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7 - “Non”-Fiction

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This is the submitted text of Eve, Martin Paul, “Non’-Fiction’, in David Foster Wallace in Context, ed. by Clare Hayes-Brady (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

In addition to his voluminous fictional output, David Foster Wallace wrote a large quantity of writing that can be deemed non-fiction. The subject matter of this material is diverse and ranges from rap music and race, through the philosophy of mathematics, US electoral politics, and animal welfare in the gastronomic space, up to prescriptivist grammar. It is partly Wallace’s reputation in the non-fictional space – perhaps as a “philosopher-novelist” of sorts – that has led to more general claims for his “genius” and literary canonization¹ For indeed, the symbiosis of the essay form with the career of the contemporary novelist is undeniable.²

Before considering Wallace’s non-fictional writing, it is first worth querying the strict division between “fiction” and “fact” that structures this binary. For, in essays such as “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again,” Wallace introduces humorous set pieces that add to the comic timbre of the work in general, but that seem unlikely, actually, to have occurred. As an example, there is the instance where Wallace claims in this essay that he believes he is surveilled while aboard the cruise ship, thus allowing the cabin crew to conduct their cleaning activities only when he is out of his cabin for more than thirty minutes. And certainly this episode provides Wallace with some humorous material:

So now for a while I theorize that somehow a special crewman is assigned to each passenger and follows that passenger at all times, using extremely sophisticated techniques of personal surveillance and reporting the passenger’s movements and activities and projected time of cabin-return back to Steward HQ or something, and

1 See, for more on this, Severs, *Balancing Books*, 3.

2 See, for just one example, Childs and Gigante, *The Cambridge History of the British Essay*.

so for about a day I try taking extreme evasive actions—whirling suddenly to check behind me, popping around corners, darting in and out of Gift Shops via different doors, etc.—never one sign of anybody engaged in surveillance.³

But a fundamental question remains: is this passage *non-fiction*? Do readers really believe that Wallace took these actions? I would argue not. Instead, portions of Wallace’s journalistic and essayistic outputs should be thought of as “creative non-fiction.” That is, in keeping with the near-term literary-historical field in which he was working – postmodernism – Wallace’s non-fiction is not straightforwardly *non*, but instead blurs the creative-critical boundary.

I further contend here that Wallace’s non-fiction writing, using many of the same metafictional techniques as in his fiction, needs to be understood in relation to poststructuralist philosophies of text that ask *what we mean by fiction vs non-fiction*. Does non-fiction really mean “writing that refers to an extra-textual reality”?

Since the high point of poststructuralist theory in the 1970s, it has been a literary-philosophical commonplace to state that there is no absolute difference between literary and non-literary writing. That is, there is nothing a work of fiction or non-fiction can do within its own language to persuade a reader absolutely of its own factuality or fictionality. John Searle and Jacques Derrida have both claimed this at various points. For Searle, “The utterance acts of fiction are indistinguishable from the utterance acts of serious discourse,” while for Derrida, “No exposition, no discursive form is intrinsically or essentially literary before or outside of the function it is assigned.”⁴ The only problem for such a view is that Andrew Piper shows that machine classification *can* distinguish between fact and fiction with over 95% accuracy using just a 1,250-word stretch of text.⁵ For the sake of clarity, this computational approach is not checking whether a text is true. It verifies only the work’s “intended truth claims” within language.⁶

3 Wallace, *SFT*, 256-353.

4 Searle, “The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse,” 68; Blanchot and Derrida, *The Instant of My Death*, 28.

