

Paris Martineau's essay, written in David Markus's "Writing the Essay," appears to take a scattered, rapid, relentless approach to David Foster Wallace's novels and critical legacy. But by blending form and analysis, it achieves a respectful reading of Wallace's proper place in our critical consciousness.

YOUR KIND-OF-SORT-OF-HALF-TRUTH IS STRANGER THAN FICTION

Paris Martineau

A man—eyes glued to the screen—unceremoniously shits himself in his ergonomically designed, body-molded recliner. His head lolls, mouth agape over the dinner tray that has been precisely snapped into place below his chin to allow for maximum viewing pleasure, and minimal effort, of course. Elsewhere, a boy snakes his way through the underbelly of a tennis court. His right arm (which is grotesquely oversized in comparison to his left as a result of thousands of forehand swings) struggles to correctly flick a spark into existence from the lighter held to his lips. He fervently tries again, this time succeeding. He exhales in rapture. A world away, a man attempts to picture himself on a beach: he fails. He knows he is not anywhere remotely tropical and the existential hell that is his I.R.S. office cubical offers no help in trying to form this fantasy. He breathes; he tries again, but the thought-crushing reality of total boredom sets in almost immediately this time. He contemplates suicide.

The characters in David Foster Wallace's novels exemplify the statement "[f]iction's about what it is to be a fucking human being" (qtd. in McCaffery). This remark, spoken by Wallace during a 1993 interview, preceded the publication of *Infinite Jest*, the massive novel which captivated readers with its unapologetic depiction of the human condition and rebelled against the end-of-the-century obsession with the minimalist post-modern conventions exhibited by

authors such as Raymond Carver, Ann Beattie, and David Leavitt. Wallace's work is devoid of flowery metaphoric platitudes; instead, it overwhelms the reader with a matter-of-fact candor that assumes the role of a seemingly omnipresent, ever-truthful, all-seeing eye. He treats the subjects in his work with the utmost care. Whether he's writing of a casual locker room chat between teammates, or of a recovering drug addict watching his friend's eyes be sewn open as he lays in a puddle of his own piss, each scene of Wallace's demands the reader's careful attention.

Part of the appeal of Wallace's work is the specificity he brings to each subject. His use of endnotes (which is incredibly extensive—within *Infinite Jest* there are 96 pages dedicated to end-notes alone) allows for a near encyclopedic level of precision in his work as he weaves together 388 different entries of fake contextual evidence for the fictional world he has created. This mimicked truth becomes hard to differentiate from reality. For example, the in-depth "Filmography of James O. Incandenza," which describes the formation, plot, and release of 80 different 'films' created by a character within the novel, seems too complex and complete to have been created for mere reference in an endnote (*Infinite Jest* 985-994). The use of almost-truths and the pervasive nature of this not-so-factual-evidence calls into question the actual relationship between reality and fiction in Wallace's work. What is truthful? What is not? And how does this contribute to Wallace's idea of fiction as a depiction of actual humanity?

In Wallace's final novel, *The Pale King*, the "Author's Forward" is not so forward. Sandwiched 68 pages into the text, it insists: "Author here. Meaning the real author, the living human being, the pencil, not some abstract narrative persona . . . [A]ll of this is true. This book is really true" (*The Pale King* 68-69). This, of course, was preceded, on the copyright page, by the classic fiction disclaimer: "the characters and events in this book are fictitious," which Wallace quickly disputes as a "legal necessity" (*The Pale King* 1, 69), creating a paradox that even he himself describes as a rather "irksome metaphysical titty-pincher" (*The Pale King* 69). *The Pale King* goes on to feature an array of characters, among them one who is oh-so-coincidentally named David Foster Wallace, who, in this life, is an employee at the IRS.

