Open Library of Humanities

orbit.

Article

Peer Review:

This article was peer-reviewed internally by the guest editor and by a member of the Orbit editorial team.

Copyright:

Open Access:

Orbit: A Journal of American Literature is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

Digital Preservation:

The Open Library of Humanities and all its journals are digitally preserved in the CLOCKSS scholarly archive service.

The Open Library of Humanities is an open access non-profit publisher of scholarly articles and monographs.

ARTICLE

Desperately Seeking David: Authorship in the Early Works of David Foster Wallace

Mike Miley

Metairie Park County Day School/Loyola University New Orleans, US

mikecmiley@gmail.com

The power of David Foster Wallace's narrative persona has only increased since his death in 2008; however, his early fiction presents alternate perspectives on authorial presence beyond the commonly accepted discourse on Wallace. A closer look at the authorial poses in *The Broom of the System* and *Girl with Curious Hair* challenges the tidiness of a narrative that privileges sincerity at the expense of a discussion of such a notion's assumptions and blind spots. In contrast to this narrative, Wallace pursues modes of authorship based in concealment throughout *Broom* and *Girl*, hiding his presence via a variety of boundaries, masks, queer personas, crosswriting, and imitative voices, to wildly varying degrees of success. In place of an intimate sense of presence, readers of these works receive a very different conception of authorship that crafts a series of imperial personas that adopt totalizing and phallocentric authorial positions that linger throughout Wallace's body of work. However, several stories in *Girl* not commonly discussed in Wallace scholarship experiment with another, more present and intimate mode of authorship that rejects gimmicky authorial masks and dead authors and instead develops an author figure whose persona is convex, reaching outward toward the reader in hope of colliding with them rather than absorbing them.

The rapid expansion of scholarship on David Foster Wallace's authorial persona since his death in 2008 has led to a narrative taking hold in Wallace Studies, a sort of party line. According to this narrative, Wallace employs authorial intrusions and interpolations such as footnotes, direct address, and characters bearing his name to "produce an actual, immaterial presence" that often stands in opposition to Roland Barthes's argument that "all identity is lost" in writing, "starting with the very identity of the body writing" (Haddad 2; Barthes 142). Lee Konstantinou shows how Wallace's authorial presence differs from other writers who use similar metafictional devices in that it "cause[s] the reader to experience a form of connection with Wallace as a writer [...] not 'Dave Wallace' the character, but the author" (98). Such an experience generates a polemical relationship between Wallace and Barthes, whose "The Death of the Author" discourages approaching a text as an expression of "the voice of a single person, the *author* 'confiding' in us" (143; emphasis original). Wallace's fiction challenges Barthes and other poststructuralist critics in an attempt to "generate sincere affect without dismissing postmodern irony's critique of transparent communication" (Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts 2). Wallace's success in doing so contributes to making his work serve as a primary example of, if not a catalyst for, the New Sincerity and similar trends in contemporary fiction that feed a "hunger for the author," for "writing revelatory of authorial personality and biography, writing that signals its accessibility and that cultivates within its readers a sense of intimacy" (Widiss 28, 3).

This narrative also treats the publication of *Infinite Jest* as his full maturation as a writer, viewing it as a künstlerroman in which Wallace "escap[es] the labyrinthine confines of his inherited cultural traditions in order to free himself [...] from his own inherited literary influences" (Cohen 68). When Wallace's fiction pre-*Infinite Jest* factors into this narrative, it often serves as a foil to Wallace's later, more mature, work an example of "the work of a writer still figuring out what sort of writer he is going to be" (Luter 67). After rehearsing a variety of voices and battling with his contemporaries and postmodern forebears in his early work, so the narrative goes, Wallace achieves a breakthrough in writing "Westward, the Course of Empire Takes Its Way," the novella that closes the story collection *Girl with Curious Hair*, that provides him with the aesthetic space to compose *Infinite Jest.* However accurate this narrative

may be or however truthful it may feel, it is also overly tidy, hewing too closely to the formula of a Hollywood biopic or superhero origin story. This tidiness derives in part from the narrow scope of texts included in the conversation: discussion of Wallace's maturation as a writer tends to focus on "Westward" and the "essay-interview nexus" of the essay "*E Unibus Pluram*: Television and U.S. Fiction" and the interview with Larry McCaffery in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, in which Wallace more or less directs his readers on how his work is to be read (Kelly, "Death").

While the authorial modes that Wallace adopts in his early work may not align closely with the persona he comes to be most associated with, that does not mean that these personas are not illuminating to his views of authorship and larger fictional project. I would like to posit that all of Wallace's work is concerned with defining authorship, and that one can read all his early fiction, not just "Westward," as evidence of Wallace auditioning different modes of authorship to carve out space for himself creatively and theoretically. In fact, a closer look at the authorial poses he uses in this work can provide a more sophisticated understanding of his conception of authorship and challenge the tidiness of a narrative that maintains a "universalizing intent to 'sincere' communication" at the expense of a discussion of such a notion's assumptions and blind spots (Haddad 25). True, Wallace certainly matures as a writer over the course of *The Broom of the System* and *Girl*, but the less sophisticated modes of authorship that they exhibit do not vanish from his writing, nor do the implications that result from them.

The trademark Wallace persona this narrative establishes is largely absent from these early works. In fact, any presence Wallace does generate in these works generally only occurs after several layers of recursive strategies make the reader question whether the presence they detect is yet another mask. Instead, Wallace pursues modes of authorship based in concealment throughout *Broom* and *Girl*, hiding his presence via a variety of boundaries, masks, queer personas, crosswriting, and imitative voices, to wildly varying degrees of success. His early fiction adopts various authorial stances and evaluates them by subjecting them to literary and theoretical scrutiny. In subjecting these modes of authorship to his critique, Wallace's author figure does not die so much as become a puppet master stage-managing the reader's

response just as much as the characters' thoughts and actions. This kind of author-ship proves to be even more problematic than the "highly rhetorical sham-honesty" of the metafiction Wallace decries in his 1999 story "Octet" (147). In place of an inti-mate sense of presence, readers of these works receive a very different conception of authorship that crafts a series of imperial personas that adopt totalizing and phallo-centric authorial positions. These positions negate the agency of the reader, resisting their birth as the figure "who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted," especially when appearing to privilege and solicit their participation (Barthes 148). Even "Westward," Wallace's alleged breakthrough toward a new kind of fiction, is animated by these impulses, and despite Wallace's maturation as an author, he never fully abandons these earlier modes of authorship in his later writing.

