

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

ENDNOTES:
THE AFTERLIFE OF DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

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SPRING 2017

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for a baccalaureate degree
in English
with honors in English

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ABSTRACT

David Foster Wallace was an American author best known for writing a very long book and killing himself. The book was *Infinite Jest*; the suicide was by hanging. Since his death in 2008, Wallace has inhabited a strange sort of afterlife. His publisher released several books, including an unfinished novel and previously uncollected material; his likeness was depicted by Jason Segel in a 2015 film; his writing and ideas and life, especially its end, have become the subject of intense scrutiny among certain sections of academia, the media, and the internet. This thesis is an attempt to answer a few questions: why Wallace? What makes him special? Who is he, now that he's dead?

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Dr. Doyle for being weird.

Thanks to my parents for tolerating my weirdness.

Thanks to my sister for being weirder than me.

“The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.”

—John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

ENDNOTES

[“david foster wallace - is he a cunt?”](#) posted a user on the message board I Love Books on March 21, 2005. “more later,” they add, “but is he?” (“david”).

A flurry of posts followed: *noo | he’s occasionally a bit of a twat but who ain’t | Slightly less so Joyce | er, "THAN Joyce" | I really like this question! | Broom of the System is bad.*

47 replies in 79 hours discussed Wallace’s article on the Illinois State Fair, the relative merits of his nonfiction compared to his fiction, and the definition of “posthumanism,” among other things. Threads stretched into weeks then months then years, gaps between posts widening until, on September 14, 2008, two days after the author in question was found dead by suicide: *reviving, sadly. r.i.p. | hard to write a sincere message here given the post's name. | it is a regrettable thread title. | i would vote for changing the name.*

The name remains. Even if it was changed, a determined user could use the Wayback Machine to view the original thread. The internet, to paraphrase *The Social Network*, is written in ink, not pencil.

So what happens to an author who chooses to no longer put ink to the page? What happens when an author dies in the internet age? When, in the midst of what he in [2007](#) called a culture of “Total Noise, the seething static of every particular thing and experience, and one’s total freedom of infinite choice about what to choose to attend to and represent and connect,” he silences himself (“Deciderization”)?

What happens when he is physically incapable of producing new words, yet academics and journalists and bloggers and commenters cite and quote and critique those words with yet more words, a body of work from which springs blog posts, articles, movies, radio

documentaries, YouTube animations, Tumblrs, and undergraduate courses, an ever-expanding nexus of data orbiting a decayed core — feeding upon itself, consuming and producing further permutations of itself, a recursive cycle fueled by a man’s anguished, recursive, dead mind?

To put it another way: who is David Foster Wallace after he dies?

Start at the end. Wallace was found in his garage by his wife Karen Green. She called the Claremont Police Department at 9:30 p.m on September 12, 2008. He was 46 years old.

An obscure [literary blog](#) appears to be the first source to break the news the following day, citing an “anonymous source” that the “talented writer of *Infinite Jest*” was dead of apparent suicide (Champion). The [LA Times](#) appears to be the first mainstream publication to cover the news, from which proliferated a rash of articles covering his death (Noland and Rubin). He was invariably identified as the author/writer/novelist/essayist/humorist responsible for *Infinite Jest*. Sometimes the page count was mentioned (1,079), sometimes the number of endnotes as well (388).

Some pieces were perfunctory. The [New York Times](#) books section quoted the dean of Pomona College, where he served as a professor since 2002 (Williams). [NPR](#) noted that he had received a MacArthur “genius grant” in 1997 (“Writer”). The [New Yorker](#) quoted a passage from his short story “Good Old Neon” (Mishan).

Some were interpretative. Laura Miller of [Salon](#), who interviewed him during *Infinite Jest*’s 1996 book tour, could not resist connecting him to the suicidal narrator of “Good Old Neon,” even if “such conclusions would only have multiplied the author’s despair” (“In memory”). A.O. Scott of the [New York Times](#) wrote that the temptation to view his suicide “as anything other than a personal tragedy must be resisted,” even though “the strength of the

temptation should nonetheless be acknowledged” (“The Best Mind”). There is, from the start, a need to see his death as more than death, accompanied by a self-reflexive criticism of needing such a need.

Some were personal. A [colleague at Pomona](#) expressed regret that they would never “watch tarantulas scurry across the Claremont fire trails in the late fall” (Seery). A [professor at Amherst](#), Wallace’s alma mater, remembered receiving the “four hundred double-spaced pages” of his undergraduate thesis that would become his first novel, *The Broom of the System* (Peterson). The closer they were to Wallace the person, the less inclined they were to speculate on Wallace the writer, the depressive, the persona.

Parallel to the official, media-controlled narrative — the narrative written by professional journalists, fact checked by newspaper staff, and overseen by editors — was the narrative written by the internet. The authors of this narrative were not professionals. They were hurt, sad, apathetic, confused, snarky, and angry. They were the id to the media’s ego, unfiltered and unedited and ungrammatical.

Commenters on the blog that first broke the news, being jaded internet users, raised the possibility that the whole thing was a hoax. The post was linked to other posts linked to other posts. Anonymous users (“Adam,” “Unspokenwordz,” “bitchphd”) expressed disbelief, quoted “Good Old Neon,” shared personal encounters with Wallace, and made unkind remarks towards other American authors (“[if only it had been eggers](#),” “[Why couldn’t it have been Updike or Mailer?](#)” (Mailer had died a year earlier in 2007)) (*The Edge of the American West*).

