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“Dave Wallace” and His Readers

Figure 8 The Isolation of the “Dave Wallace” Idiolect.

When I say or write something, there are actually a whole lot of different things I am communicating. The propositional content (i.e., the verbal information I’m trying to convey) is only one part of it. Another part is stuff about me, the communicator. Everyone knows this. (CTL 96)

“An author, like everyone else, speaks some variety, or dialect, of a language, not ‘the language’ itself,” Ives¹ observes. Whether this voice is a conscious linguistic construct or whether it is truly the voice of the author himself (as the “David Wallace” narrator insisted in TPK, all the while adding easily falsifiable fictional details such as the wrong age and birthplace) is not important. The narrator can be (re)constructed separately from the bottom-up, in each

¹ Ives, “A Theory of Literary Dialect,” 152.

text, as one encounters him. But for people who read across Wallace's work, there is surely some top-down mental work going on—a shock of familiarity triggered by a recognition of the author-cum-narrator-cum-character that allows readers to apply what they have already learned about him in other texts. In this chapter, I argue that although Wallace's use of *other* dialects was not mimetic, his projection of his own voice (through various characters and narrators) was self-consciously so, and that he used this to build what Boswell² refers to as “an amiable, self-effacing relationship with his readers,” encouraging them to continue to be part of an ongoing conversation with him. Wallace's students discovered that “his goals were traditional. The story should connect reader and writer.”³ The fandom Wallace inspired is evidence that he succeeded in connecting with many.

“Dave Wallace” is emphatically *not* foreign (i.e., American), *not* ethnic (“resoundingly and in all ways white” (CTL 102)), *not usually* regional in his speech (i.e., upper class), a former jock and perpetual nerd. The nerdiness is the only positive identity he publicly enacted (although he sometimes also *claimed* a Midwestern regional identity). This constellation of characteristics also constitutes the identity that the author claimed publicly, in many interviews that also formed part of the ongoing conversation with readers. Miley⁴ summarizes Wallace's “persona and image as a writer and public Figure” in three words: “footnotes, bandannas, and sincerity,” but his characteristic uses of language go far beyond digressive footnotes and play a much larger role in the construction of his persona than an easily changed (or omitted) bandanna.

Because Wallace occupied the right-most place on Figure 8—the “default” settings of an American, in not just his own worldview, but in popular imagination built upon media representations—he could easily have created a disembodied, personality-less omniscient narrator. He chose instead to draw readers' attention to distinctive idiolect features, creating a narrative persona that readers could connect with across texts, a personality that readers could get to know, one they might by turns admire, feel sorry for, find infuriating, one who has no social filter (telling us things we'd rather he didn't), but also withholds answers to our burning questions, distracting us with wit and style. The speech acts he regularly accomplished, the conversational turn-taking and repair mechanisms he unexpectedly incorporated into his

² Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 180–1.

³ Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, 188.

⁴ Mike Miley, “. . . And Starring David Foster Wallace as Himself: Performance and Persona in *The Pale King*,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 57, no. 2 (2016): 191–207, esp. 194. DOI: 10.1080/00111619.2015.1028611.

writing, and his characteristic linguistic politeness strategies help to lessen the distance between narrator and reader, leading even those who do not share all or any of his social categorizations to nonetheless accept him as a guide to the chaotic world presented—or even as a friend (explaining the passionate fandom of his readers).

From a lesser author, the dominance of a single voice across works might appear to be the result of a deficit, an inability to inhabit different points of view and identities at any length or depth; however, that explanation is unsatisfying for Wallace, given his prodigious skills and imagination. Another possible explanation is implicit racism, sexism, classism, and so forth—that Wallace was simply uninterested in (if not hostile to) identities other than his own. This account, however, is belied by the systematic way he sought to distinguish all the “not-me” identities from his own throughout his career, and the sympathetic treatment given to most of the “not-me” characters (often more sympathetic than the portrayals of Wallace’s alter egos). The pervasiveness of Wallace’s distinctive voice must therefore be seen as a deliberate choice, serving both thematic and philosophical goals—specifically, to reconnect with readers at each opportunity, to provide them with that sense of being in an ongoing conversation with “the living human holding the pencil” (TPK 66).

Early in his career, Wallace took Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse* narrator’s writerly advice to avoid using first-person narration if one identifies closely with one’s narrator. (Sheridan⁵ describes how Wallace noted “this is me” in the margin by that particular passage.) In *Broom* and early stories, he mostly hid behind alter ego focalizing characters. His creative nonfiction essay writing freed him up considerably to inject an admittedly fictionalized but quite realistic “Dave Wallace” narrative persona, and by TPK, he was not just using first-person narration, but adamantly insisting that this was not “some abstract narrative persona,” but “the real author . . . a real person, David Wallace” (66). The name of this narrator varies (from unnamed to “Dave” to “Dave Wallace” to “David Wallace”)—but I do not make much of this; people typically do use different versions of their names, and do not necessarily specify who is speaking when leaving messages for friends. Konstantinou,⁶

⁵ Mark Sheridan, “Interpret You, INTERPRET-ME? Or, Fictional Pasts and Fictional Futures: The Predecessors and Contemporaries of David Foster Wallace,” in *Critical Insights: David Foster Wallace*, ed. Philip Coleman (New York: Grey House Publishing/Salem Press, 2015), 78–93, esp. 81.

⁶ Lee Konstantinou, “Unfinished Form,” *Los Angeles Review of Books* (July 6, 2011). <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/unfinished-form/#>.

Staes,⁷ Boswell,⁸ and Miley⁹ have all debated the extent to which the “David Wallace” persona is fictional, but they have paid little attention to consistency of the language and conversational strategies used to construct it across works. Miley notes “the degree to which [Wallace] continually attempts to shatter layers of performance and fakery in his writing, to step out from behind the curtain, as it were, and speak directly to the reader without the mediation of performance” (195). He was, of course, deliberately *performing* the “Dave Wallace” identity, projecting the image he wanted others to see—as everybody does, if somewhat less consciously.

A psychoanalytic approach (which, given Wallace's scathing portraits of psychotherapy in multiple works, he would probably hate) might argue that Wallace became increasingly unable to hide behind his writing, that he “burst free” of the confines of traditional omniscient narration. In *Jest*, where the narrator is mostly revealed in endnotes (and in the existence of such endnotes), the narrator clearly wants readers to recognize how smart and funny and human he is, but has a conflicting and even more powerful desire to have readers focus on anything (and everything) other than him. Wallace told one interviewer that “I’m an exhibitionist who wants to hide, but is unsuccessful at hiding; therefore, somehow, I succeed,”¹⁰ and another that writing is “kind of like exhibitionism in private.”¹¹ *Jest*'s narrator puts it best: “People are virtually unlimited in their need to give themselves away, on various levels. Some just prefer to do it in secret” (53).