However, several stories in *Girl* not commonly discussed in Wallace scholarship experiment with another, more present and intimate mode of authorship. Stories such as "Lyndon" and "Here and There" gesture toward the necessity of clear and dis-tinct boundaries between author and influence, author and text, author and charac-ter, author and reader. Rather than seeking to dissolve borders, as his authorial pose can at times appear to endorse, the authorial mode Wallace arrives at in *Girl* preserves these borders. What must change is the stance of the author to their role. Instead of approaching the reader as a kind of conquest to be overpowered or absorbed into the author, the author must regard the reader as another subject eager to engage in dia-logue with another, equally present and engaged, human being, however imperfect or impossible such a dialogue may be. By the end of these works, Wallace advocates for an authorial presence that rejects gimmicky authorial masks and dead authors and instead develops an author figure whose persona is convex, reaching outward toward the reader in hope of colliding with them rather than absorbing them.

"An Exhibitionist Who Wants to Hide": *The Broom of the System*

In his earlier fiction, Wallace frequently cloaks authorial presence with literal and figurative masks, allowing him to craft a monologue out of an apparent dialogue. Wallace admits that his first novel *The Broom of the System* is a "sensitive little self-

obsessed bildungsroman," "a coded autobio[graphy]" whose author hides behind a "sex-change" (McCaffery 41). Wallace performs many such "sex-changes" in his early fiction, continually hiding himself while also attempting to be seen, confirming Wallace's claim that he is "an exhibitionist who wants to hide" (McCaffery 43). Wallace fills Lenore with his own authorial conflict, creating a linguistic presence that seeks to establish herself in distinction to her absent artistic ancestors so that she does not become an indistinct figure under the control of other forces. Through her, Wallace dramatizes his desire to create an authorial presence that associates, and simultaneously distinguishes, him from his literary influences, leaving no doubt that Wallace—and Wallace alone—is the responsible party, the author.

I encourage reading *Broom* as a treatise on authorship—or, rather, forms of failed authorship. As Nabokov does in *Lolita*, Wallace "clot[s]" his early fiction "with authorial stand-ins and shadows" that function as an interrogation of authorship for the purposes of resurrecting the author as a primary textual figure (Widiss 5). Benjamin Widiss's description of *Lolita* could just as easily apply to *Broom*:

> every character in the novel seems to be either an author or a 'text' authored by another […] to read the novel is to be faced with a continual conflation of fictional characters and the factual author, of superficial formal features and the greatest moral significances, of literary allusion and self-revelation (76).

Wallace populates *Broom* with authorial surrogates that each point to a different kind of failure that an author can encounter in trying to connect with their readership. Wallace pokes holes in each one at length, exhausting all of his options without ever arriving at a positive conception of what it means to him to be an author, to inscribe one's mind onto the world.

There are five modes of authorship in *Broom*. At one time or another in Wallace's career, he is each of these authors, sometimes several at once. Author 1 is Rick Vigorous, whose logorrhea and need to possess and control the world around him through language leads him to use fiction as a manipulative tool. His role as a textual figure is totalizing: he is not only co-owner of Frequent and Vigorous Publishing, but

also serves as its main "editor, reader, administrator," and author of allegorical stories with univocal, autobiographical meanings, making him in charge of every facet of textual production (Wallace, *Broom* 43). He tells these stories so often and at such length that the "telling automatically becomes a kind of system" in the novel "that controls everybody involved," especially Lenore, whom Rick wishes to "own," to have "inside of and contained by" him (122, 72). Rick represents the author as puppeteer, using fiction to keep the reader on a string, hanging on his every word, controlled so thoroughly that the reader becomes his possession, an object rather than a subject.

Lenore's cockatiel Vlad the Impaler represents Author 2. Vlad mindlessly parrots the clichés he hears on television, indiscriminately alternating among dialogue from soap operas, sermons from televangelists, voice-overs from commercials, and more. Despite being heralded as a prophetic voice of God, Vlad "doesn't talk so much as just repeat" (*Broom* 304). Vlad exemplifies the author as imitator, or what Wallace derisively calls "crank-turners," derivative authors who trade writing "timelessly vital and sacred" fiction in an original voice for recycling popular, marketable forms, repeating what is fashionable and lucrative (McCaffery 40, 50). Vlad's imitation corresponds with Wallace's critique of crank-turners, and Rick's claim to own Vlad only further demonstrates Rick's need to control or possess every conceivable creative outlet of textual production.

Although he does not write, Author 3, businessman Norman Bombardini, represents another type of imperial author. Bombardini embarks upon Project Total Yang, in which he will eat and eat until he "grow[s] and grow[s], and fill[s] the absence that surrounds [him] with the horror of [his] own gelatinous presence. Yin and Yang, Ever growing" (83). Bombardini embodies the author as maximalist, a more extreme version of Rick Vigorous who seeks to engulf the entire world until there is no space for anyone else. When applied to writing, a Bombardinian author would seek to write a work that encompassed "an autonomously full universe," a work so immense that it would "grow to infinite size" and swallow every work that is Other and absorb in into the Self, perhaps a work like the 1,079-page novel *Infinite Jest* (91).

Author 4 is the central figure in *Broom*, even though she is completely absent. Lenore "Gramma" Beadsman Sr. is neither seen nor heard in the novel, but Gramma

is "more or less the ringleader" who controls every aspect of it with "the force of her personality and her evident gifts," arranging implausible coincidences for Lenore to encounter and ensuring all events play out according to her plan (e.g., Vlad ingesting the pineal supplement that makes him talk) (36). Gramma exemplifies the typical view of the author as all-powerful, world-building God and fulfills Lenore Jr.'s fears that she does not exist outside of language. Like an author, Lenore Sr. orchestrates events through language ("Gramma" = grammar), and although she does not appear in the flesh, she leaves traces of her presence everywhere. Tellingly, the only indication of Gramma's physical presence is the temperature of a room, which must always be set to 98.6 degrees because she cannot regulate her own body temperature. Everything outside her must conform to what is inside her, and vice versa. The fiction the author creates is apart from them but also exists inside them; the 98.6-degree room temperature foregrounds this absent presence as not only human but something that can be felt, sensed but not seen.

