never succeed without an awareness and acknowledgement of race and class. If Rookie can’t do these things, what can it do?

WORKS CITED


w/r/t DFW

A Critical Inquiry

Julia M. H. Sizek

One humid summer day in Dayton, Ohio, I waited for a ride outside a vertical wind tunnel and read Infinite Jest. I clearly looked absurd standing in the 90-degree-95-percent-humidity heat, reading such a weighty book. One could say I looked equally absurd as I did walking into my all-male-all-engineer office (with one notable exception). That infinite summer was the beginning of my obsession with David Foster Wallace (DFW). I know that I’m just one among millions of zealous DFW readers, but since that first encounter, this obsession has determined my movement through libraries and bookstores, kept me in long discussions at almost-vacant parties, and become a justification for almost every book I recommend.

DFW’s death in 2008 and his accompanying pseudo-sainthood helped fuel the ascent of his posthumous novel The Pale King onto the bestseller lists in 2011, and D.T. Max’s post-mortem Wallace biography, Every Love Story is a Ghost Story, was in the running to be a “Top 10 Book of the Year” in 2012. As Jonathan Franzen, DFW’s friend and literary competitor, puts it, “his suicide took him away from us and made the person into a very public legend. People who had never read his fiction, or even heard of him, read his Kenyon College commencement address in The Wall Street Journal and mourned the loss of a kind and gentle soul.” Within this public discourse, DFW became a strange sort of hero. Franzen, of course, argues that this interpretation is false, and that the David he knew was a deeply ambiguous figure—a complex, un-unified character.

W/R/T DFW

Inevitably, news coverage of a person’s death will be laudatory, two-dimensional, and one-sided. It will gloss over his tangible contributions to society or thought, instead focusing on aspects of the person as a character in the world. Though this may explain the transformation of man into myth, it does not justify it. In these pages I hope to put aside the man as a myth, and use DFW’s work as a jumping-off point to discuss the world around us. Through DFW’s notion of critical engagement, we can challenge our ideas about other people and the world around us, including our framing of DFW himself.

People often find appealing the image of the tortured and self-immolating artist: By suffering for art, the artist does something that we average people cannot. Suffering marks an artist and her work with an air of immortality. For example, The Bell Jar was not particularly well-received until it was published under Plath’s name and immortalized by her suicide. The suffering and death of an artist, in part, makes him or her interesting and relevant alongside the substance of the work. For Plath and DFW, suffering is not ordinary, but a double-take. This metaphorical rubbernecking is also present in recent news coverage about gunmen in crowded movie theaters and elementary schools. While our interest in these mentally ill individuals could be described as morbid curiosity, it is also aimed at and elementary school. While our interest in these mentally ill individuals could be described as morbid curiosity, it is also aimed at psychologicalizing the signs of their insanity. We are not interested in getting to know these people as much as we want to know why they are that way. They stop being people at some point, and start becoming pure spectacle—we find them fascinating without recognizing their humanity. To envision someone as a spectacle, then, is to deny him the possibility of being normal. The person-as-myth is somehow cordoned off from society and relegated to the madhouse of public legend.

This embodiment of the obsessed, the addicted, the not-exactly-functional, is exactly what David Foster Wallace does. Infinite Jest is full of characters unfathomable to the ‘normal’ human, from the tennis prodigy and genius Hal Incandenza to the wheelchair-bound Québécois separatist Marathe. While they share common desires—to love, to be free, to be happy—they also have strange quirks that divorce them from our experience of humanity. For example, we see Hal in the opening scenes of Infinite Jest as an incomprehensible vegetable, spoilt by the excesses of life and his myriad addictions. In an interview at an elite college, Hal sits mute. When asked a simple question, he replies with some sort of statement, but one that must be perceived as not only nonsense but “marginally mammalian” (15). His acts and words are such a cause for alarm that he is immediately transported to the hospital. Presumably, his interview did not go well. But when reading this, we understand Hal while all those around him cannot. Everyone else sees him as a babbling and incoherent vegetable, yet the inner workings of his mind are revealed to us. While “directed his way is horror,” Hal intends to say “I have opinions. Some of them are interesting. I could, if you’d let me talk and talk. Let’s talk about anything. I believe the influence of Kierkegaard on Camus is underestimated…. I believe Hobbes is just Rousseau in a dark mirror” (12). While strange, he is not incomprehensible. This access to the mind is perhaps something only possible in fiction—there might be no other way to understand the vagaries of the mind and break out of what DFW called “the encagement of the self.” Yet this access to the inaccessible is what we seek in news stories about homicidal rampag-

2. Note that DFW actually feared the coming of this image long before his death: He wrote a letter to one of his friends saying that he was concerned that he had become a “Mask, a Public Self, False Self or Object-Cathect” “that I want others to mistake for the real me” (DFW quoted in Every Love Story is a Ghost Story, p. 240).