A [thread](#) was posted on the community weblog MetaFilter a day after his death, citing the literary blog and the LA Times and quoting Wallace’s 2005 commencement speech at Kenyon

College (“adults who commit suicide with firearms almost always shoot themselves in: the head”) (“RIP DFW”). 483 comments were published in 17 days. It’s hard to summarize that much disparate info; harder still to shape the innumerable blogs and comments and forum posts into anything approaching a coherent narrative. There’s just too much information for one person to conceivably process. But even if someone did: then what?

All one can do is pick out shards: *OMG DFW RIP | Though, somehow, not completely surprised. | I'll bet he left one hell of a note. | I still just can't fucking process this. | you cannot take a suicide as some sort of existential comment on the world, you have to think of it like someone dying of a heart attack.* Punctuated throughout the riffs and outbursts and snark are posts with a single period: “.” According to the MetaFilter [FAQ](#), a single period is a sign of respect — a moment of silence amidst Total Noise (“Frequently Asked Questions”).

Thus began the memorials. Online and off-, digital and IRL, family and friends and teachers and students and writers and readers shared their thoughts, tributes, and memories.

On October 4, 2008, Pomona College held a memorial service. “There were many beautiful, serious, sorrowful young people,” wrote the [LA Times](#) in a weirdly treacly article (Reynolds). Sixteen days later, Amherst College held its own service. There’s an [audio recording](#), if you’re interested. You can listen to Mark Costello, Wallace’s roommate and friend, tell the story of the time “the Daver” threw up in the bushes in the middle of an admissions interview. You can hear his voice break. “There is a power of death that is intensely strong,” he says. “And it killed him” (*Amherst College*). You can look up a [PDF](#) of the remarks given by his sister, literary agents, editor and fellow authors at a memorial in New York (“Celebrating”). You can find write-ups in various news outlets, dutifully filled with quotes from famous authors. You

can use the Wayback Machine to access an online memorial page on [Pomona's website](#), where a former student of Wallace's made an observation that became, very quickly, very prescient:

I'm scanning headlines about Dave's death, and I'm frustrated because everything I'm finding isn't about Dave, not really. The media is talking about his books and his essays and, sometimes, his teaching career, and, honestly, none of it is making much sense to me. They're talking about someone, but it's not Dave. It's an abstraction or a stereotype. They're telling a story about a character named David Foster Wallace, and it doesn't have anything to do with the person I and a lot of us knew. ("In Memoriam")

You can read his [autopsy](#). Click the link, if you want. You can look up his address on Google Maps and view a Street View image of his house taken on [April 2012](#), "a single story, family style residence with a large outdoor yard on the south side of the residence," scraggly tree out front, house number painted on the curb, and water-conserving gravel lawn ("David Foster Wallace Autopsy"). You can pull up a Street View image from [October 2007](#), eleven months before his death, and note two sedans in the driveway, a Honda and a Volvo, both deep blue or maroon, you can't quite tell from the photo.

You can read details you do not need to read. You can imagine the coroner doing his job, noting that the "ambient temperature - unregulated was 69.2 degrees at 2355 hours," that the color of the decedent's socks was white, that his shirt was blue and his shorts were gray, that "there had been a history of prior depression with multiple suicide attempts," that on the decedent's upper right arm was "a tattoo laterally with word 'Karen' and a symbol of the heart" ("David Foster Wallace Autopsy").

The autopsy was posted on October 27, 2008. One day after its release, Nick Maniatis linked to the autopsy on [The Howling Fantods](#), a Wallace fanpage he started in 1997. “I’ve thought long and hard about posting the link below,” he wrote in the accompanying post (“Autopsy Report”).

“What do you do when your husband’s autopsy report is on the internet and is deemed a subject worthy of fucking literary criticism?” [said](#) Karen Green in 2011, a few days before the publication of Wallace’s unfinished novel *The Pale King* (Adams).

I don’t know. I read it. I don’t know.

There’s a queasy intimacy that comes from encountering death through a screen. The prevailing critique of digital technology is that it’s made us lonelier, that we’re more connected yet further apart, and that we hide behind devices rather than directly engage with each other. The validity of this argument is questionable, and beside the point; what I’m trying to get at is the simultaneous distance and intimacy of internet-mediated violence. The distance makes the intimacy feel manageable, and there’s a strange power in that dissonance.

So I have no insights to make about Wallace’s autopsy, except for this: there’s an insatiable hunger that the internet enables but cannot satisfy. I can pull up images of Wallace, videos of public appearances, and audio recordings of interviews. I can read his essays and short stories and novels, including uncollected pieces that have been scanned and converted to PDFs and uploaded for the public’s perusal. I can read through endless analyses and academic papers and reviews concerning his work. I can read about his corpse. The one thing I cannot do, however, is know him, in any possible meaning of the word. So I browse and search and read; I read a document prepared by the LA County Coroner, flatly stating details I do not need to know. I am still hungry. I want the text to become flesh.

But flesh isn't enough. I want him to be more than who he was, more than a person or writer or concept. What exactly do I want?

“He was a martyr for literature,” [said](#) his biographer D.T. Max four years after his death. “That’s not all there was to him, but it’s part of it” (Williams).

There. That’s it, that word: martyr. A person who dies for a cause. Wallace, the story goes, died for his love of language. He crusaded against the irony and cynicism and solipsism that pervaded American culture, trying to push his way past thoughtless entertainment and distraction into a heightened form of awareness. He tried to find a way to be kinder and better and less alone. He failed, but his struggle continues. That’s the story the culture has created and accepted, because the fact that there is no story — no meaning, no sacrifice, just death — is too unsettling to accept.