5 Piper, *Enumerations: Data and Literary Study*.

6 Piper, 98. Portions of this paragraph are drawn from Eve, “Review of Andrew Piper”

While future work may wish computationally to examine the linguistic traits of Wallace's fiction against his non-fiction, the remainder of this chapter is devoted to a representative descriptive sampling of Wallace's non-fiction across his career, mostly drawn from *Signifying Rappers* (1990); *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (1997); *Everything and More: A Compact History of Infinity* (2003); *Consider the Lobster* (2005); *TIW* (2009); *Fate, Time and Language: An Essay on Free Will* (2010); and *Both Flesh and Not* (2012). For the sake of expediency, rather than because it is the only classificatory system or because these works can neatly be so carved, I divide the rest of this chapter into the headings of "Philosophy," "Experiential Argument" and "Politics." It is worth admitting, up front, that this schema perhaps accords less attention to one area of Wallace's practice than it might. For Wallace also wrote works of literary criticism. Some of these pieces, such as his 1997 review of John Updike's *Toward the End of Time*, have become influential in their own right, particularly in this instance for introducing the phrase "the Great Male Narcissists" to refer to Norman Mailer, Updike and Philip Roth.⁷ Such work can, also, however, often fall under the rubric of "politics," rooted as they usually are within sociological paradigms. Hence, despite its tendency to oversimplify, I stick to the above mapping for this chapter's cartography.

Finally, for this introduction, it would be remiss not to note that there are, on occasion, differences between the versions of Wallace's non-fiction essays that were published in the original serial venues (journals, magazines and so forth) and the editions that appear in subsequent anthologies.⁸ Thus, it is always worth comparing sources when working with Wallace's non-fiction writing.

Philosophy

It is no secret that his father was a philosophy professor and that Wallace's undergraduate degree was a joint major in English and philosophy. Indeed, it is often reported that it was the philosophical element of Wallace's intellectual purview that dominated, with one commentator remarking that he "knew him as a philosopher with a fiction hobby."⁹ This comes across in

7 Wallace, "John Updike, Champion Literary Phallocrat"

8 See, for instance "Tense Present" in *Harper's Magazine* vs "Authority and American Usage," in *Consider the Lobster*.

9 Wallace, *Fate, Time, and Language*, 3.

Wallace's non-fiction writing, which has a strong philosophical strand, embracing the histories of mathematics, logic and other areas, and most strongly embodied in *Everything and More* and *Fate, Time and Language*. There have also, to date, been at least two volumes solely dedicated to exploring Wallace's philosophical output.¹⁰ It could be said, in fact, that much of Wallace's non-fiction writing is philosophical in its content.

It is worth noting upfront, also, that Wallace's philosophical writings bend problematically towards appropriation for self-help purposes.¹¹ In particular, the publication of his almost-schmaltzy Kenyon commencement address as *TIW* has tended, in the popular imagination, to overshadow Wallace's actual philosophical work. It is debatable whether Wallace would even have classified this text as "philosophy," filled, as it is, with "didactic little stor[ies]."¹²

Wallace's only formal contribution to philosophical literature is the published version of his undergraduate philosophy honors thesis, *Fate, Time and Language*. This work is a response to a 1962 essay in *The Philosophical Review* by Richard Taylor called "Fatalism."¹³ In "Fatalism," Taylor presents a novel argument for fatalistic thinking – that is, the notion that all actions are predetermined and cannot be modified. Taylor does this by presenting six widely accepted propositions from contemporary philosophy and showing them to be logically incompatible with the idea of free will. The basic twist that Taylor achieves is to show that, while we accept that our actions in the present cannot influence the past (and, indeed, are constrained or determined by them), the same can be said of *future events*. That is, that a gun barrel is cool in the future, for Taylor, can be shown to determine the fact that the gun was not fired in the present.

Taylor's article prompted grave disquiet, as evidenced by the number of direct responses, which are collected in *Fate, Time and Language*. Yet, while there was consensus that Taylor's conclusions were undesirable – that either the universe is fatalistic or that there are major problems with some of the core propositions of contemporary philosophy – there was no

10 Bolger and Korb (eds), *Gesturing toward Reality*; Cahn and Eckert (eds), *Freedom and the Self*

11 D.T. Max, "Why David Foster Wallace Should Not Be Worshipped as a Secular Saint."

12 Wallace, *TIW*.

13 Taylor, "Fatalism"

agreement among respondents as to precisely *what* was wrong with Taylor’s reasoning. For Wallace, as well as for Steven Cahn who edited the Wallace volume, one of the core problems with the respondents was that many of them argued that Taylor’s piece could not be correct *because* it ended up showing that fatalism was indeed how the universe works.