Then there is Author 5, the author-in-the-making Lenore Stonecipher Beadsman, Jr., whose "feelings of disorientation and identity-confusion and lack of control" are so strong that she suspects "that her own personal perceptions and actions and volitions [are] not under her control" but rather are being manipulated by an outside force (Hayes-Brady 121; *Broom* 66). Her feelings are not hers but part of the novel's clever metafictional games—she is of course a character in a novel—but even within the narrative she is subject to the narrative control of Rick Vigorous and Gramma, who, like an author, is the "supplier of [her] name" (31). However, Lenore's lack of agency does not solely result from her being a character in a novel under the sway of an author. Clare Hayes-Brady writes that Lenore's "reliance on the stories of others is too strong, and she has not yet created a story for herself" (121). Lenore's struggle resembles that of a young author working through their influences to establish their own distinct voice and not succeeding. More importantly, this conception of selfhood applied to Lenore reveals that Wallace's early work equates authorship with agency and readership with a lack of it: To write is to become a self and to read and/or be written is to become an Other. Without an audience, an Other to inscribe themselves on, the author loses their sense of identity just as Rick loses his sense of

self when he discovers that Andrew Sealander Lang has written over his initials in a bathroom stall, obscuring his writing (himself) from its intended audience (130).

Such an equation suggests a "link between linguistic dominance and other forms of power" that runs throughout Wallace's work (Hayes-Brady 151). Wallace forges this link in the opening chapter of *Broom*. The scene depicts two frat boys bursting into a women's dorm and refusing to leave until the women sign their butts. Lenore, who is visiting her sister Clarice, manages to escape, but not before she glances back to see two of the other women on their knees poised to write. This scene offers a chilling view of the relationship between authorship, gender, and identity in Wallace's early work. Though the women are engaged in the act of writing, they do not have control over what they write. They are "being used" for "some sort of … function beyond" themselves (Wallace, *Broom* 66: ellipses added). Writing their own names on the men's backsides deprives them of control over their identities linguistically just as it does literally. "There [is] nothing pure" about this act of writing (66). It is lexical as well as sexual assault. The men "*invade*" their space and act like they have the authority to "rule everything," including language, due only to the fact that they "take up more space" within their environment (18; emphasis original). The scene regards language as a tool of coercion, aggression, and objectification as much as physical violence and intimidation. The kind of writing being enacted here resembles the kind of authorship practiced by Authors 1, 2, and 4: Rick Vigorous also inscribes his identity onto others and on private spaces such as bathroom stalls, Norman Bombardini seeks to contain all other identities and spaces within himself, and Lenore Sr. directs the entire plot of the novel. While Wallace treats most of these characters comically, the opening scene of the novel reveals how such attempts at control are not to be taken lightly.

The implications that these views of authorship have for Wallace's crosswriting as female in *Broom* are not hard to see. Hayes-Brady reads Lenore's character as Wallace displacing himself onto "a radically unfamiliar other" for the purpose of understanding himself better. Even though Lenore does not elect to sign Lang's posterior, her identity is still inscribed on a man: Wallace uses her identity, her signature, to achieve linguistic and artistic self-definition, "muting and retelling" Lenore for the purposes

of constructing his own authorial identity (Hayes-Brady 173, 176). Wallace's move makes Lenore's fears of being a character in a novel true but also unfunny: Lenore is "not really real, or that [she's] only real insofar as [she's] told about, so that to the extent that [she's] real [she's] controlled" (249). While Lenore shares this fate with every other fictional character, Wallace's decision to make her conscious of her lack of agency bears more than a trace of a cruel, objectifying streak that comes to typify authorship in his early work because her awareness of it only further encloses her in a cage of someone else's design without the possibility of escape.

In the same way that Lenore feels constructed—and in fact is constructed by Wallace—Wallace likewise constructs his reader. The tension between inside and outside, self and other within the text practically demands that a world exists outside the text and a reader to complete the novel's final sentence, "I'm a man of my" (467). However, such an ending, even though it appears open-ended, confirms that an imperial mode of authorship animates *Broom*. As Adam Kelly has noted, the final "incomplete" sentence functions as merely "a gesture toward an open system and a readerly dialogue" that conceals the degree to which it strips the reader of any agency or participatory freedom (10). Rather than being a free and independent subject able to participate in the completion of the book, the forced choice of the ending implicitly tells the reader that they are as under Wallace's control as his characters. It may appear that Wallace is following Barthes in making the reader is the "destination" of the "text's unity," "the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed," but that is mere misdirection (Barthes 148). Instead, Wallace makes overtures to inclusivity only to deny them, creating a reader whose apparent birth is merely a staging ground for the resurrection and reinstatement of a God-like author figure who refuses to relinquish control of the text.

While Lenore does appear to establish a self and emerge from the chaos of the novel free from outside control, she does not emerge empowered with authorial agency. She does not possess the power to write or inscribe herself on the world around her because she herself is an inscribed projection of an authorial self. She retains no ownership over her name either; she lives in the shadow of her namesake Lenore Stonecipher Beadsman Sr. as much as in the shadow of the author David

Foster Wallace. In this reading, *Broom* closely resembles the kind of "wholly self-absorbed text" approaching "a kind of apocalyptically solipsistic fugue-state" that Wallace rails against later in his career (Fest 96). Even though the ending appears to grant that power to the reader, they also become absorbed, part of the system, because the only thing they can say has essentially already been written for them. They do not talk so much as repeat, parroting the language of the absent author. The multiplicity of authorial positions Wallace adopts ought to dilute the power and presence of a central author figure and create space for the reader to participate in the text; however, the ending to *Broom* reveals that this jumble of personas masks a need for control of not only the text, but the reader. Despite its many characters and dynamic range of voices, the work becomes a monologue in that the author figure does not recognize the presence of any other voice.