“Part of being a martyr is not just the sacrifice, but that the sacrifice is symbolic, and it tells a broader story,” said Arizona State professor [Ed Finn](#) when I talked to him over the phone. “There’s a vessel to carry that story forward. I think that D.T. Max is doing this in a way. He’s creating this narrative.”

Max isn't the sole author of this narrative. As Leslie Jamison noted in her [review](#) of Max's biography, “When David Foster Wallace committed suicide, his death wasn't just mourned — it was read. It was read like code, like apology, like an event in a novel — not simply a plot-level event but a meta-level event, a commentary on the history and future of the novel itself” (“The Deaths of David Foster Wallace”).

In a sense, David Foster Wallace ceased to exist long before he died.

“I think, if you write stuff that’s intimate and weird, weird people tend to feel they’re intimate with you,” Wallace said in a 1996 interview with David Lipsky during the *Infinite Jest* book tour (274). (The interview was published by Lipsky in 2010 as *Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself*, which was adapted into the film *The End Of The Tour* in 2015.) “Not just that you’d be somebody that it’d be great to be friends with, but that they *are* your friend . . . But it’s also a delusion, and it’s kind of an invasive one. But then I realize that I set it up by doing just what I did” (275).

How did he set up this invitation to invasive intimacy? How did he construct this persona for readers to project themselves onto? One of the underlying themes of Wallace’s work is the symbiotic relationship between sincerity and performance — the desperate need to be liked, but not come off as the smarmy sort of person who needs to be liked. This anxiety is palpable in his work. As he told Lipsky, writing is a blend of “absolute naked sincerity and manipulation” (295).

Wallace worked through this paradox on the page. His essays are invitations to his mind, filled with rambling tangents as he roved around a cruise ship, Wimbledon, or the set of David Lynch’s *Lost Highway* — every observation qualified and interpolated and footnoted. And as his internal combustion engine whirred itself to exhaustion, the reader (me, in this case) felt that he was speaking to me, whispering directly into my ear. When I read David Foster Wallace at his best, I can trick myself into believing that his brain is my brain.

There’s a passage in *The Pale King* that speaks to the above point I made, the weird sense of personal intimacy that comes from reading Wallace’s work. The passage comes from Chapter 22, a hundred-page monologue narrated by IRS examiner Chris Fogle in which he describes, in great and oftentimes unnecessary detail, the circumstances that led to his conversion from a self-

admitted “nihilist wastoid” — a person whose default response to life was “*whatever*” — to an employee of the IRS. It is, in a sense, a religious testimony: I once was lost but now am found.

In one episode Fogle describes rooming with a fervent evangelical Christian, the sort of Christian that “refer to themselves as just ‘*Christians*,’ as though there were only one real kind.” At the time, Fogle smoked weed and popped amphetamines and generally found the Christian to be deluded and smug and self-righteous; by Fogle’s own admission, the Christian “didn’t much care for my lifestyle or what rooming with me involved, either” (210). The Christian often brought his “equally evangelical Christian girlfriend or platonic female friend” to the room, and on one occasion — within Fogle’s larger, highly self-conscious story of his own spiritual salvation — the Christian girl began telling the story of how she was “‘*saved*’ or ‘*born again*’ and became a Christian” (211).

She was lost. She felt “desolate and nearly at the end of her rope, sort of wandering aimlessly in the psychological desert of our younger generation’s decadence and materialism and so on and so forth.” She was driving around her hometown in her parents’ car when, for no particular reason, she pulled into the “parking lot of what turned out to be an evangelical Christian church, which by coincidence happened to be right in the middle of holding an evangelical service,” sat towards the back of the room, and listened to the pastor or “preacher or father or whatever they called them there” say something to the effect of, “‘*There is someone out there with us in the congregation today that is feeling lost and hopeless and at the end of their rope and needs to know that Jesus loves them very, very much*’” (212).

Fogle’s skepticism is palpable: “so on and so forth,” “or whatever,” the way certain phrases are put in quotation marks and italicized. It’s worth remembering, though, that Fogle’s monologue is being recounted nearly a decade after the events transpired, and that in the story’s

present-tense he works for the IRS — he's as equally skeptical of his past self as he is of the Christian girl (terminology his own). "I remember once, in 1975 or '76," Fogle says in an earlier passage, "shaving off just one sideburn and going around like that for a period of time, believing one sideburn made me a nonconformist — I'm not kidding — and getting into long, serious conversations with girls at parties who would ask me what the lone sideburn 'meant.'" Many of the things he did and said at the time, Fogle admits, "make me literally wince now" (161).

In other words, Fogle in the present-tense is skeptical of past-tense Fogle's skepticism of the Christian girl, who felt "stunned and deeply moved" when she heard the pastor's sermon, experienced a "huge, dramatic spiritual change deep inside of her," recognized that she was "unconditionally known and loved," and that "furthermore she had not had a down or empty moment since" (212).

To which past-tense Fogle had responded with contemptuous cynicism, disingenuously asking the Christian girl if "the preacher or father's saying '*Someone here's lost and hopeless*' was tantamount to those *Sun-Times* horoscopes that are specially designed to be so universally obvious that they always give their horoscope readers . . . that special eerie feeling of particularity and insight," essentially accusing the Christian girl of naivete and narcissism, of not seeing through the hollowness of her experience (213).