Less psychologically inclined critics might interpret all this simply as Wallace starting with safer, traditional modes of omniscient narration before moving on to more postmodern experiments. Boswell¹² traces the development of the narrator across Wallace's fiction, including some of the non-Dave-named (though sometimes *originally* Dave-named) characters/focalizers, such as LaVache Beadsman in *Broom*, Mark Nechtr in “Westward,” and Hal Incandenza in *Jest*. Oddly, Boswell relegates discussion of LaVache's sister Lenore to a footnote, even though she is the main character, and Boswell acknowledges that Wallace explained *Broom* as a “coded autobio”

⁷ Staes, “Rewriting the Author.”

⁸ Marshall Boswell, “Author Here: The Legal Fiction of David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*,” *English Studies* 95, no. 1 (2014): 25–39.

⁹ Miley, “. . . And Starring David Foster Wallace as Himself”

¹⁰ McCaffery, “An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace,” 43.

¹¹ Anne Marie Donahue, “David Foster Wallace Winces at the Suggestion That His Book Is Sloppy in Any Sense,” in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2012), 70–2, esp. 71.

¹² Boswell, “Author Here.”

with a "sex-change."¹³ Lenore "is David Foster Wallace in disguise" (Joffe forthcoming).¹⁴ *Jest*'s Kate Gompert also does not seem like a big stretch for Wallace, despite her sex. Natalini¹⁵ argues that Don Gately can also be seen as a stand in, although this is belied by clear differences not just in class, education, upbringing, and temperament, but above all by his use of language.

We don't expect friends to sound exactly the same in every situation or circumstance, easily recognizing the core of their personality across moods and registers; so, too, readers recognize the same "voice" across Wallace's work. Hayes-Brady¹⁶ describes Wallace's use of voice as "the most striking element of his writing, the one gushed over or excoriated by critics, the one remembered and imitated by readers (and critics)." Aubry¹⁷ finds the narrative voice so intrusive that it "disrupts the reader's ability to empathize with the plight of the characters," adding that "there is truly only one character in [*Infinite Jest*], and it is the narrator."

Just as language itself "is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others,"¹⁸ all the dialects in Wallace's work may be evaluated and understood in contrast to the others, part of a greater semiotic framework. It is all the more important therefore to study Wallace's own recognizable "voice" in the context of its privileged place in the linguistic landscape, the voice of "normality."

Literature as Literal Conversation

Wallace frequently discussed writing as "an act of communication between one human being and another" (something he says we "know in our gut") (*ASFTINDA* 144). He elaborated that "this process is a relationship between the writer's consciousness and her [the reader's] own, and that in order for it to be anything like a full human relationship, she's going to have to put

¹³ McCaffery, "An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace," 41.

¹⁴ Daniela Franca Joffe, "No Man's Land: David Foster Wallace and Feminist America," *The Journal of David Foster Wallace Studies* 1, no. 1 (forthcoming): 1–. https://s3.amazonaws.com/academia.edu.documents/56681900/Joffe_JDFWS_copyedited.pdf.

¹⁵ Roberto Natalini, "David Foster Wallace and the Mathematics of Infinity," in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, ed. Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 43–57.

¹⁶ Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*, 165.

¹⁷ Aubry, "Infinite Jest and the Recovery of Feeling," 116.

¹⁸ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 114.

in her share of the linguistic work." That literature communicates is self-evident, and the metaphor of literature as conversation may be as old as literature itself. Plato imagined dialogues between Socrates and his students to stand in for conversations between himself and his readers, and Sartre breathed new life into the literature-as-conversation metaphor in the 1940s, giving as the answer to his own question of "Why write?"¹⁹ that authors initiate "conversation" with the reader, seeking to have their consciousness recognized, and that readers likewise read to satisfy their own desire for recognition, seeing aspects of themselves reflected in the work. But as a credentialed SNOOT, steeped in the philosophy of language, Wallace understood the difference between *communication* and *conversation*; when he said that "a piece of fiction is a conversation,"²⁰ or that he wanted his writing to be "like a late-night conversation with really good friends, when the bullshit stops and the masks come off,"²¹ I suspect that he meant it quite literally.

The main problem with taking seriously the idea of literature as literal (not metaphorical) conversation is that, by definition, conversation involves multiple turns-at-talk from multiple speakers, the pattern of which is not decided in advance, each turn shaped by the context of previous turns and shaping the context of future turns.²² This may work metaphorically for any one of Wallace's pieces, as he typically allows different speakers to speak, and (in his fiction, at least) different consciousnesses to share their perspectives—as detailed throughout this monograph—but it works more literally when considering Wallace's writing as an ongoing conversation with readers that goes across his career. Readers have only one possible *actual* speech act within that conversation: the de facto invitation to Wallace to continue (performed each time they pick up one of his texts), but Wallace anticipates and ventriloquizes imagined speech acts for readers in such subtle ways that readers feel like they're actively taking part.

For instance, readers of *Jest* who had read Wallace's earlier work would recognize Hal as a Wallace alter ego, but an unsuspecting reader who is jolted by the shifts in focalization may be looking for what Wallace's editor Michael Pietsch, called "an 'I' who may be the one trying to put everything together"

¹⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, "Why Write?" in *Critical Theory Since Plato*, ed. Adams Hazard, Rev. ed. (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, C1992 [1948]), 983–92.

²⁰ Miller, "The Salon Interview: David Foster Wallace," 62.

²¹ Donahue, "David Foster Wallace Winces at the Suggestion That His Book Is Sloppy in Any Sense," 71.

²² Emanuel Schegloff, Gail Jefferson, and Harvey Sacks, "A Simplest Systematics for the Organization of Turn-Taking for Conversation," *Language* 50, no. 4 (1974): 696–735.

(quoted in Max²³). Staes claims that "readerly attempts to empathize with the novel's global narrative are ultimately centered around an absence in the text" (421), but there *is* a narrator there, albeit one who plays peekaboo with readers. He begins to address the reader directly, although it is possible to interpret the repeated use of the second-person pronoun as generic rather than addressee-oriented, as in "where you're dreading whatever you think of" (42), and "you can tell where the sun is without looking" (43). When the narrator offers a "by the way" (endnote 2, 983, introduced on page 46), it begins to become clear that this is an extended conversation between narrator and reader. Soon thereafter, a specific detail is selected "to give you an idea" (47). The next section begins with the presentational structure "Here's Hal . . ." and exhorts the reader, "let's face it" (49). Endnote 7 (introduced on page 52) has a likewise conversational interjection: "and—yes—alcohol" (983), which only makes sense if the narrator is anticipating a response from the reader, and here is where Wallace proves himself to be a genius at fostering a sense of connection with his readers, who will feel "heard" no matter what their opinion actually is, as the interjection works equally well for anticipated agreement or for anticipated disagreement, including all potential readers in the conversation. (That is, the "yes" can be interpreted as "yes, I know you're way ahead of me here, and I'm finally getting to it" or as "I know you disagree with me, but yes, I maintain that this is really true.")