The Imitation Game: *Girl with Curious Hair*

For his second work of fiction, the short story collection *Girl with Curious Hair*, it appears that Wallace moves away from the imperial form of authorship displayed by Rick Vigorous and Lenore Sr. toward "a new approach to authorial presence in [his] writing" (Hering 21). Many of the stories agree upon the necessity of escaping monologic and solipsistic traps, but the collection itself struggles to enact such an escape because of its desire to dazzle the reader with the author's literary ventriloquistic talent. Much like Vlad the Impaler takes center stage at the end of *Broom*, the mode of authorship he represents (Author 2) dominates *Girl.* Hering and Marshall Boswell both note how the bulk of *Girl* "involves a deliberate transposition of the 'parroting' found in the plot of *Broom* to the narrative registers of the stories themselves," with Wallace mimicking a different writer in each story (Hering 20; Boswell 69–70). While critics differ on exactly which writers Wallace mimics in the stories, there is a general consensus that nearly every story in the collection acts as a riff on one prominent contemporary writer or another Wallace wishes to be read against, from Bret Easton Ellis ("Girl with Curious Hair") to Philip Roth ("Say Never") to Raymond Carver ("Everything is Green") to William Faulkner and William H. Gass ("John Billy") to Robert Coover ("Lyndon"), and, of course, John Barth ("Westward"). I also share Matthew

Luter's assessment of "Little Expressionless Animals" as Wallace echoing Don DeLillo, a connection previous critics overlook (75).

Wallace's pastiche of the literary landscape could appear to dilute his authorship, making him less resemble an "Author-God" and more closely resemble the writer whose "only power is to mix writings," in the sense that Wallace merely cycles through various voices "to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as to never rest on any one of them" (Barthes 146). Hering, however, elevates Wallace's project in *Girl* above simple imitation, claiming that "Wallace deliberately tries to *force* his predecessors (as well as his contemporaries) to speak in his own voice" (21; emphasis added). However, if one follows Hering's logic, Wallace's authorial mode in *Girl* is less parroting *a la* Vlad the Impaler—wholly derivative and mindless—and closer to the totalizing positions of Rick Vigorous and Norman Bombardini. The opening scene in *Broom* and the moment when Rick Vigorous finds that his initials that he wrote in a bathroom stall have been replaced by Andrew Lang's provide visual analogs for Wallace's approach in *Girl*: in writing in the style of these other writers, Wallace invades their space and "writes over" them to negate their power over his own voice. This "writing over" demonstrates that imitation need not equal subjugation: it too can be a totalizing pose. The large number of writers Wallace parrots in *Girl* renders the collection a binge of authorial voices and strategies and makes "Westward" look like a purge of these voices from Wallace's system. Hayes-Brady likewise sees a "deadening force of consumption pervad[ing]" the narrative of "Westward," and if one looks look at the collection more broadly, it is apparent that Wallace adopts a similar consumption ethic throughout with regards to authorial poses (54). Wallace approaches Bombardinian levels of consumption in *Girl*—gobbling up all the popular styles and voices, absorbing them into himself until he "owns" all of these voices and there is no distinction between himself and the rest of the literary world. His own Project Total Yang.

Wallace devours more than other author's styles in this collection: he consumes more narrative positions and masks than he does anywhere else in his fiction, writing female personas and perspectives ("My Appearance," "Little Expressionless Animals"), queer protagonists ("Lyndon," "Little Expressionless Animals"), Jewish personas ("Say

Never"), and several social classes and regions ("Girl with Curious Hair," "Everything is Green," "John Billy"). The abundance of masks, boundaries, windows, screens, and collisions in *Girl* calls constant attention to the necessity of contact; however, this contact is based less in the breaking of boundaries than it is a lowering of defenses, a relaxing of poses that allows for a non-fatal collision between two subjects.

Wallace admits the inadequacies of masks by pointing to moments where so many of them fail. "John Billy" is one such example. The story features one of the most complex narrative voices that Wallace ever attempts, the height of his linguistic "stunt pilotry" (McCaffery 25). Wallace maintains this voice for most of the story; however, in the last five pages, the voice, like the Professional Conversationalist's mask in *Infinite Jest*, starts to slip and sounds, increasingly, more like David Foster Wallace and less like John Billy. The sentence "Simple Ranger's face had checked entirely out: the old and historical and adental man was dreaming out through the window into the geometry of bird and soil that stretched to the sky's tight burlap seam" is a far cry from a sentence like "Was me supposed to tell Simple Ranger how Chuck Nunn Junior done wronged the man that wrong him and fleen to parts unguessed" (141, 121). The first almost reads as a checklist of Wallace's authorial idiosyncrasies (math metaphors, a blend of informal and technical diction, sky imagery) while the second, which is the story's first sentence, would not likely be attributed to Wallace in a blind test. Interestingly, this shift in voice occurs at the moment in the story when it is revealed that Simple Ranger, the audience for John Billy's story about Chuck Nunn Junior, is none other than Chuck Nunn Junior himself. The clue that unmasks Simple Ranger as C. Nunn is "that voice there" (145).

The boundary between text and reader dissolves in the story's big reveal, becoming a site of total identification that shifts the onus of connection from the reader to the author. Simon de Bourcier's close analysis of Wallace's sentence structure in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* points out that the stories in that collection which read as distinctly Wallace-esque are also ones that speak about writing most directly (15). This moment of unmasking in "John Billy" makes a similar turn in that it also initiates the moment when the audience to John Billy's story begins their critique of John Billy's authority, making the story serve as a sort of writers' workshop, a form of

"fiction-therapy" (Wallace, "Here and There" 153). John Billy's story essentially fails: his attempts to bring "Chuck Nunn Junior's eyes out his head and [make] him look at dirt and brush and soil and fowls," and to "show him the waist-deep shit we all grew up in" backfire because John Billy erroneously believes that his superior storytelling makes the episode "a gift" for his audience, whose lives he is talking about without realizing it (143). "John Billy" critiques this perception of authorship as ignorant and short-sighted, suggesting that real storytellers must descend from their "gleaming abstract Olympian HQ" and jump into "the waist deep shit" themselves to become "more like a reader" "quivering in the trenches" (Wallace, "Octet" 160). The boundary between Self and Other, or writer and reader, does not dissolve in this situation: each remains distinct and autonomous. What becomes critical is contact brought about by both figures inhabiting the same space, their mutual interest colliding. One senses an awareness of a new type of authorship developing over the course of the collection, an authorship based on connection and contact, which the collection increasingly characterizes as collision. (Recall that "John Billy" is primarily about a car crash that sends someone through the border of a windshield.)