To which present-tense Fogle responds to past-tense Fogle's response to the Christian Girl with an admission that "there was an important fact behind the Christian girl's '*salvation*' story which I simply didn't understand at the time." While present-tense Fogle still believes that her story was "stupid and dishonest," that doesn't make the girl's experience and its effects on her any less real. "I was both right and wrong about her little story," Fogle says. Because life-changing, Come-to-Jesus Moments — when you hear a pastor in a pulpit speak vague,

generalized truths that seem specifically addressed to you and you alone; when you read a 1000-plus-page book about tennis and addiction and Quebecois separatism and feel that the more-than-eight-years-dead author is speaking through his tangled postmodern prose to you and you alone — “really *are* unique and particular — though not unique in the way the Christian girl believed” (214).

These moments are unique because you are unique; because at the moment of the Moment you are the sum total of “everything in your previous life-experience which has led up to it and made you exactly who and what you are”; because in the Moment you are “psychologically *primed*” to find meaning in things that on any other day might seem meaningless (214).

Here’s a personal example. One Wednesday morning, the fire alarm went off in my building at around 7 a.m. My roommate and I dragged ourselves out of bed. We know each other through a Christian group on campus, and every Wednesday at 8 a.m. the group held a prayer meeting. I hadn’t gone to one the entire semester.

“Maybe,” I joked to my roommate as we stood outside in the cold, bleary-eyed and not quite awake, “Maybe this is a sign from God. Maybe this fire alarm is God’s cosmic wake-up call. Maybe God got us out of bed as a sign that we should go to this prayer meeting.”

And we laughed, and the alarm shut off, and he went back to bed and I went to the prayer meeting. And throughout the day I started thinking: what if I *did* choose to interpret this seemingly meaningless event as a meaningful sign from God? What if I followed the example of the Christian girl?

But if I called myself a Christian (or at least the kind of Christian in the tradition of Martin Luther and John Calvin, who believed that matters of salvation were beyond the sphere of free will), I should believe in the doctrine of divine providence, which holds that God has complete control over everything: every alarm and prayer meeting, every word I type on this keyboard, every word the guy sitting next to me types as he juggles his left leg and alt-tabs between Microsoft Word and Facebook, every birth and death and laugh and tear and sound and silence and everything and nothing. Everything has meaning, because God made it so.

But meaning only arises from a context of meaninglessness, right? We declare that an occurrence has meaning because the occurrences that surround it do not have meaning; we separate the signal from the noise. So if everything has meaning — if everything is signal — how is that any different from nothing meaning anything, from living in a world of Total Noise?

I grew up the sort of Christian who referred to myself as just “Christian” (“as though there were only one real kind”), who made a distinction between “Catholics” and “Christians,” who believed the public school I attended was a battlefield in the war between Christianity and every other false ideology. I stood in a church basement the day after the East Coast earthquake of 2011 and raised my hands and closed my eyes as the praise band played contemporary Christian rock hits. I listened to a pastor declare from his pulpit that if you feel called by the spirit *right now*, if you are lost and uncertain and wish to make a change in your life, then please just close your eyes and pray this prayer to accept the Lord Jesus Christ into your heart. And I thought he spoke to me, just me, and no one else.

I tried to have faith. Wallace did too. While teaching at Syracuse in the ‘90’s he started praying and discussing matters of a faith with a Catholic priest, who eventually told him that “he

had too many questions to be a believer,” according to his biography (Max 166). This, then, is the central conflict: a deeply-rooted, self-conscious skepticism that feeds into itself, becoming skeptical of its own skepticism, and a desire — maybe an existential need — for faith.

I think the “point” of Fogle’s account of the Christian girl is that the line between faith and delusion is perilously thin. It doesn’t matter if the pastor or preacher or father or whatever really was speaking personally to the Christian girl; it doesn’t matter if God really did rig the fire alarm in my building to go off as a signal for me to attend the prayer meeting. The “objective” meaning of these fictional and real events is unverifiable; believing that these events have meaning is an act that goes beyond rationality — an act of faith.

Another point: when analyzing a work of literature it’s important not to conflate the author with the narrator. Chris Fogle should not be confused with Wallace. Yet there seems to be a shared sense of skepticism between character and creator and reader. We can trace a sort of Matryoshka doll of skepticism: I am skeptical of Wallace skeptical of present-tense Fogle skeptical of past-tense Fogle skeptical of the Christian girl.

Fogle’s story is a simultaneous embrace and rejection of this skepticism-all-the-way-down mindset. Doubt suffuses every word he speaks; every assertion is questioned and scrutinized. Yet in his conversion from accidental nihilist to accountant, Fogle trades the easy cynicism of his youth for a mindset of complete and total awareness; he trades thoughtless skepticism for thoughtful skepticism.

Fogle’s Moment occurred in the fall of 1978, sitting in his DePaul University dorm in the afternoon, watching *As the World Turns* while idly spinning a soccer ball. If this seems like a

strange setting for a person to experience a life-changing revelation, Fogle is certainly aware of it.

“At the end of every commercial break,” he says, “the show’s trademark shot of planet earth as seen from space, turning, would appear, and the CBS daytime network announcer’s voice would say, ‘*You’re watching As the World Turns.*’” The reception is staticky. The TV is between Fogle’s knees. “‘*You’re watching As the World Turns,*’” says the narrator, each repetition seeming to Fogle more and more pointed until he is “suddenly struck by the bare reality of the statement,” that he sat on a yellow couch watching a daytime soap opera on his roommate’s TV as the literal world literally turned, that as he slumped wastoid-like deep into his cushion “real things in the world were going on and people with direction and initiative were taking care of business in a brisk, no-nonsense way” (222). It seemed as if the show’s narrator reached out through the screen and spoke directly to him, as if this banal, trivial, seemingly meaningless occurrence was loaded with profound meaning.