As Boswell²⁴ points out for BIHM, the reader "assumes the position of someone who literally cannot get a word in edgewise"—a position also frequently occupied by Wallace's characters, not just the interviewer in BIHM, who is never heard at all. In the first stretch of the conversation between Marathe and Steeply (87–95), the men are frequently interrupted mid-utterance, and there are more than twice as many words devoted to narration than both men speak combined (2,453 to their combined 956, not counting an interrupting chunk of narration about feral hamsters). Most readers cannot identify directly with undercover operatives or wheelchair assassins, but they *can* imagine having a conversation with Wallace's narrator *about* these. Marathe and Steeply are not-very-believable people, transparently symbols for more abstract political philosophies—there is more of a real "personality" with which readers can identify in the ostensibly less personal narration.

Readers should more easily be able to identify with Hal, as Martínez²⁵ points out, as the opening passage "is likely to activate readers' 'socially

²³ Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, 182.

²⁴ Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 189.

²⁵ Martínez, *Storyworld Possible Selves*, 25.

isolated' individual possible self," while other readers "may be schematic in . . . the 'sportive self'" or may have a "past self . . . as a 'university applicant.'" Martínez outlines "linguistic footprints marking the presence of these hybrid mental constructs [i.e., storyworld possible selves] in the construal of narrative storyworlds,"²⁶ but does not explicitly consider the role of dialect representations in that process. Wallace acknowledged the "paradox" of "allowing the reader to sort of escape self by achieving some sort of identification with another human psyche—the writer's or some character's, etc.—and you're *also* trying to antagonize the reader's intuition that she is a self, that she is alone and going to die alone."²⁷ Wallace's lack of concern for realistic dialect portrayals may limit readers' ability to project themselves onto the characters, but the multiplicity of dialect portrayals creates a universe in which any reader could be one of the crowd. Readers may identify with the "Dave Wallace" narrator directly—but if not, they can still feel like he is speaking *to* them with empathy and respect.

The narrator of *Jest* is never named, and no biographical details are given, although some can be gleaned (for instance, he has local insider information about Boston neighborhoods and slang). He is extraordinarily well informed in both arcane realms of scholarship and the seamy underbelly of society. His knowledge of drugs and halfway houses might tend to raise doubts about his reliability, which in turn motivates the demonstration of wide-ranging scholarly knowledge, to show that the narrator is quite credible, on this topic at least. The establishment of narrative reliability is especially important, as readers are asked to believe some frankly incredible things, even within the parameters of *Jest's* strange near-future society (e.g., when the wraith of the late James Incandenza communicates with Gately in the hospital). The extent to which these details mirror facts about the author is remarkable and contributes to the reader's sense of actually engaging in conversation with the author. As impressive as his demonstration of knowledge is, coupled with his compulsion to monopolize the conversation, the narrator will probably come across as a show-off, so it is all the more important that he treats readers with respect for their own intelligence and demonstrates indirectly, via his explicit warnings, that he cares about them.

Another extended example (also from the endnotes of *Jest*) shows some of the same techniques at work, but also how Wallace was able to manipulate linguistic variables on all levels of language, a distinctive characteristic of his

²⁶ Ibid., 20.

²⁷ McCaffery, "An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace," 32.

personal voice that readers may not consciously register.²⁸ Letzler²⁹ discusses several of *Jest's* endnotes in terms of establishing the narrator's authority and/or reliability, such as notes 216 ("No clue") and 223 ("though what the hell 'ALGOL' is is anybody's guess") (both 1036), which establish that the narrator is not omniscient, but he does not see a similar purpose for endnote 8 (984), reproduced later, citing it specifically as prototypical "cruft"—that is, "junk text, simultaneously too excessive and too vacuous to be worth anyone's attention."³⁰

8. I.e.: psilocibin; Happy Patches^a; MDMA/Xstasy (bad news, though, X); various low-tech manipulations of the benzene-ring in methoxy-class psychedelics, usually home-makable; synthetic dickies like MDMA, DMA, DMMM, 2CB, para-DOT I-VI, etc.—though note this class doesn't and shouldn't include CNS-rattlers like STP, DOM, the long-infamous West-U.S.-Coast "Grievous Bodily Harm" (gamma hydroxybutyric acid), LSD-25 or -32, or DMZ/M.P. Enthusiasm for this stuff seems independent of neurologic type.

^aHomemade transdermals, usually MDMA or Muscimole, with DDMS or the over-counter-available DMSO as the transdermal carrier. (984)

Contra Letzler's strange theory that Wallace *wanted* people to skim his work (an idea I suspect would have given the author his proverbial "howling fantods"), the opening line of this note deploys multiple poetic devices to attract the reader's attention, to ensure that a reader won't simply glance, think "list," and turn back to the main text: the list begins with "psilocibin," which has an internal identity rhyme: (saɪ lə'saɪ bɪn). "Happy Patches" likewise consists of three open syllables (lacking consonantal coda) followed by a closed syllable, with the first and third syllables rhyming: [hæ pi 'pæ tʃəz], also showing consonance, in this case of the salient, popping /p/ sounds. "MDMA," breaks the metrical pattern, as a natural reading of this initialism is iambic whereas the previous two items were trochaic, but this provides another yet another tetrasyllabic list item with internal rhyme and internal consonance. The repeated diphthong in *psilocybin* is the same as in the first syllable of the introductory phrase "I.e." [ɪ'əɪ 'ʔi:], creating a strong sense of assonance. (Wallace could easily have begun his list with *e.g., for instance, to wit, viz.*—or without any lead-in at all.)

²⁸ Shapiro, "The Poetic Language of David Foster Wallace."

²⁹ David Letzler, "Encyclopedic Novels and the 'Cruft' of Fiction: *Infinite Jest's* Endnotes," *Studies in the Novel* 44, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 302–24.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 308.

The vowels in the first four items of the list are all non-back, non-round vowels (all the stressed vowels are front vowels, with a few unstressed central schwas), echoing the front vowels in "I.e." I do not argue that Wallace was conscious of any *particular* element of phonological patterning—it may be that he simply thought his list "sounded good," without thinking much about why. He didn't invent the names of (some of) these drugs, but he did choose which ones to use in their canonical form and which slang references to substitute. (The Urban Thesaurus³¹ lists several dozen slang terms for psilocybin, for instance.) Some of the ostensible drug names further down in the list appear to be Wallace's own inventions within the novel, including "DMMM" and "DMZ/M.P." (M.P. presumably refers to Michael Pemulis, adolescent drug peddler, who claims that his supply of DMZ is "unprecedentedly potent" (212).) In addition to selecting specific terms, Wallace had to order the items within the list.