Wallace uses the critique of storytelling featured in "John Billy" elsewhere in his fiction; however, future instances reveal that open critique of insincere authorship is not without its problems. In some ways, the narrative reveal in "John Billy" serves as a rehearsal for the extended critique of AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) speakers in *Infinite Jest* and in Meredith Rand's story in *The Pale King*. AA veterans and the narrator of *Infinite Jest* exhibit no sympathy for AA speakers whose testimonies lapse into making excuses for their addiction or link their behavior to causal triggers rather than their own poor choices. As Edward Jackson and Joel Nicholson-Roberts observe, these speakers who fail to meet AA's narrative criteria are all female, while the harsh judges of their narratives are predominantly male. The audience and the narrator's denunciation of them illuminates an undercurrent of violence to recovery and narrative norms in that "marginal subjects have to assimilate to [AA's] white male prescriptions in order to 'recover'" (25). The women are free to tell their story but must conform to a narrative formula that demeans them. Similarly in *The Pale King*, Meredith Rand's relationship with her husband is grounded on his ability to unpack her life story for

her, to rewrite or dictate her own history to her, only more accurately and authoritatively. While John Billy may be a man whose storytelling technique is critiqued by another man, this scene and others similar to it in Wallace's *oeuvre* bear traces of the modes of authorship displayed by Rick Vigorous and Norman Bombardini. Although the critic in this case, C. Nunn, sits in the audience and may be considered a reader, his status as subject of the story being told (or the AA veterans' status as storytellers) makes the behavior represent a desire to inscribe themselves and their narrative onto a female other, denying them the autonomy and authority to tell their own stories.

Wallace vs. ~~Barth~~ Barthes

For all of the impersonation, masks, and concealment on display, a few stories in *Girl* do not pursue these problematic modes of authorship Wallace wrestles with throughout it and *Broom*. Instead, they attempt to push through them and envision a new authorial position. "Luckily the Account Representative Knew CPR," "Lyndon," and "Here and There" craft a new definition of authorship through an implicit critique of Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author." John Roache has described Wallace's feelings toward post-structuralist theory as ambivalent at best and problematically dismissive and reductive at worst (12). Wallace appears to endorse and adopt Barthes's "The Death of the Author" in the oft-cited McCaffery interview when he says "once I'm done with the thing, I'm basically dead, and probably the text's dead; it becomes simply language, and language lives not just in but *through* the reader. The reader becomes God, for all textual purposes" (40; emphasis original). Embracing Barthes seems the right thing to say to an interviewer for *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*; however, there is a disingenuousness about Wallace's response, something obligatory in how he name-checks Barthes before proceeding to describe his presence and intent in his work. The Barthes reference becomes even more difficult to accept sincerely when one considers that Wallace calls art "a living transaction between humans" on the following page of the interview. However, several stories in *Girl* demonstrate how "the birth of the reader" need not come "at the cost of the death of the author" (Barthes 148). In these stories, Wallace shows how a living reader and writer present in the text is not just possible but necessary.

"Luckily the Account Representative Knew CPR," while often ignored as a minor sketch, rehearses many of the themes and imagery that take center stage in "Pop Quiz 9" of "Octet." The two men, the Account Representative and the Vice President in Charge of Overseas Production, occupy the same building but remain oblivious to their "shared pain" because their lives never intersect (48). This lack of intersection is but one of "the sorts of similarities enjoyed by parallel lines" (45). Both men also suffer from heart trouble—the Vice President's heart has just stopped; the Account Representative's has recently been broken by divorce. However, through the magic of coincidence (and the frequent late hours required of late capitalism), their parallel paths collide in the parking garage, where the Vice President in Charge of Overseas Production has a heart attack and the Account Representative races to his aid and performs CPR, "*having at* the Vice President in Charge of Overseas Production's defective heart" until help arrives (51: emphasis original).

Boswell reads the story's ending as Wallace dramatizing his claim in the McCaffery interview that fiction's project is to provide CPR to the culture (78). I would extend that reading to authorship, with the story's scenario of a younger figure resuscitating an older, ailing one working as a metaphor for rescuing the author figure from certain death due to external forces (theory) and internal failure (overly ironic metafiction). In effect, Wallace performs CPR not only on the culture, as Boswell claims, but on fiction and the author figure. The (older) Vice President represents the author ensconced in his Olympian HQ, "tall, large, broad and blunt," "a slow-moving hull," "florid, craggy," "literally senior" (47). The Account Representative, on the other hand, is Wallace's new brand of authorship: "in time, alert, composed, svelte, lithe, well-kept, independent," a "lone wolf—though an efficient wolf" (49–50). He cannot see clearly, let alone possess the vision of a God-like figure, because he has removed his contact lenses, but he can see well enough to identify the Vice President and the trouble he is in and keep him alive. Thus, this figure does not presume an omniscient or totalizing vision but instead knows that "*having at*" the Vice President's heart is the only course of action. Reading the story as being about authorship also does not "furnish it with a final signified"; the story is not closed or explained by "discovering the Author" (147). Instead, the story suggests that the author can be revived without

reinstating their God-like powers, provided that the author in question can view reading as "a creative act" that is part of an open exchange, or transaction, between writer and reader (Wallace, "Borges" 294). Account Representative and Vice President, reader and writer, all are joined together in a symbiotic struggle to survive, "*having at*" each other's hearts via fiction, "to have and to hold, for a lifetime" ("Luckily" 51). The location of this interaction on the lower levels of the parking garage brings the author figure down into the trenches where they not only interact with readers but can be saved by one of those people quivering in the trenches.