And lo: “I knew, sitting there, that I might be a real nihilist, that it wasn’t always just a hip pose. That I drifted and quit because nothing meant anything, no one choice was really better. That I was, in a way, too free, or that this kind of freedom wasn’t actually real — I was free to choose ‘*whatever*’ because it didn’t really matter” (223).

Maybe this sounds a bit hokey or stupid to you. Maybe the way I recounted this episode makes it come across as even more ridiculous than it does in the book: a fictional druggie/wastoid/late-70’s poser decides to turn his life around while watching a soap opera in his dorm. Maybe it’s ridiculous and dumb and cliched and all the rest. I think it’s supposed to be.

Maybe the ridiculousness of the scene is part of the central moral lesson of *The Pale King*: the way to heal oneself is to pay close attention. To not instinctively say *whatever* to

anything and everything, to not dismiss cliches because they're cliched, to not declare that everything is meaningless because finding meaning seems impossible, to admit that dumb or ridiculous stories can hold profound truths. To listen for signal amidst the noise.

Listen: I've lost the thread. I thought I could read every last bit of digital detritus about Wallace. I thought I could dutifully consume and catalogue every Wallace-related burst of information within the seething chaos of the internet. And from this mountain of material I would find a narrative throughline, or at least impose one upon the mountain.

I guess I always knew, on some level, that that was impossible. When asked about my thesis topic (which is quite rare), I give an explanation that goes something like this: D.T. Max's biography of David Foster Wallace began with his birth and ended with his death. I wanted to start with his death. I wanted to write a biography of the idea of Wallace, and how that idea outlived him. And I would do that by reading/watching/listening to the media that sprung up around him.

I thought it was about him. I thought I could stand on the outside, detached from his gravitational pull, and observe the orbit of all this stuff circling the black hole of his suicide. But I was wrong, of course. I'm in his orbit.

So let me tell you my story of David Foster Wallace.

He was born in 1960 in Ithaca, New York. His parents were intellectuals: his father a philosophy professor at the University of Illinois, his mother an English professor at the local community college. Growing up he was the smartest kid in the room, the bright young student constantly seeking to dazzle the grown-ups with his intellect. He played football and tennis. He

later claimed that a tornado struck while he was playing tennis and flattened him against a chainlink fence. In high school he began experiencing severe depressive episodes.

He attended Amherst, his father's alma mater. He took semesters off due to his depression. He wrote two theses, one in English and the other in philosophy. The English thesis became *The Broom of the System*; the philosophy thesis was published posthumously as *Fate, Time, and Language*. He was obsessed with postmodern hijinks and cleverness for cleverness's sake. He worshipped at the altar of intellectualism. He thought he could save himself.

He drank and smoked weed. He started in high school and kept up the habit. He graduated from Amherst and attended an MFA program at the University of Arizona. His first novel was published at age 27. He worked on short stories and published a collection, *Girl With Curious Hair*, at age 29. He earned his master's degree. He drank. He found himself at Harvard's graduate philosophy program. He drank some more. His depression gripped his mind and would not let go. He smoked some more. His skepticism and cynicism and intellect were killing him. He attempted suicide. He checked into a mental ward. He attended a Boston-area rehab called Granada House, which would become the inspiration for Ennet House in *Infinite Jest*.

"People at Granada House listened to me for hours, and did so with neither the clinical disinterest of doctors nor the hand-wringing credulity of relatives," read an anonymous [letter](#) from an ex-resident that is widely considered to be authored by Wallace. "They listened because, in the last analysis, they really understood me: they had been on the fence of both wanting to get sober and not, of loving the very thing that was killing you, of being able to imagine life neither with drugs and alcohol nor without them. They also recognized bullshit, and manipulation, and meaningless intellectualization as a way of evading terrible truths" ("An Ex-Resident's Story").

And from this rock bottom Wallace emerged, baptized in the Church of Sincerity, of which he was its prophet. From that point on his work, while still steeped in irony and skepticism and rigorous intellectualism, was grounded in capital-F Faith. He proselytized about the importance of rejecting the easy, thoughtless cynicism of mainstream American culture. He called out to the lost and weary, offering a way out. He became a believer in Belief. He became a secular saint.

Later, he killed himself.

There's this thing we call reality, because we don't know what else to call it. There's my water bottle sitting to the right of my computer, the white cap scuffed from having fallen from my bike too many times, the logo nearly faded, a film of grime covering the rubber bit between the bottle and the cap, the water filled to about 90%, the meniscus just barely visible, the oxygen atoms of every H₂O molecule subtly attracted to every other molecules' hydrogen atoms.

And there's me, and you, and every other person with every other brain through which reality is viewed and skewed and interpreted. There's a sort of linguistic nozzle through which we take the raw stuff of reality — in its immense and terrible complexity — and make sense of it by breaking it down into words, and building those words into stories. We turn the flesh into text.

One can be very good at telling stories. One can make stories about addiction and depression and loneliness seem vibrant, life-giving, and alive. But one can never make a story that is reality, because reality is not a story; reality is reality.

