

Closing time in the fun-house

The radical problem besetting contemporary American fiction at present is that the United States corresponds almost exactly with its image in popular culture, but not quite. Scrappy fragments of the real United States may flit about the crisp outlines of its televisual simulacrum but, within the mediated frame of our United Kingdom-based perception, such discrepancies are minor disruptions. It is easier to edit them out than act on the suspicions they arouse. The image sharpens and becomes more convincing and, in consequence, the mediated US grows familiar and conventional, more realistic than the Real, its lurid and alluring affects more compelling.

We are, accordingly, compelled, and doubly so because the same perceptual confusion obtains within the United States. Those art-forms (among which I include literary fiction) on which we, at our transatlantic remove, rely for a critical view of the discrepancy between the real and mediated "Americas" are succumbing to the same collapse in distinctions and becoming caught up in the same whirl of ontological back-passing. We look to American writers for the real America, or at least for a critique of the fake. What if they are not looking at each other? If contemporary American fiction is about itself — if there is no "out there" there — then where is the real US? Where did it go? How do we recognize it? How do we get it back? These questions press on both the readers and writers of contemporary American fiction, most of whom at present seem unaware or powerless in face of their existence. David Foster Wallace is pre-eminent among a small group of writers, almost unknown on this side of the Atlantic, whose work recognizes and attempts to address them.

The terms of his attempt were set out in an essay he wrote in 1993 for an issue of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* devoted to his work. Entitled "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction", it took the statistic that United States citizens watch an average of six hours of television a day, and asked why, and to what effect? The elaborate answer involved Wallace in a survey of postmodern fiction's habitual idioms and the consequences of this, a comprehensive trashing of one of his peers (Mark Leyner), and a tentative prescription for future action. A summary of the essay might read: Television's placid support for the domestic status quo in the 1960s and 70s (images of happy nuclear families against a reality which included Vietnam and Watergate) was exposed by "cool" ironic commentaries in post-modern novels by Thomas Pynchon, Joseph McElroy, Don DeLillo, William Gaddis and others. Television appropriated and institutionalized that ironic idiom, and thereby found the perfect means to suppress the various contradictions in its appeal to the viewer (briefly, television's propensity to mock, subvert and refer to itself being presented as an in-joke for the "sophisticated" individual viewer, who can then pretend he is not one of the herd). From being critical and transformative, postmodern irony became oppressive. Contemporary American fiction writers, having inherited their defining (transgressive) idiom from the preceding generation, now find themselves locked in it, unable to erase the possibility that whatever they may write, they might actually be meaning its opposite. Now, to be "cool" and ironic is to play the game; writers should be rewriting the rules, if not blowing up the stadium.

Wallace's essay is collected in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (1998), and it is the most trenchant short account available of

LAWRENCE NORFOLK

David Foster Wallace

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what television does to its consumers and cultural rivals, and how it does it. The debate aroused in the United States this year by Jedediah Purdy's *For Common Things*, a gauche but heartfelt book about irony's (destructive) effects on civic responsibility which drags a broader brush over the same area of concern, testifies to Wallace's presence, but the essay's salient feature is perhaps the level of its author's anxiety.

In Wallace's analysis, however quickly American fiction writers reach for the real, their hands grasp imagery first. Television imagery, which is to say ironized imagery, and the habit of ironic mockery it both instils and needs. For Wallace's generation, who grew up reading the writing on the wall in Pynchon, Barth, Coover and (above all) DeLillo, institutionalized irony is now the air the writer breathes. There is no choice, short of holding one's breath. Wallace's anxiety is a displaced reaction to his own cultural environment. He knows he is breathing poison.

I think that readers (and writers) in the United Kingdom misread a certain kind of ironic-cool voice and certain kinds of formal experimentation in American fiction as a style, in the way that Tom Wolfe's work evinces a style, and John Updike's work a different style, and so on. But this is wrong. The voice and the kinds of experimentation in the work of, say, Jonathan Franzen, A. M. Home, Ken Kalfus, Mark Leyner, Wallace himself, and all the other grandchildren of the DeLillo of *White Noise*, do not comprise a style but an awareness of and a response to the condition out of which fiction is produced. The ironic voice signals that an institutionalized pop culture is not only the object of literature's inquiry, but the hopelessly compromised means of that inquiry too. How to break out of this self-defeating hermeneutic circle?