This shared relationship between figures of different ages and statuses carries over into "Lyndon," where the bond between David Boyd and President Lyndon Baines Johnson plays out in a similar, if more complex, way. Boswell claims that Johnson's success has transformed him from being "a man of feeling" to "an abstraction," and he characterizes the story's central conflict as dialectical, between "real animal love" and "abstractions," or, put more simply, between feeling and theory, presence and absence (84). Lyndon Johnson's struggle in the story involves "his hatred of being alone" and need "to have people know he was in their room" butting up against his belief in an abstract, impersonal love that is "nothing but arrangements of distance" (115, 93, 115). This conflict reflects a need to have one's presence acknowledged while never having to actually *be present* for anyone else. Boyd, on the other hand, occupies the other end of the spectrum as "an audience [...] just barely there," "almost refined right out of existence," typified by one character's claim "a lot of times Dave could be in a room with you and you'd never even notice him in the room" (93).

The comparisons to authorship are fruitful here as well. Boyd acts as an author, completing all of Johnson's correspondence before each day is through, making him another one of *Girl*'s many author figures. His name is also David, the first of several author stand-ins named "Dave" that Wallace creates throughout his career. As in "Luckily the Account Representative Knew CPR," the elder author figure has become divorced from the lower folks in the trenches—Lyndon occupies the highest office in the land and first speaks from a helicopter—and, tellingly, cannot conceive of how to collapse the immense distance that has built up between himself and the people he serves (Boswell 84). One of the central questions the story asks is whether any act

of love or communication can be strong enough to bring the Commander in Chief down to earth. This question remains as applicable to an author as it does to the President of the United States.

"Lyndon" proffers writing as the most potent communicative act to bridge the distance between people and truly bring loftier powers back down to earth alongside those quivering in the trenches. As in "Luckily the Account Representative Knew CPR," the story turns when Johnson's path crosses Boyd's late at night when no one else occupies the office; however, unlike in "Luckily the Account Representative Knew CPR," their relationship is rooted in written correspondence. In Boyd and Johnson's first meeting, Johnson tells Boyd to "write that down for me," establishing their relationship as textual from the start (78). Boyd's first assignment of delivering mail throughout the office only solidifies his position as a pivotal node in the textual-exchange system that is Lyndon Baines Johnson. The midnight encounter that establishes their intimacy hinges on Boyd expressing his admiration for the Same Day Directive, which requires that all incoming correspondence receives a reply the same day as it arrives. Johnson responds to Boyd's praise with "I wrote that" (89). After this conversation, they spend the rest of the night together "answering mail, for hours, mostly silent," signing each letter with the same signature, Johnson with his own hand, Boyd by "applying the Senator's signature stamp," making them bound to each other through the written word (89, 88). This relationship develops in intensity until Boyd does so much writing for Johnson that they "contain one another" (116). Boyd serves as one of the first ghostly authors to haunt Wallace's fiction by acting as Johnson's ghostwriter, "jot[ting] things down for him—thoughts, turns of phrase, reminders," and, of course, letters, all of which would be subject to Johnson's review and bear his signature (91). Thus, Boyd's connection with Johnson depicts textual production and authorship as shared endeavors that work best when the paths of both parties collide.

The ending suggests that Boyd's textual relationship with Johnson not only opens up the possibility of meaningful interaction between them but also administers a kind of emotional CPR to Johnson. Lady Bird rhetorically asks how Johnson could "not know the heart of a young man who has emptied his life and his own

heart into the life and work of Lyndon Baines Johnson?" (114). Lady Bird implies that, by writing for Johnson, Boyd and Johnson pour their hearts into each other until they "contain one another" and there is, effectively, no distance between Johnson's heart and Boyd's (116). The role reversals are abundant in the story's final scene: Boyd goes from being "under [Johnson]," who looks down on people from a helicopter at the story's open, to standing over Johnson, who looks up at him (78). The final image of the story, where Boyd finds Johnson lying in bed with Boyd's lover René, seems to suggest that their places become interchangeable, that Johnson knows the interior of Boyd's heart so well that it allows him to descend from a great distance and climb into bed with Boyd's lover. This change in position may resemble a Bombardinian vision of authorship, where Boyd's masked writing on behalf of Johnson dilutes his own identity to the point that Johnson has usurped his position in his bed and absorbed him entirely. However, when one considers the lengthy passage that opens this final scene, a different reading presents itself. The passage envisions all the "arrangements of distance" that one must collapse or dismiss in order to arrive at the climactic moment of the story when Boyd discovers just how much he and Johnson "contain one another."

Hering reads this passage as "inclusionary" on the surface, representing the convergence of Johnson's world, the bedroom, and "the interior world of Boyd himself" (58). However, Hering does not see this inclusion standing up to scrutiny, reading it instead as another expression of Johnson's dominance over global and personal politics, a kind of ownership (118–19). This reading once again places readers under the sway of an imperial author of Bombardinian proportions: these vast "arrangements of distance" in a text may appear to travel "as far west as the limit of the country lets you," away from a central, controlling presence, but "like someone greedy with a praline" or like the curvature and gravitational pull of the earth itself, any straight-line departure from a point in a text written in this imperial mode of authorship will inevitably "bring you around" to the "*master* bedroom" of the author, who "own[s] the fucking floor you stand on" (118, 77; emphasis added).

The globular or spherical shapes that litter the scene can appear to be an "intensely claustrophobic" and "overbearing force" because "everything the world

holds is inside" their "imprisoning, englobing curve" (Hering 59; Wallace, "Lyndon" 117). However, if one looks at these spheres as convex shapes, one can view them in a more positive light. Convexity runs throughout *Girl* and the end of "Lyndon" offers yet another example of it. The outward movement convexity represents corresponds with the collection's motifs of collision and piercing. While these shapes are depicted as traps throughout the collection, they gesture toward an exit, an exit based in a kind of presence, what Hering calls "looking *through*" rather than "looking *at*" (99; emphasis original). Hering reads "Westward's" closing image of a hubless wheel and its "radial spokes" as a metaphor for Wallace's authorial stance at the end of the collection. "The extension of radial spokes outward from a central hub" connotes expansion but also conjures imagery of the "outward motion" that characterizes "outwardly bound communication and dialogue" symbolized by waves, convex shapes, and, most importantly, arrows (61). Like spokes, arrows move outward from a specific point; however, unlike spokes in a wheel, these arrows have the ability to collide with a target and break through without being destroyed like waves.