Various writers have used various methods in the never-ending quest to bridge the unbridgeable chasm between reality and story. Some strip their prose to the bare minimum — the iceberg theory, as Hemingway called it. Others actively reject reality, choosing to instead lean

into the manufactured reality of the story. I'm being vague here and making sweeping generalizations, but I think you get the gist of what I'm getting at. That's another strategy.

Wallace's response, as mentioned above, was to pay attention, to attempt to capture every last complexity of the most mundane interactions. Take, for example, an early scene in *Infinite Jest* where Ken Erdedy waits for a woman to deliver him weed. "Where was the woman who said she'd come," thinks Erdedy as he waits in his house (17). Wallace burrows deep into Erdedy's consciousness, noting every last anxious thought he has as he paces around his living room, debating whether or not to pick up the phone to call the woman instead of just waiting for the woman to call him, but picking up the phone would prevent her call from going through if she were to call, or what if she actually came to the door and rang the doorbell but he couldn't hear because he had the phone pressed against his ear right as she finally arrived, and so on.

The point being that Wallace's primary strategy for converting reality into a story was sheer magnitude: words upon words upon words, building on one another to simulate one tiny fraction of one tiny moment of actual reality. To put it another way, Wallace knew that every waking moment contains an infinity of words.

Let's consider two metaphors, which will hopefully clarify what I'm trying to say.

Consider the encyclopedia wand, a thought experiment from Haruki Murakami's *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*. "The idea is t'engrave the entire encyclopedia onto a single toothpick. Know how you do it?" asks a professor to the nameless protagonist (284). The solution, the professor explains, is simple: take every symbol and give it a numeric equivalent. A is 00, B is 01, C is 02, and so on. Convert the text of the encyclopedia into this

numeric code, so that you end up with some unfathomably long, but still finite, number. Take that number and put a decimal point in front of it, which creates a number between 0 and 1.

0 is the very bottom of the toothpick. 1 is the very top. Make an infinitesimally thin mark at the number's exact location. You now have an encyclopedia on a toothpick.

This is obviously physically impossible, but practicality isn't the point of most thought experiments. The point is that when we think about infinity, we usually think in terms of magnitude: an infinite number of monkeys at an infinite number of typewriters eventually producing a copy of Hamlet, for example. But infinity is also a matter of precision. Between 0 and 1 are an infinite number of numbers, and between 0 and 0.1 are an infinite number of numbers, *ad infinitum* — finite sets contain infinite infinities. To put it another way, the direction of infinity points inward, as well as outward.

Another metaphor: Riemann sums, a mathematical method of approximating the area under a curve. Suppose you have a curve on a closed interval that looks like this:

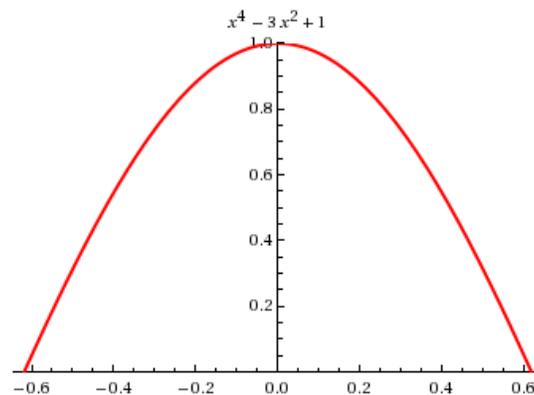


Figure 1. Curve.

How do you find the area between the x-axis and the curve? You could approximate the area by drawing a rectangle that roughly fits the curve.

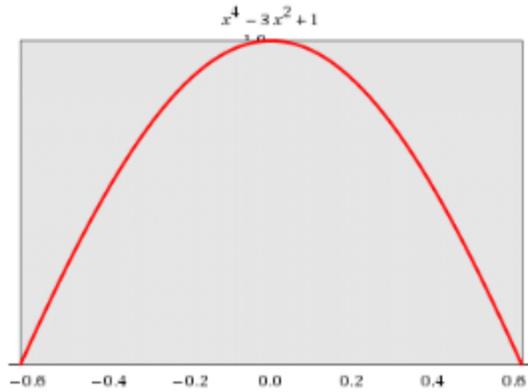


Figure 2. One rectangle.

That's not very accurate, though. What if you used two rectangles?

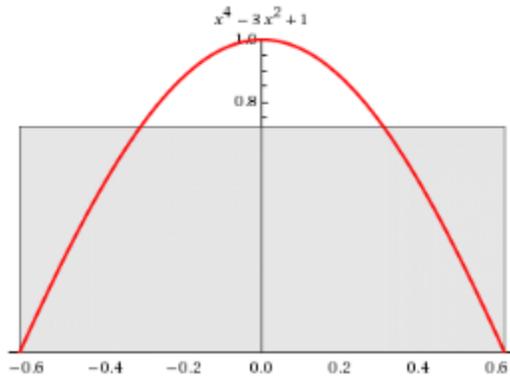


Figure 3. Two rectangles.

Four rectangles?

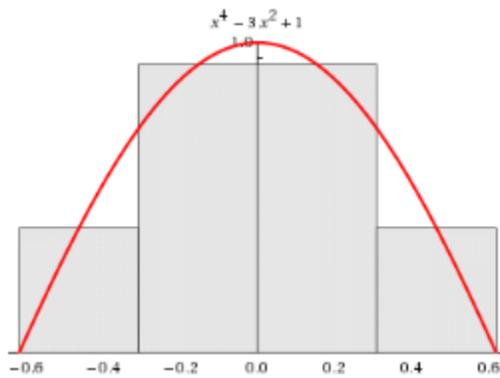


Figure 4. Four rectangles.