In his 1993 essay, having concluded that the ironic sneer of American television culture could not be out-cooled and that its reflexive backflips would always out-flex those of fiction, however experimental, Wallace ended his piece on a tentative note:

The new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the "Oh how banal."

The essay is important, because Wallace, after more than 27,000 words of dense argument and detailed example, clears enough space to make this honest unironical statement honestly and unironically. For a couple of wobbly paragraphs, he is outside the ironic aura, even though, when the quotation above was written, it was presumably the only possible example of the literature it invoked. Wallace's anxiety and his perpetual sense of physical discomfort (which runs throughout his work) both grow out of a heightened understanding of the ubiquitous ironizing aura in which contemporary American fiction (his own included) finds itself

unable to mean what it says, however earnestly it tries to say it, because earnestness now just sounds wrong. America's acoustics have changed. To put it another way, hip postmodern



David Foster Wallace

irony gets under Wallace's skin. And because Wallace thinks with his skin, this awareness is omnipresent in his work. Almost alone among those writers with something worth saying and the skill to say it, Wallace appears able to exist in ironically rendered America and write without resorting to its terms.

His fiction includes: *The Broom of the System* (a novel, 1987), *Girl with Curious Hair* (1989 — short stories, the last of which, "Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way", a novel-length act of patricide on the novelist John Barth, has been forcefully disowned by Wallace), *Infinite Jest* (a very long novel, with footnotes, 1996), and now *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men*. He has also produced a lot of journalism, mostly reportage with a strong analytical bent covering such diverse subjects as the Luxury Cruise phenomenon, tennis, The Illinois State Fair, and the sociology of a David Lynch film set. A report entitled "Neither Adult Nor Entertainment", on the Adult Video Awards ceremony in Las Vegas in January 1998, which appeared under the byline of "Willem R. DeGroot and Matt Rundlet" in the September 1998 issue of *Premiere* magazine, may plausibly also be attributed to Wallace. The presence of numerous lengthy footnotes, the authors' (author's?) habit of cataloguing, enumerating and analysing everything in sight, and insistence on fully disclosing the exact (flawed) terms of their (his?) remit, urge an identification with the Wallace of his more conventional journalism. That piece compares the "the whole sardonic postmodern deal" of the Oscars ceremony with its porn industry equivalent, to the detriment of both, noting that "the whole mainstream celebrity culture is rushing to cash in. The whole thing seems to suck."

If "Neither Adult Nor Entertainment" is not by Wallace, then it cannot have informed "Adult World, Parts I and II", in *Brief Interviews*, which is about "a young couple experiencing sexual difficulties" according to the blurb. The husband is a secret porn-user, compulsive masturbator and currency dealer. His wife worries about their sex life, consults a former boyfriend, and discovers her husband's secret. In Part II, written as a schema for the continuation Wallace saw no point in writing, she exchanges her "Dildo" (fervently purchased to practise her oral sex technique) for several dildos (brazenly purchased to masturbate with, and "now not captidz", Wallace notes). The couple think about having children.

The skimpy narrative exists primarily to register movements in the subtext which moves teasingly beneath it, just as pornographic language does beneath conventional language. The prose enacts this explicitly, flashing a glimpse of the "spanked pink" of the husband's "thingie", for instance, in the "spanked pinks and slapped reds" of emergency vehicle lights reflecting off a wet freeway later in the story. The care with which Wallace renders the surface of Part I becomes a sort of poignant joke, given its subsequent casual trashing for the exigencies of Part II, where the pornography's bones are laid bare.

"Adult World" makes some brutal trades between the integrity of its rhetorical position and any pretension to aesthetic pleasure. It is difficult for fiction to be this honest about its own procedures, and a lot of this difficulty gets passed straight to the reader. One of the more conventional stories in the collection is called "The Depressed Person". It won an O. Henry award. A depressed woman calls the members of what she calls her "Support System" to talk about her problems, hating herself for doing so but unable to stop as she makes ever more exorbitant claims on their (and our) attention, time and sympathy. The lower she sinks, the more irritating she becomes (the story is exclusively from her point of view), but the more deserving of the very help she so irritatingly demands also, and so on, via her own pitiless self-analysis, into the depths of self-loathing