Wallace’s award-winning thesis and posthumous book argued that the problem in Taylor’s logic required a new formal language that could express what he calls the intensional-physical-modality system. Reading this system is not for the faint-hearted (the first rule of the system is: “[$t_n p$]_w = 1 iff [p]_{w, ^un} = 1”). The basic gist of Wallace’s argument is easier to grasp, though, and concerns situated truths with respect to physical embodiment (“situational physical modality”). It asks questions of “impossibility” with respect to the placement of an individual at any particular time; what does it mean to say that one *can* do something – or has the possibility to do something – when that person is situated at a particular geo-temporal coordinate?

Others have explored more thoroughly the extent to which Wallace’s contribution marks a serious philosophical intervention, with Columbia University Press insisting that the book underwent thorough peer review, while the paratexts in the edited edition tactfully sidestep an appraisal of the correctness of his argument. Wallace’s other philosophical contribution, though, was through his work on the philosophy of mathematics.

In *Everything and More: A Compact History of Infinity*, Wallace turns his attention to Cantorian mathematical philosophies. This is not a work of original philosophy or history, but rather a piece of “pop technical writing” that explores some of the ways in which mathematical paradoxes can be resolved within specific paradigms of understanding “infinity.”

It is also a work that has attracted some scathing denunciations from mathematicians. As Amir D. Aczel put it, “this book is very disappointing. I found mathematical misinterpretations [...], many mathematical statements that are patently wrong [... and] Wallace is not the right expositor of these ideas.”¹⁴ Michael Harris, another professor of mathematics, wrote that Wallace’s book was “laced through and through with blunders of every magnitude.”¹⁵ Elsewhere,

14 Aczel, “When Good Novelists Do Bad Science.”

15 Harris, “A Sometimes Funny Book Supposedly about Infinity”

a further well-qualified commentator called *Everything and More* “a train wreck of a book, a disaster.”¹⁶ The Wallace fansite, *The Howling Fantods*, even contains a mathematical errata document that runs to three A4 pages in length of corrections to Wallace’s math.¹⁷

Readers of this work should, therefore, be careful in approaching Wallace’s history of infinity as a work of mathematics. Instead, as Roberto Natalini has shown, this work perhaps better serves as a key to understanding certain formal decisions made in the crafting of Wallace’s novels, including his indebtedness to other math-centric works, such as Don DeLillo’s *Ratner’s Star* (1976).¹⁸ Yet the question remains: if the book is so bad as a work of mathematics, what does this say for our use of such explication as a backdrop against which to situate Wallace’s fiction?

Wallace was, to some extent, skeptical of such uses of his philosophical writings to underscore his fictional work. In an oft-quoted 2006 interview, he disarmingly said that “If some people read my fiction and see it as fundamentally about philosophical ideas, what it probably means is that these are pieces where the characters are not as alive and interesting as I meant them to be.”¹⁹ Yet the very idea that Wallace might be a “therapeutic” writer is indebted to his association with Wittgensteinian philosophy and the idea that “doing philosophy” might or should itself be a therapeutic activity.²⁰ It is, therefore, worth noting that Wallace’s philosophical writing does overlap with his fiction. For instance, the “Eschaton” game in *Infinite Jest* (1996) relies on various philosophies of mathematics and representational/critical reality.²¹ Likewise, *The Broom of the System* has an explicitly Wittgensteinian theme.

In all, though, it is clear that Wallace’s formal philosophical and mathematical texts are, in themselves, relatively slight and not well regarded by those outside of his fictional fanbase, bucking the critical trend that Thompson identified in a previous chapter of following Wallace’s implicit (and explicit) directions for interpretation (and not even well regarded by

16 Rucker, “Infinite Confusion”p.313

17 Ragde, “Mathematical Errata” [presumably URL is in bibliography?]

18 Natalini, “David Foster Wallace and the Mathematics of Infinity.”

19 Karmodi, “A Frightening Time in America”

20 See Baskin, *Ordinary Unhappiness*

21 Wallace, *IJ*, 321-41. For more on this, see Eve, “Equivocatory Horseshit”

mathematicians who enjoy his fiction). Where his non-fiction writing becomes stronger, though, is in his experiential creative non-fiction.

Experiential Argument

Wallace's non-fiction really comes into its own when he writes in magazines about his experiences, be they aboard cruise ships ("A Supposedly Fun Thing"), watching Roger Federer play tennis ("Roger Federer as Religious Experience"), and visiting lobster festivals ("Consider the Lobster"). These pieces allow for his expansive prose style to work its humor without the threat of inaccuracy within the contents that plagues his technical works on philosophy and mathematics.