The phonological patterning draws readers in, challenging the temptation to skim, encouraging readers "to choose to be engaged."³² Another effect is to create a strong contrast with the parenthetical comment that interrupts the list after the first few items: "(bad news, though, X)" breaks all the established patterns. The back rounded vowels of "news" (/u/) and "though" (/o/) stand out vividly from the string of front unrounded vowels, pulling readers out of the list, as does the visual cue of the parentheses, and the unexpected adjective following the string of nouns. If the purpose of the endnote were simply to list "designer class drugs," the parenthetical comment would flout Grice's maxim of quantity (being more information than required), relation, and arguably of manner as well.³³ The flouting forces a speech act re-analysis, reinforced by the subsequent use of an imperative structure ("note that"), with its underlying "you" subject, in another piece of personal commentary. The narrator provides not just information about drugs, but evidence of his own personality and lived experience, as well as a warning to the reader to stay away from these drugs.

A warning is felicitous, according to Searle,³⁴ if the utterance counts as an attempt to get the hearer to recognize that a future event (which the speaker believes will happen) would be detrimental to the hearer. *Jest's* narrator believes that it would be bad for readers to take these drugs. Not

³¹ <http://urbanthesaurus.org/>.

³² Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*, 105.

³³ H. Paul Grice, "Logic and Conversation," in *The Philosophy of Language*, ed. A. P. Martinich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 159–70.

³⁴ John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 67.

only does he tell readers that X is "bad news," he ends the note with personal commentary that would flout maxims if the speech act function of the note were misinterpreted: "Enthusiasm for this stuff seems to be independent of neurologic type." Although "this stuff" could refer to every drug mentioned, including the "mild designer class drugs," or just to the "CNS [Central Nervous System]-rattlers," this observation can be seen as obeying the maxims of quantity and relation only if the speech act is correctly interpreted as a warning: the narrator anticipates that readers may mistakenly believe that only certain "types" have enthusiasm for (and thus get addicted to) drugs (which in turn implies that readers might freely indulge without such results). Indeed, returning to the main text following the endnote, the narrator goes on to explain that the cycle of doing enough drugs "to basically short out the whole motherboard . . . and slowly recover" may "work surprisingly well" "if your basic wiring's OK to begin with," but only for a short time "before it starts to creep up on you" (52).

Repeated use of the discourse marker *though* in the endnote is more evidence that the narrator is countering readers' expected stance, attempting to persuade or convince. That he cares enough about readers to issue such a warning (but indirectly, not in an authority-figure, preachy way) is another step in the emergent relationship between reader and narrator. Wallace repeats essentially the same maneuver in the next endnote, in case readers missed it here, with the direct warning "be advised" (984), and repeatedly thereafter. Readers might not be interested in the scientific names of drugs or their classification, or which company produces them. The allusion to the "good old folks over at Sanofi-Winthrop Pharm-Labs, Inc." (984) is, as Holl³⁵ points out, "a colloquial antipode to those scientific expressions" which "defangs the whole paragraph." That is, the real function of endnote 12 is to remind readers that they don't *need* to be knowledgeable about all this stuff, that their friend, the narrator, is there to tell them whatever they need to know.

Wallace's infrequent use of second person in *Jest* is quite different from his more striking and metafictional use of it in "Octet," in which, as Dawson³⁶ points out, the pronoun refers to "a fictional version of the authorial narrator . . . yet it is also clear that the narrator is attempting to address readers through his self-directed apostrophe": "You are, unfortunately, a fiction writer. You are attempting a cycle of very short belletristic pieces" (145); "You know that this is a very bad corner to have painted yourself into, as a

³⁵ Rainer Holl, *The Narrative Game: The Reading of David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest as Play* (Hamburg: Anchor Academic Publishing, 2013), 7.

³⁶ Paul Dawson, *The Return of the Omniscient Narrator: Authorship and Authority in Twenty-First Century Fiction* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2013), 75.

fiction writer" (152); "You're still going to title the cycle 'Octet.'" (152, fn 6). By making the artifice so apparent, Wallace hoped to reveal "the fibrillating self of the 'real' author." *Jest* has other metafictional devices (including the endnotes in general, and the wonderful mock "filmography" of James O. Incandenza in particular (endnote 24), which is highly intertextual both with other elements of the novel itself and other real-world texts and films), but the use of first and second pronouns in *Jest*, though relatively infrequent, straightforwardly distinguishes the "I" of the narrator and the "you" of the reader, echoing Wallace's use of pronouns in his nonfiction.

Positive Politeness

In addition to the use of first and second person, other positive politeness strategies abound in Wallace's writing, fostering solidarity with readers who might otherwise be intimidated by his scope of knowledge and imagination. In fact, Wallace exemplifies almost every positive politeness strategy discussed by Brown and Levinson (1987):³⁷ he expresses strong and certain opinions (viz. note 8's "doesn't and shouldn't include"), confidently (and optimistically) claims to know things he couldn't possibly know (like the contents of others' thoughts), swears freely and uses all sorts of slang (both of which, Niedzielski and Preston³⁸ point out are used "for solidarity or in-group marking"). Hayes-Brady³⁹ notes that Wallace doesn't just appeal to the reader's common sense, he flatters it. For those readers who cannot identify with his narrators and alter egos, the consciousness of difference presents a constant threat to their positive face, requiring a great deal of positive politeness to offset.

Wallace's narrator frequently claims common ground with readers, assuming shared reference to all kinds of popular culture (especially television shows such as *M*A*S*H*, *Bewitched*, *As the World Turns*, *Jeopardy*, *The Late*

³⁷ Following anthropological theory, Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson, *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) assume tension between individuals' "negative face" (the desire to be independent and autonomous, free from imposition) and "positive face" (the desire to be liked and accepted, part of the group). "Negative" and "positive" are not value judgments, just complementary opposites. Speakers use politeness strategies (also categorized according to which type of face they address) to offset the face threats they anticipate, taking into account the variables of social distance (vs. intimacy) and power, both of which are continually re-negotiated through the use (or nonuse) of politeness strategies.

³⁸ Niedzielski and Preston, *Folk Linguistics*, 183.

³⁹ Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*, 165.

Show with David Letterman). On the other hand, his allusions to more intellectual fare are generally coded. Without literary scholars to point out a paraphrase of an opening sentence of one of Kafka's or Borges's fictions, that a character's name is taken from Dostoevsky, and so on, many readers simply would not know. Thus, Wallace avoids alienating the audience who doesn't recognize such allusions, while creating a sense of in-group inclusion for the audience that does. His work also has many puns and "gags," confessing a "grossly sentimental affection . . . for stuff that's nothing but funny, and which I sometimes stick in for no other reason than funniness."⁴⁰ Wallace is "widely acknowledged as one of the funniest writers of his generation. . . . He is deeply playful and often transgressive writing exhibits a sense of proximity and intimacy."⁴¹ The puns and gags work similarly to the veiled allusions: readers who "get" the jokes feel like Wallace is winking directly at them; others are not alienated, because they do not realize that a joke has been attempted. Essentially, to borrow terminology from film and media studies, Wallace left "Easter eggs" for readers.