While this character is obviously fictitious, the intertwining of near-autobiographical truth and fantasy allows not only for the work to slip into the category of metafiction, but also for a deeper emotional commitment to be developed between the reader and author. His characters do not seem removed from reality; they are not attempting to be a symbolic representation of some larger swath of mankind. The possibility that Wallace leaves open—that tinges of actual truth do exist within his work—allows for the almost accidental acceptance of these characters as people by the reader. This is perhaps most evident in Wallace's shorter piece, "The Planet Trillaphon as it Stands in Relation to the Bad Thing," which reads not as a short story, but as a memoir. Wallace begins with an ominous account:

I've been on antidepressants for, what, about a year now, and I suppose I feel as if I'm pretty qualified to tell you what they're like. They're fine, really, but they're fine in the same way that, say, living on another planet that was warm and comfortable . . . would be fine: it would be fine, but it wouldn't be good old Earth, obviously. (26)

His existence on the planet Trillaphon, Wallace's moniker for the antipsychotic drug Tofranil, is described as a state of medication-induced physical separation from depression (which he aptly names The Bad Thing). Throughout the short story, Wallace gives an autobiographical account of the character's (or, perhaps, his) struggle with The Bad Thing, utilizing the first-person perspective from the inaugural sentence. This lack of distinction between the narrator and the author sustains the reader's belief that the piece is truth, rather than a fictional short story.

When he describes "the nature of The Bad Thing," in which "every single cell in your body is sick . . . all just sick as hell," the emotional authority of the piece is not merely that of an author writing about a character's depression, but that of a human being describing their own debilitating personal sickness ("The Planet Trillaphon" 29). This merging of reality and fiction allows for a deeper emotional commitment to be felt by the reader. Wallace is not contained by the staunch rules necessary for factual integrity, nor is he wholeheartedly

indulging in the wild possibilities of fantasy. The interweaving of these two popular styles of literary thought leaves the reader with a sustained belief in the authenticity of the work due to the possibility of both truthful and fictitious claims being found throughout the narrative.

In the essay “Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young,” Wallace writes that “we need narrative like we need space-time; it’s a built-in thing” (“Fictional Futures” 8). His assertion comes in response to the mid-eighties backlash against the “endless succession” of postmodern “flash-in-the-pan short story starlets”—whom Wallace begrudgingly defends despite their overwhelming “sameness” (“Fictional Futures” 2). He states that the narrative nature of new entertainment requires that literature adapt to, or at least attempt not to discount, the mass appeal and engagement that such art forms provide. These ideas lend themselves to the belief that the types of narrative structures Wallace made use of were meant to ease the barrier of communication as he attempted to convey his thoughts. Yet the structural makeup of that same narrative is hopelessly complex. In fact, Wallace’s comically maximalist style requires the reader to continuously disengage with the text’s narrative in order to engage with its entirety. Within *Infinite Jest*, the constant use of endnotes leaves the reader physically flipping back and forth across the barrier of a thousand pages of text in order to continue the story linearly. The sprawling, fragmented form his pieces take on does allow for a thorough and astoundingly accurate depiction of the so-called ‘human experience,’ (which is usually one of the presumed goals of maximalism) but the great lengths—both physical and metaphoric—that he goes to in order to achieve this almost leaves the reader feeling as if they are being kept at an arm’s length from the whole of his emotionally provocative prose.

In his article for the *New Yorker*, “The Unfinished,” however, author D.T. Max describes this exercise in patience not as a nuisance, but as “[Wallace’s] way of reclaiming language from banality while simultaneously representing all the caveats, micro-thoughts, meta-moments, and other flickers of his hyperactive mind” through the physical flickering of the page in hand. Max describes the choice to utilize endnotes as an integral aspect of the text as one which was born

out of a desire to give the reader a visceral reminder that “what he was reading was invented—the final work of constructing a moral world was his” (Max). Such devices are reflective of the common postmodern parody of the structure and purpose of literature. However, this explanation does not completely remedy the concern in regards to the possible alienation of the reader as an after-effect of his structural choices, which could possibly hinder the emotional connection between author and reader. While Max’s description of form as a model for thought in Wallace’s work rings true, it fails to take into account the problems that arise due to the overt and incredibly intense maximalist nature of his work.

