes.

It's now possible to see that all the autobiographical stuff in *ADMAU*'s Preface does more than just humanize Mr. Bryan A. Garner. It also serves to detail the early and enduring passion that helps make someone a credible technocrat—we tend to like and trust experts whose expertise is born of a real love for their specialty instead of just a desire to be expert at something. In fact, it turns out that *ADMAU*'s Preface quietly and steadily invests Garner with every single qualification of modern technocratic Authority: passionate devotion, reason, and accountability (recall "in the interests of full disclosure, here are the ten critical points . . ."), experience ("that, after years of working on usage problems, I've settled on"), exhaustive and tech-savvy research ("For contemporary usage, the files of our greatest dictionary makers pale in comparison with the full-text search capabilities now provided by NEXIS and WESTLAW"), an even and judicious temperament (see e.g. this from *HYPERCORRECTION*: "Sometimes people strive to abide by the strictest etiquette, but in the process behave inappropriately"<sup>52</sup>), and the sort of humble integrity (for instance, including in one of the entries a past published usage-error of his own) that not only renders Garner likable but transmits the same kind of reverence for English that good jurists have for the law, both of which are bigger and more important than any one person.

Probably the most attractive thing about *ADMAU*'s Ethical Appeal, though, is Garner's scrupulous consideration of the reader's concern about his (or her) *own* linguistic authority and rhetorical persona and ability to convince an Audience that he cares. Again and again, Garner frames his prescriptions in rhetorical terms, e.g.: "To the writer or speaker for whom credibility is important, it's a good idea to avoid distracting any readers or listeners." *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage*'s real thesis, in other words, is that the purposes of the expert authority and the purposes of the lay reader are identical, and identically rhetorical—which I submit is about as Democratic these days as you're going to get. ■

<sup>49</sup> (meaning *literally* Democratic—it Wants Your Vote)

<sup>50</sup> The last two words of this sentence, of course, are what the Usage Wars are about—those "language" and whose "well"? The

most remarkable thing about this sentence is that coming from Garner it doesn't sound naive or obnoxious but just . . . reasonable.

<sup>51</sup> Did you think I was kidding?

<sup>52</sup> (Here this reviewer's indwelling and ever-vigilant SNOOT can't help but question why Garner uses a comma before the conjunction in this sentence, since what follows the conjunction is neither an independent clause nor any

kind of plausible complement for *strive to*. But respectful disagreement between people of goodwill is of course Democratically natural and healthy and, when you come right down to it, kind of fun.)

[REDACTED]

Well, I guess I might as well just send this since I at least won't be the first to break the copyright law here. Here's Peoria (4).

Peoria (4)

Triquarterly; Evanston; Fall 2002; David Foster Wallace;

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Start Page: 131

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Subject Terms: Poetry

Personal Names: Wallace, David Foster

Abstract: A poem is presented.

Full Text:

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Past the flannel plains and blacktop graphs and skylines of canted rust, and past the tobacco-brown river overhung with weeping trees and coins of sunlight through them on the water downriver, to the place beyond the windbreak, where unfilled fields simmer shrilly in the A.M. heat: shattercane, lambsquarter, cutgrass, saw brier, nutgrass, jimsonweed, wild mint, dandelion, foxtail, spincabbage, goldenrod, creeping charlie, butterprint, nightshade, ragweed, wild oat, vetch, butcher grass, invaginate volunteer beans, all heads nodding in a soft morning breeze like a mother's hand on your cheek. An arrow of starlings fired from the windbreak's thatch. The glitter of dew that stays where it is and steams all day. A sunflower, four more, one bowed, and horses in the distance standing rigid as toys. All nodding. Electric sounds of insects at their business. Ale-colored sunshine and pale sky and whorls of cirrus so high they cast no shadow. Insects all business all the time. Quartz and chert and schist and chondrite iron scabs in granite. Very old land. Look around you. The horizon trembling, shapeless. We are all of us brothers.

Some crows come overhead then, four, silent with intent, on the wing, corn-bound for the pasture's wire, where one horse smells at the other's behind, the lead horse's tail obligingly lifted. Your shoes' brand incised in the dew. An alfalfa breeze. Socks' burrs. Dry scratching inside a pulvert. Rusted wire and canted posts more a symbol of restraint than a fence per se. NO HUNTING. The shush of the interstate off past the windbreak. The pasture's crows standing at angles, turning up patties to get at the worms underneath, the shapes of the worms incised in the overturned dung and baked by the sun all day until hardened, there to stay, tiny vacant lines in rows and inset curls that do not close because head never quite touches tail. Read these.

[REDACTED]



[from Triquarterly #112]

Peoria (9)  
"Whispering Pines"

David Foster Wallace

Under the sign erected every May above the interstate highway reading SPRING IS HERE--THINK FARM SAFETY and through the NE ingress with its own defaced name and signs discouraging solicitation and Speed Limit and universal glyph for children at play and down the blacktop's gauntlet of doublewide showpieces past the rottweiler fucking nothing in spasms at chain's end at the end and the sound of frying through the kitchenette window of the trailer at the hairpin right and then hard left along the length of a speedbump into the dense copse as yet uncleared for new singlewides and the sound of dry things snapping and stridulation of bugs in the duff of the copse and the two bottles and bright plastic packet impaled on the mulberry twig, seeing through shifting parallax of thin limbs sections then of trailers along the North park's anfractuuous roads and lanes skirting the corrugate trailer where it was said the man left his family and returned sometime later with a gun and killed them all as they watched Dagnet and the tom abandoned 16-wide half-overgrown by the edge of the copse where boys and their girls made strange agnate forms on pallets and left bright tom packs until a mishap with a stove blew the gas lead and ruptured the trailer's south wall in a great labial tear that exposes the trailer's gutted insides to view from the edge of the copse and the plurality of eyes as the needles and stems of a long winter crunch and snap beneath a plurality of sneakers where the copse leaves off at a tangent past the end of the undeveloped cul de sac where they come now at dusk to watch the parked car heave on its springs. The windows steamed nearly opaque and that it seems to move without running, the car, squeak of struts and absorbers and a jiggle that seems to wish to be rhythmic but isn't. The birds at dusk and the smell of snapped pine and a younger one's gum. The car's shimmying motions resemble those of a car moving at high speeds along a bad road, making the Buick's aspect dreamy and freighted with menace in the gaze of the girls who squat at the copse's risen edge appearing dyadic and half tree and owlsh of eye, watching for the sometime passage of a limb's pale shape past a window (once a bare foot flat against it and itself atremble), moving incrementally forward and down each night in the weeks before true spring, wordlessly daring one another to go up close to the heaving car and peer in, which the only one who ever does is no longer here.

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David Foster Wallace, author of *Infinite Jest* and other works, has recently been appointed Disney Professor of Creative Writing at Pomona College.