Wallace's frequent use of "redacted Q&A narrative format" (which Thompson⁴²) traces back to influence from Manuel Puig), in which the questions are never heard or seen, may also simulate a conversation with readers, as he imagines and responds to readers' questions—much as he commonly uses ellipses within conversations to indicate fraught (meaningful) silence, forcing inferences based on the flouting of Grice's maxims of conversation. The ending of *Broom* mid-sentence ("I'm a man of my" [467]) works on several different levels, linguistically. Kelly⁴³ argues that "because there is no real ambiguity concerning the next word in the sentence, the reader's agency is in fact negated," which ignores the everyday reality of conversational practice, in which people often trail off without finishing their sentences, especially when the ending is predictable. Failure to end a sentence can project a sense of intimacy and trust (as in the commonly held claim of couples in sync that they finish each other's sentences), as well a lack of a desire to end the conversation. Kelly characterizes this as "a *gesture* toward an open system and readerly dialogue, rather than an achievement of it,"⁴⁴ but it is unclear how any piece of fiction would actually achieve dialogue in the realistic conversational sense. What Kelly refers to as "dialogue" is openness

⁴⁰ McCaffery, "An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace" 24.

⁴¹ Wilson Kaiser, "Humor after Postmodernism: David Foster Wallace and Proximal Irony," *Studies in American Humor*, New Series 3, no. 28 (2013): 31–44, esp. 32.

⁴² Thompson, *Global Wallace*, 65.

⁴³ Kelly, "Development Through Dialogue," 273.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

of interpretation, and although readers understand exactly which word is projected to end the sentence, they are in no way forced to *agree* with that sentence as a true representation of speaker Rick Vigorous's character. Nor is the speech act function of the sentence self-evident, much less the intended pragmatic interpretation of leaving the sentence dangling, a clear violation of Grice's maxims of quantity and manner. An incomplete utterance may reflect anticipation of *disagreement*, an overt signal of reluctance to initiate conflict. In a different context, trailing off might indicate that the speaker is unsure of how to phrase a thought, which could be interpreted either as a request for help from the interlocutor in choosing a word. As Wallace put it, "FYI, there happens to be a whole subdiscipline of linguistics called Pragmatics that essentially studies the way statements' meanings are created by various contexts" (CTL 93). It may sound naïve to critics (especially now so many years later), but I know one reader at least who did literally speak back to the book at this point, saying, "Are you kidding me? You can't just end a book mid-sentence!"

Thompson⁴⁵ briefly discusses Wallace's "vocal reproductions," including "use of 'like' as vocalized pause," "frequent use of colloquialisms," and "reliance on contractions," none of which are particularly unique to Wallace's writing. More interesting and distinctive is Wallace's penchant for starting sentences with multiple conjunctions ("and but," "and but so," even "and but so then"), which Thompson⁴⁶ says "gives the prose an idiomatic, spoken quality . . . a frenetic, breathless tone" and Hayes-Brady⁴⁷ says gives "the sense that the reader is simply reading the continuation of an earlier train of thought." Wallace himself put this at the top of a list of his own stylistic quirks that he did not wish the copyeditor of *Infinite Jest* to attempt to edit away (HRC Wallace Papers, container 20.5):

- Multiple conjunctions at the start of independent clauses.
- Commas before prepositions at the end of sentences.
- Hyphens to form compound nouns.
- Sentence-fragments following exceptionally long sentences.

Wallace was obviously well aware that *and* and *but* have distinct uses in conversation. Not only did he highlight the distinction between these

⁴⁵ Thompson, *Global Wallace*, 225.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁴⁷ Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*, 143.

conjunctions in his copy of Kolln's⁴⁸ *Rhetorical Grammar* (89), but he also included a discussion of this in a handout for his English composition students (dated September 25, 2002, and titled "YOUR LIBERAL-ARTS \$ AT WORK" [all-caps in the original]):

2. *And* is a conjunction; so is *so*. Except in dialogue between particular kinds of characters, you never need both conjunctions. "He needed to eat, *and so* he bought food" is incorrect. In 95% of cases like this, what you want to do is cut the *and*." (HRC Wallace Papers, Teaching Materials, container 32.9)

Although a speaker may have a false start and abruptly change conjunctions mid-utterance without anyone particularly noticing it, the deliberate stringing together of conjunctions in writing is initially defamiliarizing. Eventually, however, this serves a connective purpose, creating cohesion across Wallace's works. Far from just a verbal tic, the combinations convey a sense of breathless excitement (as Thompson noted), but also an indication that what follows will be complicated, not just what Wallace thinks goes along with what has previously been communicated (as Hayes-Brady noted), but also what contradicts previous assumptions, what follows logically, what causes and what is caused. In some sense, this provides justification for (and warning of) Wallace's long-windedness, but there is also a sweetness that works against any interpretation of aggression or showing off. The narrator is not just excited by the story, he is eager and happy to tell it to readers; the expression of emotion and the assumption that readers will be equally excited by what he has to tell are further classic positive politeness strategies.

Wallace also incorporated conversational markers of vocal hesitation ("there seems to be some, umm, personal stuff getting dredged up and worked out here" [CTL 104]) and a variety of conversational discourse markers (as discussed by Schiffrin⁴⁹) such as *well*, *like*, and *you know*, even though he certainly knew that these are frequently "regarded as meaningless, or, worse, 'dumb' and 'bad habits.'"⁵⁰ The palpable sense of playfulness underlying these uses, evident also in his extraordinary lexical creativity, undoubtedly helps to mitigate this "offense." Wallace delighted in idiosyncratic nonce-formations, which are on display not just once but three times in the example of *Jest's* endnote 8 quoted earlier in this chapter: *home-makable*, *CNS-rattlers*, and

⁴⁸ Martha Kolln, *Rhetorical Grammar: Grammatical Choices, Rhetorical Effects*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1989).

⁴⁹ Deborah Schiffrin, *Discourse Markers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

⁵⁰ Niedzielski and Preston, *Folk Linguistics*, 268.

over-counter-available (984). Unlike other qualities that an author might project onto a character in his or her fiction, such lexical creativity on the part of a character or narrator would not be possible were it not shared by the author himself. Morrissey and Thompson praise his “inventive constructions,”⁵¹ although Cioffi⁵² deems this “more showing off, more hostility toward the reader.” Wallace’s lexical innovations also often function as deliberate attempts to break expectations for a more formal register (as seen in that same example of endnote 8), an attempt to lessen the negative face threat involved in overly formal uses of language that would imply social distance.