Wallace’s essays provide the solution to this seemingly paradoxical issue. Limited by the boundaries of fact, and notable for their brevity, his essays present a straightforward clarity that is hard to come by within the vast expanses of works such as *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*. The voice that emerges out of these limitations is distinctly that of David Foster Wallace, yet the condensed nature of these works allows for an almost more fervent version of Wallace to reveal itself. Frequently, he writes in a manner that is disarmingly candid: a representative of the average overly-educated-thirty-something, on the edge of sarcasm, yet unmistakably sincere. In the piece “This Is Water,” which is adapted from Wallace’s Kenyon College Commencement Address, he states:

And I submit that this is what the real, no-bullshit value of your liberal-arts education is supposed to be about: How to keep from going through your comfortable, prosperous, respectable adult life dead, unconscious, a slave to your head and to your natural default-setting of being uniquely, completely, imperially alone, day in and day out. (3)

There are no long-winded conceits used, no mixing of fact and fiction for an additional effect and connection, no endnotes, yet the poignancy of moments like this within his essays is comparable to the oh-so-highly acclaimed moments that come only after traipsing hundreds of pages into the depths of works such as *Infinite Jest*. Alexander Nazaryan, in an article titled “The Turbulent Genius of David Foster

Wallace,” speaks to this phenomenon, saying that “above all, [Wallace’s] essays are sincere in a way that fiction can never be, since the mere act of passing off make-believe as truth is fundamentally dishonest.”

One would think after reading Wallace’s works of fiction—novels of great renown that bridge the seemingly unsurmountable gap between fact and fantasy—that this level of emotional connection (however convoluted it may be) is a product of the nature of the freedom of the novel, and a means to the proverbial end of describing this ephemeral and ever-changing “fucking human being” through a distinct narrative choice that could most certainly not exist within the confines of something as stodgy-sounding as an essay. However, upon reading Wallace’s essays, it is soon apparent that emotional power of his prose is not purely an epiphenomenon of his fiction writing, but an integral part of every form of his expression. His essays, which are rooted in fact, “could have only been written by David Foster Wallace” (Narzaryan). They diverge from the academic norm, “intimate in one sentence, cerebral in the next, dropping teenage slang and obscure jargon in the same dependent clause” (Narzaryan). They break apart the generally well-established conventions of the traditional essay and, from the ruins of what is often a trite form of expression, we see a reflection of how David Foster Wallace truly acts and thinks. He is just as intellectually restless in his essays as he is as a novelist (perhaps more so, actually), often obsessing over the most trivial of pursuits, yet whether he be writing on the minutiae of grammar as it relates to the publication of *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* in “Tense Present,” or the dreary horror that is the average Midwestern county fair in “Tickets to the Fair,” he is full of the same vibrant humanity his fictitious works are praised for. He is sincere, joyous, and passionate in his quest—most of all, he is real.

The constant bait and switch that the realm of metafiction relies on is discarded here. Wallace separates himself from this gray area, and what emerges is astoundingly effective in its candid nature. Sobering, matter-of-fact statements exist within these works:

It is not the least bit coincidental that adults who commit suicide with firearms almost always shoot themselves in the head. They

shoot the terrible master. And the truth is that most of these suicides are actually dead long before they pull the trigger. (“This Is Water” 3)

And such remarks remind us that—although the syntactical structure may be similar; although the fervent passion still exists—David Foster Wallace, the character who exists as a narrator in his fiction, is not the same David Foster Wallace as presented in his essays.

Those who have written of Wallace frequently entertain the idea of him as a mysterious man of half-truths that existed throughout his narrative work. He has been described as a brooding depressive, a tortured genius who came up for air only to spout off a poetic maxim and then solemnly return to his dark abode. This flagrant distortion of Wallace’s identity grew only more wide-spread in the years following his suicide, an act which prompted many an autobiographical reading of stories such as “The Planet Trillaphon” and *The Pale King*. Soon, the very nature of Wallace’s sense of self (unfortunately and ironically) slipped into the hands of the collective, and he became a bonafide cultural icon. Wallace, a man who weaved together tales of tennis prodigies and drug abusers, a man who pushed beyond the mid-century minimalist drivel, a man who constantly touted the “bull-shit-ness of literary fame” and scoffed at the “enormous hiss of egos” found in modern day au-thors, had been pigeonholed into the near textbook definition of the very thing he despised (Lipsky 193). In his article “The Rewriting of David Foster Wallace,” author Christian Lorentzen puts it aptly: “Nobody owns David Foster Wallace anymore . . . he has been reduced to a wisdom-dispensing sage on the one hand and shorthand for the Writer As Tortured Soul on the other” (1).