As Boswell does before him, Hering overlooks the moments in stories before "Westward" where similar types of breakthroughs occur: in "Little Expressionless Animals," the waves in Julie's metaphor connect and break through—they "meet what they move toward" *before* they break (42). Similarly, the final passage in "Lyndon"—which also features wave imagery in the "wake of the line's movement" and the location of the "dim master bedroom" "on the dim far eastern *shore* of the Atlantic"—suggests a moment of breakthrough too: "a toppled trophy has *punched* a shivered star *through* the glass of its case" (117; emphases added). This detail may not seem important on the surface, but when one considers the abundance of glass barriers throughout *Girl*, Wallace's inclusion of it at the start of a scene in which "every concavity […] now looks to have come convex" amplifies the scene's expression of some radical kind of "oneness" that does in fact seem to break through and "topple" barriers between President and constituent, self and other, reader and writer ("Little Expressionless Animals" 17). Although the author's arrow may not always hit its intended target, leaving the author trapped in an "imprisoning, englobing curve." Wallace's imagery alleges that if the author can "punch through"

these flawed modes of authorship and enact a convex authorial presence, then the arrow can "forget the curved circle" and hit the intended target of the reader's heart ("Lyndon" 117).

"Here and There" functions as a more penetrating (and brief) critique of monologism and metafiction and ends on the precipice of the same kind of metafictional breakthrough toward intense authorial presence that concludes "Octet." With its main character's conflict between mathematical logic and creative writing, "Here and There" is equally autobiographical and self-conscious a work as "Westward." However, the story comes without the performative and imitative elements in "Westward" that embody the modes of authorship they critique almost as often as they critique them.

Wallace fills "Here and There" with literary terminology and creative writing workshop discourse to make clear that Bruce's search for a new way to relate to his girlfriend is the same struggle a writer, namely Wallace, must have to re-envision the reader. By placing Bruce, the protagonist, in "fiction therapy," any criticism made of Bruce becomes a criticism of authorship as well. Unlike the ending of *Broom*, the story genuinely critiques the monologic mode and concludes with the realization that "an unconditional act of dialogic communication" in which a speaker truly allows someone else to have the last word constitutes the best relief to anxiety (Hering 22). Rick Vigorous's monologism expresses his fear that he will cease to exist if he stops speaking. His final statement "I'm a man of my" permits his voice to continue beyond the limits of the text and allows him to inscribe himself onto the reader without being written over because the reader's inscription, the final "word," still bears his signature. Bruce displays similar impulses to Rick, but the course of his fiction therapy steers him toward a different outcome in which he will not only continue to exist after he stops speaking but will actually become a better, more present writer by listening. Boswell reads Bruce's lover as "reader (of Bruce's justifications), object (of Bruce's narrative), and subject (of her own narrative)" (91). This dynamic dissolves the boundaries between "reader versus text, self versus other, and here versus there" more than any other early work by Wallace (91). However, this shift in Wallace's approach to writing is less an example of dissolution than of fortification

and connection: Bruce's growth comes through acknowledging that others are subjects as vivid as he.

Bruce's relationship with his girlfriend mirrors Rick's with Lenore: she feels like "her feelings were something outside her, not in her control," and this feeling stems from Bruce's view of her as a "reader, as well as an object" (Wallace, "Here and There" 152, 153). Wallace uses Bruce's conflict to demonstrate how his failure to connect with his girlfriend and have an honest conversation about marriage derives from his inability to view her as a subject equally present and alive as himself. His psychiatrist warns Bruce of the dangers of his behavior, saying

> if one uses a person as nothing more than a receptacle for one's organs, fluids, and emotions, if one never regards her as more than and independent from the feelings and qualities one is disposed to invest her with from a distance, it is wrong then to turn around and depend on her feelings for any significant part of one's own sense of wellbeing. […] she has an emotional life with features that you knew nothing about, that she is just plain different from whatever you might have decided to make her into for yourself. In short a person Bruce (156–7).

This passage reads like an extended rebuke of all the problematic modes of authorship on display throughout Wallace's early work. While writer-reader may appear to be a subject-object relationship, "Here and There" illuminates the solipsism inherent in such a notion and that this notion must be abandoned if an author hopes to communicate. Unlike "Westward," which features the writer armed with arrows and knives, poised to stab the reader in the heart, the climax of "Here and There" imagines a kind of mutual presence not based in authoritative penetration or force but in mutual presence and vulnerability. Contrary to what "Westward" may suggest, "Here and There" does not envision fiction as the kind of cruel space where the author "treats the reader like it wants to … well, fuck him" or "stabs him in the heart" because the reader is not a conquest or mere "receptacle for [the author's] organs, fluids, and emotions" ("Westward" 331, 332; "Here and There" 156).

The story ends with Bruce being called upon to repair an aging stove, but, in getting behind it and starting to take it apart while his relatives look on, he realizes that he has no idea how to fix it. This moment constitutes a breakthrough in "fiction therapy": the author figure (Bruce) confronts and dismantles a "thick, inefficient" mode of authorship (the stove) only to arrive at the same position as the reader: alone and "afraid of absolutely everything there is" (168, 172). However, "Here and There" concludes in a more positive, redemptive manner than *Broom*: "Then welcome" (172). This greeting welcomes the writer and reader into a more enlightened state of authorship that allows the writer to empathize with the reader, to see them as a subject and repair their broken relationship so that fiction can become the "living transaction between human beings" Wallace viewed it as and give the culture the CPR it so desperately needs.

Only Collide!

Like many of the characters that populate his early fiction, David Foster Wallace gravitates toward authorial stances that regard writing as asserting one's authority on the world, behaving as if the act of writing, of authoring, automatically confers authority upon the writer and thus grants them the ability to possess and control what they write and whom they write about. However, as Hayes-Brady writes, one cannot presume that writing and authority are synonymous. Rather, the mark of a mature writer is not to expect authority, but to accept it and accept it graciously and reverently (33). Accepting authority reveals an earnest and mutual "willingness to engage" on the part of the writer as well as the reader (45). Thus, one could argue that Wallace's early work typifies that of many writers in that it lacks maturity; however, looking carefully at his constantly evolving approach to defining authorship throughout this work shows a writer immersed in a search for an authorial mode that satisfies his aesthetic, theoretical, and ethical criteria, a sort of fiction therapy.