Burn⁵³ describes Wallace’s “parallel projects bleeding into each other,” and Thompson⁵⁴ points out, for example, the similarity of “Pop Quiz 4” in “Octet” to the Barry Loach story in *Infinite Jest*. Wallace acknowledged that he was “not subtle at all about repeating things in certain works.” This, too, is reminiscent not just of conversation in general, but of long-term relationships: friends and partners hear some of the same stories told over and over again.

Wallace would likely have taken positive politeness strategies even further in TPK, just as he went further in claiming identity with the narrator. The opening chapter of the novel as published is only two paragraphs long; each paragraph contains both second-person pronouns (“like a mother’s soft hand on your cheek” [1], and “your shoes’ brand incised in the dew” [2]) and imperative structures (“Look around you” [1], and “Read these” [2]). The use of “doubly-deictic you” in fiction, simultaneously includes intradiegetic perspectivizer and extradiegetic reader to facilitate blends of projected storyworld possible selves.⁵⁵ The first paragraph ends with an explicit first-person-plural thesis statement: “We are all of us brothers.” There could not be a more direct appeal to solidarity with the reader.

That many Wallace readers have been passionate about this author, feeling that they have truly connected with the mind that produced these works, is not surprising, given the intentional blurring of the author/narrator distinction, and given the intensely personal revelations made by the narrator and some alter ego characters. Cioffi⁵⁶ argues that *Jest* is a

⁵¹ Morrissey and Thompson, “The Rare White at the Window,” 8.

⁵² Cioffi, “An Anguish Become Thing,” 167.

⁵³ Stephen J. Burn, “A Paradigm for the Life of Consciousness: Closing Time in *The Pale King*,” *Studies in the Novel* 44, no. 4 (2012): 371–88, esp. 373.

⁵⁴ Thompson, *Global Wallace*, 104.

⁵⁵ Martínez, *Storyworld Possible Selves*.

⁵⁶ Frank Louis Cioffi, “An Anguish Become Thing: Narrative as Performance in David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*,” *Narrative* 8, no. 2 (2000): 161–81, esp. 170.

"disturbing" text, because it forces the reader into the role of a performer; that the reader "must come to a self-conscious realization that his [*sic*] behavior resembles that of the drug addicts Wallace's novel focuses on" (170). He speaks of the inability he felt, as a reader, to skip over distressing, brutal scenes; powerless as an addict to forego his fix. I can't argue with his personal, subjective response, but I felt no more loss of control, no loss of dignity or perspective than I would listening to a close friend who needs to vent, to process, to share. It is readers' awareness of the ongoing conversation with the narrator/author that prevents them from overinvesting in the lives of the characters, despite the empathy evoked. Readers willingly cede control to a master conversationalist, flattered that he has taken such time and effort to entertain and instruct them.

Wallace shared detailed and intimate knowledge of many subjects, not just the pharmacology of drugs or the biological reactions to them, but less disturbing topics as well, for instance the game of tennis (which the author played at a competitive level in his youth), and he did not confine himself to areas of knowledge that paralleled his lived experience. He researched major plots and themes (e.g., in preparation for TPK, he took accounting courses⁵⁷), but rather minor points as well—for instance, the first short paragraph of TPK lists twenty-one different types of plants and grasses, many of which I had never heard of before. Wallace's 1990 review of Martone admits that "the question of how much erudition a fiction writer gets to require of his reader is, of course, eternally vexed." The reverse is equally vexed: How much erudition does a reader demand or desire the writer to demonstrate? Although Wallace's many extended displays of knowledge potentially threaten readers' negative face (as they may feel "put down" by the implicit assertion of the author's own authority and their relative lack thereof), the research these displays obviously required is also somehow flattering—that not content with his own (already impressive) breadth of knowledge, Wallace spent many hours studying these minor details on behalf of his readers, and wanted to share that research with us. (The effect of this upon a contemporary audience accustomed to continuous and effortless access to information may be somewhat dampened; *Jest* was published before Google existed.)

Wallace is famous for his syntactic complexity, seemingly endless sentences with multiple levels of subordination,⁵⁸ strings of prepositional

⁵⁷ Cockfield, "David Foster Wallace on Tax Policy, How to Be an Adult, and Other Mysteries of the Universe," 93.

⁵⁸ de Bourcier, "They All Sound Like David Foster Wallace."

phrases,⁵⁹ strings of adjectives unbroken by commas (forcing readers to consider potential interactions between the descriptors rather than simply an additive, list interpretation).⁶⁰ As with Wallace's use of rare and specialized vocabulary, this display of syntactic authority potentially threatens readers' negative face, but is simultaneously flattering to the audience, optimistically assuming that the reader will devote some effort to make sense of it and appreciate it. (The self-selecting audience returns the compliment, knowing that however smart they are to "get it," Wallace had to be much smarter to write it.) Part of the appeal comes in recognizing that Wallace was not merely asserting his own authority, but risking his own positive face. Americans often judge speakers harshly for being "too correct . . . because the forms are 'too snooty' and the speakers 'too high-falutin.'"⁶¹ Niedzielski and Preston⁶² document in particular "folk prejudice against long sentences."

Another potential threat to readers' negative face is Wallace's tendency to go on and on and on. Wallace poked fun at his own narrative style (and critics' response to it), by creating surrogates in TPK and allowing them to criticize one another's storytelling and conversation, such as "Irrelevant Chris" Fogle, who tells extremely long stories "full of useless, apparently irrelevant detail. . . . This charge could also be levelled at the entire novel, even in its unpublished state."⁶³ When, in the middle of a conversation about attraction and loneliness, Shane Drinion goes off on a long tangent about radio expense protocols, his IRS co-worker Meredith Rand responds,

Can I say that one of the reasons you come off as a little boring is that you don't seem like you have any sense of what the real topic of a conversation is? . . . What do you imagine is going through the other person's mind when you're ranting like that? Do you just automatically assume they're interested? Who cares about radio accounting if you're not tasked to it? (464)

Rand herself then proceeds to tell a seemingly endless story, prompting Drinion to observe that "certain parts you tend to repeat, or say over again only in a slightly different way. These parts add no new information, so

⁵⁹ Heather Houser, "Infinite Jest's Environmental Case for Disgust," in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, ed. Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), 118–42.

⁶⁰ Shapiro, "The Poetic Language of David Foster Wallace."

⁶¹ Walt Wolfram and Ralph Fasold, *The Study of Social Dialects in American English* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1974), 19.

⁶² Niedzielski and Preston, *Folk Linguistics*, 265.