That said, as noted above, there *are* inaccuracies in these works that cast some doubt on the definition of "non-fiction." Consider Wallace's description of a Federer shot:

Federer's still near the corner but running toward the centerline, and the ball's heading to a point behind him now, where he just was, and there's no time to turn his body around, and Agassi's following the shot in to the net at an angle from the backhand side...and what Federer now does is somehow instantly reverse thrust and sort of skip backward three or four steps, impossibly fast, to hit a forehand out of his backhand corner, all his weight moving backward, and the forehand is a topspin screamer down the line past Agassi at net, who lunges for it but the ball's past him, and it flies straight down the sideline and lands exactly in the deuce corner of Agassi's side, a winner — Federer's still dancing backward as it lands. And there's that familiar little second of shocked silence from the New York crowd before it erupts, and John McEnroe with his color man's headset on TV says (mostly to himself, it sounds like), "How do you hit a winner from that position?"²²

Yet, in the age of YouTube, a quick verification search shows that McEnroe's comment applies to a shot that is barely anything like the one described by Wallace. As with many religious

22 Wallace, "Federer as Religious Experience"

experiences, seeing Federer play tennis was clearly deeply personal for Wallace and difficult to correlate with any extra-textual, shared reality. Wallace's non-fiction certainly comes with fictional embellishments.

More positively, though, perhaps what works best with Wallace's experiential essays is that they are also all driven by an argumentative thrust. In the case of Federer, Wallace states that "The specific thesis here is that if you've never seen the young man play live, and then do, in person, on the sacred grass of Wimbledon, through the literally withering heat and then wind and rain of the '06 fortnight, then you are apt to have what one of the tournament's press bus drivers describes as a 'bloody near-religious experience.'"²³ Elsewhere, the arguments that drive Wallace's non-fiction are arguably more extreme. When it comes to the Maine Lobster Festival, for example, Wallace argues that we should consider the sentience of the animal that is boiled alive, and even takes this so far as to compare the festival with the Holocaust.

Time and again, Wallace crafts his essayistic experiential pieces into argumentative propositions that deliberately contrast two extreme poles for humorous effect. So while Wallace claims, in "A Supposedly Fun Thing," that he has been hired to write "a directionless essayish thing," with a "paucity of direction or angle," he repeatedly distrusts such commissions. "They keep saying—on the phone, Ship-to-Shore, very patiently—not to fret about it," he writes. Yet Wallace also says that "They are sort of disingenuous, I believe, these magazine people. They say all they want is a sort of really big experiential postcard—go, plow the Caribbean in style, come back, say what you've seen." Wallace instead turns his experiential postcard into an argument about how the "pampered" living style, marketed as featuring on-board a seven-night cruise, is transformed into a "kind of death-and-dread-transcendence."²⁴ It is, of course, the bathetic differences between these poles – a seven-night luxury cruise and "death-and-dread-transcendence"; a lobster festival and the Holocaust; Roger Federer and religious experience – that drive Wallace's creative non-fiction. Wallace gives us arguments, but they are often deliberately absurd.

23 Ibid

24 Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing"

Wallace's extremity is not just achieved through wild juxtaposition of the everyday and the outlandish; his subject matter is often, itself, also unusual. Consider, for instance, Wallace's essay "Big Red Son," the subject of which is the pornographic film industry and its effect upon contemporary culture.

This subject allows Wallace, once more, to create humor in his non-fiction writing. After all, when simply handed character/stage names such as "Dick Filth," there is barely any need for Wallace to return to the Pynchonian naming style that he deployed in his first novel, *The Broom of the System* (1987). It's as though the gags come pre-packaged.

However, there is also a danger circling around this area. While Wallace takes care to highlight feminist perspectives on pornography and to draw attention to the toxic masculinity that inheres in such culture, as with mathematics, one has to ask whether he is always the right person to do so.²⁵ After all, as Edward Jackson has highlighted in the wake of D.T. Max's biography, and as later essays in this volume demonstrate, Wallace is intensely problematic with respect to gender and sexuality.²⁶

All of which is to say that Wallace's experiential argumentative essays should always be viewed with a critical eye on his perspectivized position. Just as, in his philosophical work, Wallace argued for the importance of embodied positional takes, rather than transcendental subjects, I contend that reading Wallace's "non"-fiction requires us to situate his work in relation to the man, and to pay attention to what we know about his life. For the experiential angle that Wallace brings punctures any bubble of the intentional fallacy; the life and the writing cannot sit wholly apart from one another. Which brings us, finally, to politics in Wallace's writing.