A possible reading is supplied by the opening sentence of "Pop Quiz 9" from the story-series "Octet": it begins, "You are, unfortunately, a fiction writer." "Octet" is, if not the maddest, certainly the most maddening of the stories here, presenting itself as an abortive attempt to present intractably convoluted moral problems in terms of a parlour game. The last (numbered 9, actually the fifth of a projected but never-completed eight) spins itself into reflexive knots via text and footnotes, but then somehow keeps spinning and spinning around, as if some impossibly gifted Houdini of narrative had been misinformed: the trick was not to break free but actually to get progressively more tied up. I have no idea how many readers will follow Wallace as he confesses his successive misgivings about this project in ever more abstruse footnotes, but just at the point of the story's disappearance over the last horizon of readerly patience and its own long-overdue collapse, a signal thought strikes. Wallace means it. These are not ironic reflexive gestures meant to distance the writer from the imminent implosion of his own artefact. They are Wallace's own, sincere misgivings.

In the light of this, much of the collection's strangeness becomes meaningful. Its "out there" forms and weird choices of subject are eccentric only if the centre is defined by precisely the hip, flip postmodern irony whose shadow Wallace is sneaking out from under. If he means it, then the collection's title story, a discontinuous series of interviews from which the female interviewer's questions have been erased, turns from being a juvenile exercise in *épater les bourgeois* into a series of psychological traps. Certainly, these

men are hideous. But they are funny too, now and again. One can sympathize with them, just about. And then it dawns on you (as it did not on any of the American reviewers of this book) that almost all of them are, one way or another, rapists. Now keep laughing.

The perverse choices Wallace makes are disturbing and serious. He treats subject matter normally considered unfit for fiction. There is very little parody in the book and what there is would look broad even in a pantomime. "Tristan I Sold Sisse Nar to Echo" is a reimagining of the Tristan and Isolde and Echo and Narcissus legends set in a futurized "medieval" California. The bardic narrator ("Ovid the Obtuse") laments, "Alas, we no longer get to say 'alas' with a straight face, but 'alas' used, according to legend, to be what you said in great stoic sorrow over tragedies ineluctable. 'Hic barbarus ego sum, quia non intellegor ulli!'"

A piece of doggerel included in "Westward the Course of Empire . . ." ten years ago asked for whom the fun-house was fun? The answer is, "Everyone!", until that is, it isn't. Escaping it is to leave behind not only the ironic funsters but also their ironic idea of fun. That is, the idea of fun culturally dominant at the moment, which is the moment upon which Wallace calls time in this collection. As a result these stories are not easy to read. Several fail. The best is "Church Not Made With Hands", which presents a series of verbal tableaux concerning the loss of a child, the recession of perspective and quality of light in the paintings of Vermeer, and the sadnesses consequent upon both. Wallace argues mutely that they are the same at root.

That story could not have been written in the fun-house, because a sad story must, finally, be sincere, and because the fun-house's cipher of sincerity, sadness and all that makes one sad is "Outside!". The piece of doggerel quoted above went on to ask for whom was the fun-house a house? Not for Wallace's characters or their stories which are written out in the "out there", in the real United States. They are consequently, according to our current idea of fun, rough, awkward and difficult. The most urgent justifications for their thorniness are, for the moment, North American preoccupations. The annulling and pervasive habit of unthinking irony Wallace diagnoses in contemporary popular culture and seeks to correct by example does not (yet) bite so hard in Britain. This does not make the stories any easier. Yet if one accepts that the proper remit of contemporary American fiction is to deal with America as it is, and the habits of mind which make it so, then Wallace – not Jay McInerney, nor Bret Easton Ellis, *inter alia* – is the most significant writer of his generation.

David Foster Wallace's magnum opus remains *Infinite Jest*, which is a book about how one's exterior environment (or world) persuades one's interior environment (or self) that the latter cannot live without the former: addiction, in the broadest possible sense. It was serious and unironic as only a novel of 981 pages of densely inventive prose and ninety-six pages of minutely printed notes can be. The stories in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* can be read as long-range forays launched from that project. They operate at the limit of the range of the short story and under self-imposed conditions of the utmost stringency. The unmediated terrain they seek is very distant from US fiction's current habitual haunts: some of these stories never find it and others never make it back. Those that do bring news of a rare and real America.

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