⁶³ Boswell, "Author Here," 35.

these parts require more work to pay attention to" (501). There is never any suggestion, however, that one should *not* pay such close attention, despite the effort involved. On the contrary, Drinion is able to achieve such a pure state of attention, when engaged in his work and when listening to Rand, that he is unaware that he is literally, physically (albeit just slightly) levitating off his seat. Wallace's "notes and asides" (some handwritten and marginal) were published with the unfinished main text, including the relevant observation that

Drinion is *happy*. Ability to pay attention. It turns out that bliss—a second-by-second joy + gratitude at the gift of being alive, conscious—lies on the other side of crushing, crushing boredom. Pay close attention to the most tedious thing you can find (tax returns, televised golf), and in waves, a boredom like you've never known will wash over you and just about kill you. Ride these out, and it's like stepping from black and white into color. Like water after days in the desert. Constant bliss in every atom. (546)

Negative Politeness

Wallace's evident mastery of language as well as many different fields of knowledge in which readers could not claim equal expertise, together with his monopoly of the "conversation," pose inherent threats to readers' negative face, but it would be risky for Wallace to directly flatter readers' negative face to offset these threats, as overt deference could appear to be mocking readers. A safer strategy was to threaten his own negative face, using hedges and disclaimers occasionally, but often showcasing aggressive and dysphemistic self-deprecation. (That is, in order to avoid the appearance of sucking up to readers, he instead repeatedly put himself down.) In a letter to Ann Fadiman's creative writing class at Yale, Wallace wrote about "Narrator Persona challenges, more specifically the Asshole Problem":

I'm sure you guys have seen it—it's death if the biggest sense the reader gets from a critical essay is that the narrator's a very critical person, or from a comic essay that the narrator's cruel or snooty. Hence the importance of being just as critical about oneself as one is about the stuff/people one's being critical of.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Fadiman, "Afterword," 761.

In his scathing review of John Updike's⁶⁵ *Towards the End of Time*, Wallace purports not to understand protagonist's Ben Turnbull's attitude, because "it never once occurs to him that the reason he's so unhappy is that he's an asshole" (n.p.). Wallace couldn't fathom such a lack of self-awareness; he interrogated himself at every turn, and frequently found himself wanting: "I can be kind of a snob and an asshole" (*ASFTINDA* 228), for instance. Joffe⁶⁶ interprets Wallace as claiming here *not* to be an asshole, unlike Ben, but given Wallace's frequent admission to the contrary, this seems unlikely, although I agree that it is a rhetorical bid for sympathy: readers are presumed to prefer a self-aware and apologetic asshole over an un-self-aware, unapologetic one. Surely, being an asshole is not a simple binary categorization, but a question of degree.

Thompson⁶⁷ points out that "Wallace's commitment to identifying his own shortcomings on many issues is done unsparingly." Cunningham⁶⁸ argues that *Jest* illustrates both the benefits and risks of "perpetual confrontation with oneself," as this kind of unflinching self-examination is the only way to acknowledge and overcome one's weaknesses, but getting hypnotized by what Wallace called "the constant monologue inside your head" (*Water* 50) can also lead to the trap of solipsism.

Hypermasculinity

Brown and Levinson's politeness theory is theoretically gender neutral, but life is not—and Wallace's voice is not just masculine, but hypermasculine. This may explain why "the majority . . . of Wallace's readership appears to be male, contrary to his own persistent (and perhaps affected) invocation of the she-reader."⁶⁹ Holland⁷⁰ and Hayes-Brady⁷¹ have excellent discussions

⁶⁵ "John Updike, Champion Literary Phallocrat, Drops One: Is This Finally the End for Magnificent Narcissists?" *The New York Observer* (October 13, 1997). <https://observer.com/1997/10/john-updike-champion-literary-phallocrat-drops-one-is-this-finally-the-end-for-magnificent-narcissists/>

⁶⁶ Joffe, "In the Shadows," 39.

⁶⁷ Thompson, "Wallace and Race," 207.

⁶⁸ Josh Cunningham, "'The Hazards of Being Free': Thinking About Not Thinking in *Infinite Jest*." 2019. MA Thesis, *CUNY Academic Works*, 3. https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cc_etds_theses/739.

⁶⁹ Hayes-Brady, "Personally I'm Neutral on the Menstruation Point," 63.

⁷⁰ Mary K. Holland, "'By Hirsute Author': Gender and Communication in the Work and Study of David Foster Wallace," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 58, no. 1 (2016), 64–77. DOI: 10.1080/00111619.2016.1149798.

⁷¹ Hayes-Brady, "'...': Language, Gender, and Modes of Power in the Work of David Foster Wallace" "Personally I'm Neutral on the Menstruation Point"; *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*.

of Wallace's awareness and apparent appreciation of feminist theory. Joffe⁷² traces Wallace's "crisis in white Midwestern male identity" (117) throughout his work, to which I will add just a few linguistic observations.

The consistent narrative persona employed across Wallace's works embodies without exception all the gendered stereotypes first detailed in Robin Lakoff's *Language and Woman's Place* (1975),^{73,74} some of which have already been considered in terms of politeness strategies: He has strong and certain opinions which he seldom hedges nor over-exaggerates (he does not fear that he will not be attended to, causing him to "speak in italics" (56–7)); he confidently claims to know things he can't possibly know (like the contents of others' thoughts); he jokes, swears, does not euphemize, doesn't use ritual frozen phrases of politeness (despite using a lot of conversational strategies and discourse markers, Wallace's narrator seldom uses *please*, *thank you*, *I'm sorry*, *excuse me*, at least not ironically), doesn't use words relating to traditional "woman's work" (needlecrafts, housework, more specific color terms) or "empty" adjectives (*nice*, *cute*); he never uses "intensive" *so* (although he uses the conjunction *very* frequently); he feels free to break whatever rules he feels like. Whether these stereotypes reflect current or past reality (and to what extent they may reflect socially constructed gender identities beyond a binary categorization) is not the point here; readers recognize these as gendered stereotypes and consciously or unconsciously code the voice accordingly. Especially in works in which the narrator is mostly hiding (such as *Jest*, in which the narrator is most evident in the endnotes), where his words are the only information we have about him, such impressions probably achieve even greater prominence than they would in a face-to-face conversation. Even the amount of detail given and the resulting length of Wallace's novels and essays codes as masculine, as men are given more latitude to engage in lengthy monologues, to hold the floor without seeking input from others.

Hayes-Brady and Holland suggest that Wallace never successfully empathized with women, always viewing them as unfathomably other. I have tried to argue that Wallace did empathize with Clenette, Yolanda, Amber, and others, but it may also be true that he overempathized with males, falling into logical fallacies as a result, as Bloom⁷⁵ warns. Wallace's narrators and

⁷² Joffe, "In the Shadows."

⁷³ Lakoff, *Language and Woman's Place*.

⁷⁴ It would be more precise to say that Wallace's narrator *avoids* all aspects of "women's language," as Lakoff has been justly criticized for providing only a list of characteristics of how women supposedly deviate from an implied masculine norm.