Politics

Although, as Marshall Boswell puts it, "Wallace is not generally thought of as a political novelist," a complex personal politics are evident in his essayistic non-fiction.²⁷ Perhaps the

25 Wallace, "Big Red Son," 18-19.

26 Jackson, *David Foster Wallace's Toxic Sexuality*; Max, *Every Love Story*

27 Boswell, "Trickle-Down Citizenship" 211.

clearest example of this is in Wallace's profile of Senator John McCain, collected as "Up, Simba" in *Consider the Lobster*. A non-partisan piece that, in the collected version, comes with a self-situating statement that notes that, on this occasion, Wallace voted for the Democrat Bill Bradley, Wallace's article purports to be neither pro- nor anti- McCain.²⁸ While Boswell notes the importance of this essay for the discussion of civics in *The Pale King*, I would personally also draw attention to the humor that Wallace again brings to the piece, for example that the press buses are known as "Bullshit 1" and "Bullshit 2."²⁹

Perhaps more importantly, though, I would like to highlight that politics in Wallace's non-fiction are to be found in the least likely of places (although this is perhaps to be expected. Defining "politics" is a notoriously difficult task as it encompasses all kinds of interpersonal interactions, as evidenced in the above note on Wallace's literary criticism).³⁰ One of Wallace's most political, but also, surprisingly, most readable and ranging essays is his "Authority and American Usage," a *review of a dictionary*.³¹

Specifically, Wallace's review of Bryan A. Garner's *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* is even subtitled "or, 'Politics and the English Language' is redundant." This work, which actually unites all the strands that I have here covered, roves from explications of Wittgenstein's private language argument to giving a "thesis statement" – the argumentative trope for which I advocated above.³²

Wallace's essay also dedicates a substantial portion of its rhetoric to the different political stances that dictionaries can hold. Namely, it asserts/ shows/ argues? that those who advocate for grammatical dictionaries can be either prescriptivist or descriptivist, with the former camp specifying how language *should* be used, while the latter describe how language *is* used. This, in itself, represents different polarities of political opinion in the United States.

28 Wallace, "Up, Simba," 157.

29 Ibid, 171.

30 See, for a good example, Markovits, *The Politics of Sincerity*.

31 Wallace, "Authority and American Usage."

32 Ibid, 72.

Wallace goes further than this, though. In a highly controversial move, he extends the analogy between prescriptivism and descriptivism to discuss women's reproductive rights in the context of US democratic tolerance and the *Roe vs. Wade* ruling.³³ Wallace is cautious and equivocationary here, though. Instead of taking any kind of principled stance, he instead argues that it is necessary to be both "Pro-Life and Pro-Choice," in a kind of rejection of binary logic. Wallace uses a type of rational logic to argue for the respect for life in the case of doubt as to whether a fetus should be deemed a living human, while also arguing that he cannot infringe upon the reproductive and bodily autonomy of a pregnant woman. The answer that Wallace comes to is, however, mealy mouthed and allows him to worm out of the situation without ever answering the ethical call: one has to pick one's side on the basis of an individual moral decision that involves a hard choice, not to evade the choice by claiming that we can take *both* options.

And it is on this note that I will close this chapter. Wallace's non-fiction writings – however we choose to define them – provide a rich ground for scholars and fans of his fiction, or as works standing alone. I have sought here to challenge notions that these writings are discrete because they are purely factual, and that they can be separated from Wallace's fiction by a distinction between truth and fabrication. I have also suggested that some artificial groupings – philosophy, experiential argument and politics – can provide frames that help us categorize Wallace's non-fiction writings, to some extent. In all, though, Wallace's non-fiction writings present sources that are not just informative for and generative of his fiction, but that work in symbiosis with those other writings. As such, they deserve and reward close attention in their own right, not necessarily as non-fictions, but more as "non"-fiction.

33 Wallace, "Authority and American Usage," 82.