Twenty?

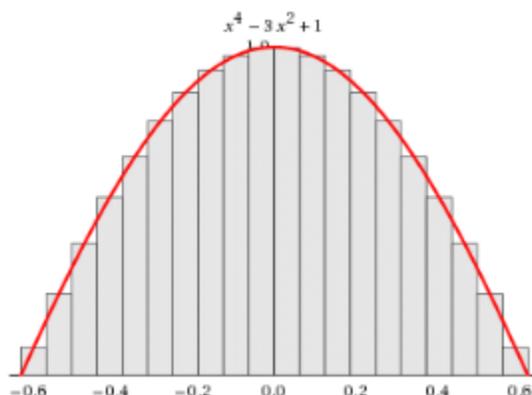


Figure 5. Twenty rectangles.

And so on. The more rectangles you use, the more accurate your approximation of the area under the curve will be. But that’s all Riemann sums are: approximations. You could use a hundred rectangles, or a thousand, or a million, and get really close to the actual value, but you’ll never get exactly there. The only way to find the exact value of the area under the curve is to use an infinite number of infinitesimally thin rectangles, otherwise known as integration.

Wallace approached infinity. He knew that even an infinitesimally tiny sliver of reality was literally unimaginable to behold, filled with infinities upon infinities of raw information too tremendous to be shunted through our linguistic meaning-making-machines. He knew that words are crude, imprecise tools that can only approximate the actualities of felt experience. But he was a writer and words were his vocation, so he treated every word like a Riemann sum rectangle, trying to approximate the area under the curve by using as many of them as possible, arranging them in a pattern that outlined the arc of reality.

“I know that you know as well as I do how fast thoughts and associations can fly through your head,” wrote Wallace in “Good Old Neon,” a story which attempts to articulate (with words) the inability of words to fully articulate anything. “What goes on inside is just too fast

and huge and all interconnected for words to do more than barely sketch the outlines of at most one tiny little part of it at any given instant” (151).

It must have been humbling for a great writer to recognize the inadequacy of words. Maybe that’s the mark of a great writer: recognizing that inadequacy, and yet still using words to express their own inadequacy. Because never mind the actual, for all intents and purposes infinity of the known universe, all the planets and solar systems and galaxies and galaxy groups and clusters and superclusters, forget all that. Think about the infinity within your head, your tiny skull-sized kingdom. How much of your mind can you put into words?

“Inside you is this enormous room full of what seems like everything in the whole universe at one time or another,” wrote Wallace. “Yet the only parts that get out have to somehow squeeze out through one of those tiny keyholes you see under the knob in older doors. As if we are all trying to see each other through these tiny keyholes” (178).

Maybe this is all a bit much. Maybe (probably) this is just the ramblings of a callow undergraduate. But I hope not, I hope this is getting at something, which the undergraduate can only gesture towards by quoting and expanding upon the writings of David Foster Wallace, who himself could only gesture towards whatever that something is. Whatever it is — call it reality or truth or whatever — it’s impossible to put into words.

The trouble comes when we put our faith in words, when we confuse the representation of reality with reality itself. When, for example, instead of seeing and hearing the person sitting across from us at the table describe their recent personal troubles — a cup of coffee in their hands, the hot liquid steaming — we only see and hear our reaction to the person, our ongoing internal monologue about the person, and not the person themselves. When we see and hear only

ourselves. When we succumb to the most hardwired of instincts: solipsism, the idea that one's own self is the only thing that can be verified as real.

I say hardwired. I'm not a neuroscientist, and I don't have any biological evidence to back up this claim. What I mean is that when we're born, we think the only things that exist are things we can directly observe. I also mean that, for me at least, it's much easier to be selfish than generous, inward-directed than outward-, attentive to my own mind than the world around me. It's much easier to tune into the constant word-stream of my thoughts than to focus on what's outside.

I think Wallace got this. In his essay "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again," Wallace called the pampering he received on a luxury cruise ship an attempt to satisfy the "dissatisfied-infant part of me, the part that always and indiscriminately WANTS" (ch.7). That infantile, narcissistic part of him, though, was impossible to satisfy, no matter how much pampering he received.

I suspect everyone gets this on some level. Everyone, at some point, has tuned out the person at the other end of the table and started thinking about all the things *I'm* going through, and how pitiful the person's complaints are compared to *my* trials and tribulations. But again, the trouble comes from mistaking the mind through which we process reality — and all the needs and wants and intent-thinking the mind generates — with reality itself.

"Most Substance-addicted people are also addicted to thinking, meaning they have a compulsive and unhealthy relationship with their own thinking," wrote Wallace in *Infinite Jest*. "The cute Boston AA term for addictive-type thinking is: *Analysis-Paralysis*" (203).

You don't have to be a substance addict to know what he's talking about.

The most insidious thing about solipsism is that it appears to have no alternative. It fools the mind into thinking the world is the mind, and if the mind is everywhere, there's nowhere you can go to escape. You can't will yourself from selfishness to selflessness, nihilism to faith, stories to reality. In other words, you can't use words to escape a cage built of words.

"The Devil Is A Busy Man" is a story from Wallace's *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* that deals with this paradox. The unnamed narrator is obsessed with being a truly "good" person, and to that end, they divert money to a married couple in need. The narrator, however, takes elaborate steps to make sure the married couple doesn't realize where the money came from, with the fear that being openly generous would "infect the 'motivation' for my nice gesture — meaning, in other words, that part of my motivation for it would be, not generosity, but desiring gratitude, affection, and approval towards me to result" (162).