⁷⁵ Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* (New York: Ecco, 2016).

protagonists certainly display frequent “himpathy,” in which “a privileged man’s side of the story” comes both first and last, resulting in empathy for male perpetrators of violence rather than for their usually female victims,⁷⁶ as illustrated most prominently throughout BIHM. Holland⁷⁷ finds “little, if any, development in Wallace’s thinking about the threat posed to the (female) other by the (male) self’s desire,” while acknowledging “his anxiety about the ways in which he might be complicit” in the continued subjugation of women.

A recent *Atlantic Monthly* article⁷⁸ centered around the pernicious association of “genius” and “maleness,” pointedly observing that Mary Karr didn’t just remind the world of Wallace’s abusive stalking and violence toward her (which he had admitted, and was included in his biography), she “reminds the world, indeed, that it needed the reminding in the first place. The horror stories had simply been subsumed into the broader story (the ‘greater good’) of Wallace’s personal genius.” Wallace, the man, was no doubt a much less admirable creature than “Wallace,” the fictional persona, despite his deliberate attempts to blur the distinction. (This isn’t a malicious jab at the dead author, whom I obviously nevertheless admire—who among us can live up to the image we’d rather project to the world? The greater one’s ability to control the projected image, the greater the gap that may emerge between the reality and the fictionalized image.)

What keeps “Wallace” from being *toxically* masculine (in pop psychological terms, which have expanded the definition of the term rather dramatically from its original use) is precisely the odd nature of the conversation he offers to readers. He may be guilty of “mansplaining,” feeling entitled “to hold forth . . . without asking,”⁷⁹ but he is presumably explaining to male and female readers alike and does not typically condescend to readers by explaining things they ought to already know. More importantly, he cannot invade readers’ personal space to demand attention. Any reader who so wishes may simply put down the book, ending the “conversation” without being forced into an uncomfortable act of rudeness. Those who choose to keep reading *invite* Wallace to continue.

As with nationality, ethnicity, and regionality, Wallace’s choice to voice a category of identity disproportionately does not celebrate that identity. White males are undoubtedly overrepresented and privileged in Wallace’s work, yet

⁷⁶ Manne, *Down Girl*, 34.

⁷⁷ Holland, “By Hirsute Author,” 65.

⁷⁸ Garber, “David Foster Wallace and the Dangerous Romance of Male Genius.”

⁷⁹ Kate Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 304.

the harsh spotlight shone upon them is not flattering. Aubry's⁸⁰ description of *Jest* describes most of Wallace's work: "Case after case of highly educated, middle-class, typically male characters who are incapable of expressing, accessing, or sustaining modes of affect, including love, sorrow, and joy." This fails to note one important exception, however; the narrator expresses all of these and more, and often does succeed in sharing them with readers.

One of the "exotic new facts" that "you will acquire" if you spend "a little time around a Substance-recovery halfway facility" (*Jest* 200) is that "*pace*"⁸¹ macho bullshit, public male weeping is not only plenty masculine but can actually feel *good*" (201). Although well over a hundred of these "facts" are presented, this is the only one that the narrator specifically distances himself from, with the one-word parenthetical comment: "(reportedly)." Even when explicitly calling out "macho bullshit" and apparently giving men permission to cry in public, the narrator cannot bring himself to admit that he has done so. This is the perfect encapsulation of Wallace's performative masculinity: the awareness that it is harmful and isolating, the apparently inability to change (despite such awareness), and the subsequent impulse to turn it into a joke, clearly hoping that if readers share the humor, they will excuse the macho bullshit. (This is, fittingly, the same strategy used to address "the Asshole problem.")

Wallace is undoubtedly *easiest* to read for heterosexual white males who can identify directly with his hypermasculine narrator, but there are many "storyworld possible selves" with which other readers may identify, including not just the "socially isolated" individual possible self, which is probably a feared or undesired representation,"⁸² but the more flattering role that Wallace's narrators explicitly project for readers: the educated and intelligent self who gets the jokes and references, who appreciates being spoken to in this manner. One can only speculate what Wallace's response would have been to the world being reminded of his abuses in the #MeToo movement—my guess is that after some predictable defensiveness and characteristic soul-searching, he would have produced the world's most gut-wrenching, self-excoriating, beautifully poetic apology. I do not know whether he would have actually learned from the experience, or whether those he abused would have accepted any apology from him—but that he would have *written* in response seems incontrovertibly obvious.

⁸⁰ Aubry, "Infinite Jest and the Recovery of Feeling," 100.

⁸¹ Wallace surely intended *contra*, here. The Latin *pace* is typically used not just for disagreement, but to indicate good will toward a person being contradicted, as in "This usage is unusual, *pace* Wallace."

⁸² Martínez, *Storyworld Possible Selves*, 69.

Whether in fiction or creative nonfiction, with or without a first-person narrator (let alone one with his same name), Wallace's style is so distinctive that anyone who had read one of his pieces could pick up another and recognize him in it. As Boswell⁸³ argues, "Reading a David Foster Wallace novel, short story, or essay is tantamount to learning the 'rules' of his game." I agree with Boswell that it is a game worth learning, yielding "a special, surprisingly intimate zone of communication, of subjective interaction, that is unlike anything else in contemporary literature."

Wallace's recursive ventriloquation (to borrow a term from Bakhtin) creates an almost overwhelming echo chamber: Wallace's voice speaks through a narrator (always somewhat fictionalized, even when not a distinct, named character), the narrator in turn often speaks through sound-alike characters, via free indirect discourse that includes his own ventriloquizing of yet other characters' speech. The homogenous quality of most of these voices makes this multiplicity more manageable for readers, but also fosters an actual sense of relationship with the author, the sense that whatever name is attached, it is always Wallace speaking. Whether one sees this as the author's strength or weakness is largely determined by one's reaction to that distinctive voice. This would seem to emphasize the loneliness of "Dave Wallace," continually creating new imaginary friends to share his point of view. Franzen⁸⁴ shares that both he and Wallace saw fiction as "neutral middle ground on which to make a deep connection with another human being," and that the formulation they "agreed to agree on" is that fiction is "a way out of loneliness." On the other hand, because of Wallace's ventriloquation, readers who can identify feel like they have not just made a connection with a single mind but have stepped into a whole likeminded community. In this sense, Wallace's narrative persona simultaneously embodies polar opposites of the masculine "ideal": the independent loner (who needs nobody but himself) and the perfect team member (speaking with one voice, all working toward the same goal).

⁸³ Boswell, "Author Here: The Legal Fiction of David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*," 19.

⁸⁴ Jonathan Franzen, "Recollections," [Remarks from a Memorial Service for David Foster Wallace Held October 23, 2008] *Sonora Review* 55 (2009): 41–4.