The canonization of Wallace as the vague, bro-lit, depressed hero of the new era can be seen most clearly in director James Ponsoldt’s controversial biopic *The End of the Tour* (2015), which portrays Wallace as an iconographic tortured saint. Film-Wallace is too much of a Holy And Pure Genius to behold the mundane nature of everyday life. He waxes poetically about the relationship between masturbation and death whilst cracking open a beer, and a trip to a convenience store turns into a metaphysical commentary on life (Ponsoldt).

Film-Wallace, who should really be called The-Mind-Of-The-Collective-Wallace, is one ‘holy-shit-this-guy-is-so-brilliant-and-unapproachable’ moment after another. This Wallace is never trivial, or colloquial, or anywhere close to (as he would put it) a “fucking human being.”

None of the joy for the simplicity of life found in Wallace’s essays is seen in the film. Film-Wallace doesn’t seem like the same man who could write 34 pages on the everyday implications of a particular dictionary like he does in “Tense Present” unless there was some awe-inspiring three to four sentence quip at the end that makes a broad and, of course, heavily ironic commentary on human nature (Film-Wallace loves commentary on human nature). This Wallace that has emerged as the so called ‘memorable one,’ the ‘biopic-worthy one,’ is not the Wallace that he so adamantly decreed that he was throughout his non-fiction work, but the Wallace that exists within the pages of the emotionally intriguing half-truth, half-fantasy world that he was so skilled at crafting.

This world of popular imagination—which blurs the lines of autobiography and fiction for Wallace’s developed narrative character—has thoroughly enveloped any remotely reality-based version of David Foster Wallace. The emotional connections his longer works make through their auto-fictitious claims create a visceral relationship with the reader. Yet, it is the intensity of these works that leads many to overlook Wallace’s essays, which depict a more realistic version of his character, even if certain inescapable contrivances still remain.

All of this has caused the disconcerting dichotomy that exists between the Tortured Depressive Soul of the Genius David Foster Wallace and anything else that might partially represent an actually real person. His individuality as well as his humanity have both been lost somewhere in the void that we the readers love to fill with his entrancing narrative prose. “Every whole person understands his lifetime as an organized, recountable series of events and changes with at least a beginning and middle,” Wallace writes (“Fictional Futures” 8). But perhaps he is an exception to this rule. It seems fittingly ironic that he—the man who prided himself on incomplete narratives and fractured stories—would live on in our minds as an equally fractured, part-fact, part-fictitious version of himself.

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truth is stranger than fiction definition: 1. said when you want to emphasize that real events or things are sometimes stranger than imaginary. Learn more. Any opinions in the examples do not represent the opinion of the Cambridge Dictionary editors or of Cambridge University Press or its licensors. More examples Fewer examples. The book tells a harrowing story where truth is stranger than fiction. From. Wikipedia. This example is from Wikipedia and may be reused under a CC BY-SA license. Translations of truth is stranger than fiction. in Chinese (Traditional). in Chinese (Traditional). Truth stranger than fiction (i.redd.it). submitted 1 year ago by Shai_Hulud_My_Dude. 23 comments. share. save. hide. report. Sh, facts don't matter when some people want even the vaguest of stretches to claim some sort of inner circle conspiracy of knowledge. permalink. embed. save. parent. give award. [â€"] make_mind_free2go 3 points4 points5 points 1 year ago (0 children). October 27th Introduction Truth is usually stranger than fiction. Scandals catch more attention than merit. Youâ€™d figure being unique triumphs fitting in. So why am I praying to be more of a wallflower? It Started 3 Weeks Ago It was after my Declaration. âœDeclarationsâ€ are the Bahaâ€™i version of a baptism. At the age of 15, I got to decide if I truly believed in the Faith I had grown up knowing and loving. Of course I declared! They also say truth is stranger than fiction. Why is this? Because fiction is confined to our imagination, while truth is beyond it. That makes fiction, in a way, more predictable, more understandable. It is easier to control fiction by its very nature of being created by us, ponies..." Twilight loved going to public lectures in Ponyville. Public lectures are similar to university lectures, but open to the public and about a more varied range of topics. That was published as non-fiction, but over half of it was uncovered as fictitious. You should take this as a lesson; don't believe everything you read. Of course, for the most part, non-fiction is agreed upon as truth "Twilight opened the door to her treehouse and ran inside. The pegasi started the rainstorm a few minutes earlier than announced.