The problem is that the narrator doesn't actually care about the couple. They only care about themselves, and whether they are the sort of person who is capable of doing a nice thing without receiving credit for it, or someone who only does nice things to receive recognition for the nice thing.

The story ends with the husband calling the narrator. The narrator insists that they don't know where the money came from, but inadvertently implies that it was the narrator who gave the couple the money. "Thus," they conclude, "I showed an unconscious and, seemingly, natural, automatic ability to both deceive myself and other people, which, on the 'motivational level,' completely emptied the generous thing I tried to do of any true value" (164).

The simple answer to this conundrum, of course, is to stop with this ridiculous circular thinking and Just Be Nice, to be kind and generous and sincere without performing these useless mental gymnastics. Which is simultaneously the easiest and hardest thing to do in the world. I

think Wallace recognized the solution but couldn't quite carry it out. I think he tried to intellectualize his way out of himself; he tried to use words to escape words. "I'm *real* careful now," he said in the interview with Lipsky. "And it's also why I think I cultivate normality" (67).

In a parenthetical comment, Lipsky wrote: "Normality can't be cultivated, in the same way, as David points out in the books, you can't try to be sincere. You either are sincere or not: It needs to be affectless" (67).

This document is 341 kilobytes. The main text contains 40,113 characters that make up 8,187 words (plus five images, that time-tested page inflation technique) across 27 double-spaced pages. It is, in one sense, along with every other signal humans receive, a quantity of information. "In an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes," said information theorist [Herbert Simon](#) in 1971. "What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients" ("Designing Organizations" 40)

Simon suggested measuring information by the amount of time the recipient spends consuming it. Assuming a reading speed of 200 words per minute, the recipient will devote 36 minutes and 36 seconds of attention to processing this information. I started writing this document on September 11, 2016; the final deadline is April 10, 2017, which makes 212 days, or 5,088 hours, or 305,280 possible minutes I could have spent writing this — of which total quantity of time, obviously, I only devoted a small fraction to producing this information. I thought about choosing some percentage (probably less than 1%) to calculate the amount of actual time I spent writing this. But aside from the fact that that percentage would be completely arbitrary, it wouldn't take into account the amount of time I spent consuming various forms of

Wallace-related information: his two completed novels and uncompleted novel, three short story collections, three essay collections, and nonfiction book on infinity, not to mention associated academic papers and articles that discuss his work, various blogs and forum posts, plus YouTube videos, audio recordings, and so on. Which still doesn't take into account the amount of time I spent going about my days idly thinking about Wallace, or discussing his ideas with other people. Does all that count as time spent "writing" this thesis?

And this is just me. If you look at Penn State's database of honors theses, you'll find that in the [2015-2016 academic year](#), 496 people submitted theses on topics ranging from mitochondria to Trayvon Martin to the use of UAVs to estimate vegetation density. I downloaded [one at random](#); it's about the skeletons of children in prehistoric Spain (Lynch). The main body of the text is a bit over 10,000 words (50 minutes), which, if you arbitrarily assume that all the other theses are around the same length, translates to a bit under 500,000 words (2,500 minutes, or less than 42 hours) of information in the form of honors theses.

And this is just one academic year in one department of one university. I could expand the data set and do some more calculations — maybe all the English-language theses on Penn State's database, or all the theses from schools in Pennsylvania, or the nation, or the world — but you get the point: no piece of information exists in a vacuum. If you start examining the context from which information is produced, you'll find yourself drowning in a constantly expanding ocean of background data that's as broad and wide as it is deep. An ocean without end in any direction.

David Foster Wallace is dead. On the final deadline for submitting this thesis, he will have been dead for 3,312 days. He is literally incapable of producing new information in the form of words — or any form, for that matter. His information set is closed. I added up the page

count of what I arbitrarily consider his canonical books (*Broom*, *Girl with Curious Hair*, *IJ*, *A Supposedly Fun Thing*, *Brief Interviews*, *Consider the Lobster*, *Oblivion*, *The Pale King*, and *Both Flesh and Not*) using information from Amazon: 4,268 pages, or 1,280,400 words (assuming an average of 300 per page), or about 107 continuous hours of reading. A sizable, but ultimately finite amount of information. But that's not including the uncollected short stories that are floating around in PDF form on the internet, or his archives at the [Harry Ransom Center](#) at UT Austin: 44 document boxes and 8 oversized folders containing early handwritten drafts, notebooks, interview notes, correspondence, syllabi for the classes he taught, and more ("David Foster Wallace: An Inventory"). An initial inventory of the collection [notes](#): "Further acquisitions of Wallace related materials are expected" ("David Foster Wallace Collection").

And as Wallace's information set expands outward — as more miscellaneous scraps of information are collected and cataloged and archived — it expands inward as well. Words spring from his words, not unlike the endnotes Wallace loved so much: every word has infinite possible addendums, which themselves can be addended to infinity. The information stream has no end.

And if we stay immersed in all this information, we can confuse it for the thing it's meant to represent: reality. We can forget about the reality that a woman found her husband in a garage on September 12, 2008; that his ashes were scattered to the Pacific; that the internet chatter and undergraduate theses and container boxes filed away in a storage room in Texas — none of any of that changes the bare, imputable facts that exist far beyond the words that convey them. He does not live on. He has no afterlife. He does not exist.

It's taken me the better part of an academic year to realize that in the end, there are no words.

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