The familiar narrative on Wallace's development as a writer points to the "essay-interview nexus" as the end point of this search; however, his 1992 essay "Greatly Exaggerated" puts forth a grand rethinking of his position toward authorship to claim fiction as an engaged conversation between two human beings, the living author

and the living reader. Wallace slyly dismisses Barthes's dead author near the essay's end. The "whole question [of authorship] seems sort of arcane," Wallace writes, "for those of us civilians who know in our gut that writing is an act of communication between one human being and another," a collision of equally present and engaged subjects (144). Wallace endorses a living author in the belief that his continual commitment to affirming his presence will bring about the same level of belief and commitment in the reader, making them each embodied beings engaged in intimate communication (Konstantinou 86; Haddad 20). While "Greatly Exaggerated" pivots from poststructuralism most directly, looking at authorship in his early work shows how his arriving at these ideas is the result of a years-long process of interrogating various approaches to authorship until he arrives at a mode of authorship devoted to making fiction not "a cultivation of absence" or "erasure of consciousness" but a resuscitation of presence, a reassertion of consciousness, and it is a mode of authorship he continues to pursue throughout the rest of his fiction (Wallace, "Greatly Exaggerated" 140).

However, examining how Wallace reaches this point creatively should illuminate that the narrative of his development as a writer need not be so linear or optimistic as the Wallace Studies party line would have it. Rather, his approach to authorship does not follow a fixed path, and these immature, problematic modes remain in his writing for the remainder of his career. *Infinite Jest*, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, *The Pale King*, and the nonfiction certainly succeed at fostering a strong authorial presence that makes Wallace a unique voice in contemporary literature; however, these works nevertheless contain traces of the more imperial forms of authorship that run throughout his early work that seek to direct and control the reader, often by adopting the markers of direct and earnest communication. Granted, in some instances these modes are presented for the purposes of critique (e.g., the "strategies" of Orin Incandenza in *Infinite Jest* and the toxic males holding forth in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*), but for every example of critique there are other unconscious (or concealed) variations. Unpacking these authorial modes in their earliest and most potent form allows for others to detect their more concealed appearances in his later work to see how for all the sincere, solicitous moments of authorial presence in his

fiction, there are equal and opposite cases of authorial coercion and readerly domination that require readers to resist the allure of the tidy narrative surrounding David Foster Wallace's authorial persona.

Acknowledgements

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

References

Barthes, R 2001 "The Death of the Author." *Image-Music-Text*, translated by Stephen Heath, Hill and Wang, 142–148.

Boswell, M 2003 *Understanding David Foster Wallace*. University of South Carolina Press.

Cohen, S 2012 "To Wish to Try to Sing to the Next Generation: *Infinite Jest*'s History." *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, Cohen, S and Konstantinou, L (eds.), 59–79. University of Iowa Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt20q1v7f.9

de Bourcier, S 2017 "'They All Sound Like David Foster Wallace': Syntax and Narrative in *Infinite Jest, Brief Interviews with Hideous Men, Oblivion,* and *The Pale King*." *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 5(1): 10, 1–30. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.207

Fest, B 2014 "'Then Out of the Rubble': David Foster Wallace's Early Fiction." *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing": New Essays on the Novels*, Boswell, M (ed.), 85–105. Bloomsbury.

Haddad, V 2017 "Conjuring David Foster Wallace's Ghost: Prosopopeia, Whitmanian Intimacy and the Queer Potential of *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*." *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 5(1): 5, 1–28. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.139

Hayes-Brady, C 2017 *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, and Resistance*. Bloomsbury.

Hering, D 2017 *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form.* Bloomsbury.

Jackson, E and **Nicholson-Roberts, J** 2017 "White Guys: Questioning *Infinite Jest*'s New Sincerity." *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 5(1): 6, 1–28. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.182

Kelly, A 2010 "David Foster Wallace: The Death of the Author and the Birth of a Discipline." *IJAS Online*, 2.

Kelly, A 2014 "David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas." *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing": New Essays on the Novels*, Boswell, M (ed.), 3–22. Bloomsbury.

Konstantinou, L 2012 "No Bull: David Foster Wallace and Postironic Belief." *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, Cohen, S and Konstantinou, L (eds.), 83–112. University of Iowa Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt20q1v7f.11

Luter, M 2018 "The Broom of the System and Girl with Curious Hair." *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*, Clare, R (ed.), 67–81. Cambridge University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108553902.006

McCaffery, L 2012 "An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace." *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, Burn, S J (ed.), 21–52. University Press of Mississippi.

Roache, J 2017 "'The Realer, More Enduring and Sentimental Part of Him': David Foster Wallace's Personal Library and Marginalia." *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 5(1): 7, 1–35. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.142

Wallace, D F 1989 "Here and There." *Girl with Curious Hair*, 149–172. Norton.

Wallace, D F 1989 "John Billy." *Girl with Curious Hair*, 119–147. Norton.

Wallace, D F 1989 "Little Expressionless Animals." *Girl with Curious Hair*, 1–42. Norton.

Wallace, D F 1989 "Luckily the Account Representative Knew CPR." *Girl with Curious Hair*, 43–52. Norton.

Wallace, D F 1989 "Lyndon." *Girl with Curious Hair*, 75–118. Norton

Wallace, D F 1989 "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way." *Girl with Curious Hair*, 231–373. Norton.

Wallace, D F 1998 "Greatly Exaggerated." *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments*, 138–145. Back Bay.

Wallace, D F 2000 "Octet." *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men,* 131–160. Back Bay
    Books.

Wallace, D F 2004 *The Broom of the System.* Penguin.

Wallace, D F 2013 "Borges on the Couch." *Both Flesh and Not: Essays,* 285–294. Back
    Bay.

Widiss, D 2011 *Obscure Invitations: The Persistence of the Author in Twentieth-Cen-
    tury American Literature.* Stanford University Press.