3. Think of an athlete you admire (particularly, a marathoner you admire). As you watch him race, you think, “Wow, I wish I were him—I’d be so fast, practically superhuman.” As you begin to seriously consider the implications of what you have just said, you realize 1.) how painful running a marathon at that speed is, and 2.) the requisite training to run at that speed (a lot). Suddenly, you no longer wish to be him, because that is a lot of pain and suffering that you are pretty content without. A wish for embodiment becomes admiration instead. This is the same kind of relation we have to artists: We think they’re great and admire them, but value our normalcy enough that we will not want to become a suffering artist.

4. For a (slightly abbreviated) analysis of how this is so, see Franzen 2012.


6. Max 2012: 164
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In every Love Story is a Ghost Story, Foster Wallace does. Though this may explain the

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es and biographies of tortured artists. While the news often renders these people more incomprehensible and makes them into more of an object, DFW manages to show us what is still essentially human about these characters, and allows us to attempt to understand them rather than reject them outright or distance them as spectacles.

Through enabling identification with such characters, DFW forces us to rethink stereotypes, and thus makes a good work of fiction great. One example is Don Gately, another central figure in *Infinite Jest*. As a former burglar and drug addict, Gately works at a halfway house in Boston. We are introduced to him when he is still “an active drug addict...distinguished by his ferocious and jolly élan.” Our conception of Gately as a ruthless criminal who commits robbery while “whistling a jolly tune and trying to look menacing in his clown’s mask” is somewhat warranted, and we think that Gately should continue to conform to our expectations about how such a person should act (58). But during the story, Gately comes to redeem himself, beginning with a commitment to sobriety, continuing with a dedication to the “highest possible use to which a newly sober life could be put,” and ending with a recommitment to his sobriety at the end of the novel. Though his final act to refuse drugs is certainly heroic, Gately represents civic responsibility more generally as he takes up responsibility in the doldrums of the mundane. Gately overcomes his addiction to drugs, “the drug addict’s basic way of dealing with problems, [which] was using the good old Substance to blot out the problem.” As he sobers, he becomes normal. First he accepts his mistakes, the “really irrevocable impulsive mistakes Gately’d made as an active drug addict and burglar, not to mention their consequences, the mistakes”, which Gately’s trying to accept he’ll be paying off for a long time”

7. Wallace 2006:55


Of course, one could argue that *Infinite Jest* deserves literary merit solely for its contribution to a new kind of fiction. The lengthy footnotes, the pre-planned “smoke breaks” in the text, the eschewing of standard chronology and unified plot in *Infinite Jest* challenge us to rethink how we approach novels, and what we think fiction is. But I would argue that the literary tools are only reflections of a wider goal. This points to his fundamental contribution: DFW offers a way of critical engagement with the world around us through forcing the reader to engage with both the text and the characters in it. He jars a conventional narrative structure with a 10-page footnote on the rules and regulations of Echaton, and pushes the reader to mentally catalogue the chronology of the Year of Glad and the Year of Dairy Products from the American Heartland. He challenges the reader to consider who a drug addict is, or whether a tennis prodigy is a person or a primate. These individual challenges are only small examples of what I’d call a larger framework for critical engagement, in which DFW challenges those things that we thought were stable in our lives (our representations of others and how we should interact with them). Thus the problem is not us or the world, exactly, but rather our comfort with our own thoughts, and our unwillingness to challenge and rethink our knee-jerk reactions. While DFW only challenges us in-text, we take these lessons out-of-text, and this kind of

9. Blair’s term, not mine. It describes “the way that adults unrelated to each other by blood or marriage routinely take care of one another is to participate in the many forms of civic life, from cleaning up after their dogs to running for PTA to voting. These community relationships are not particularly intimate; they don’t usually change anyone’s life or offer intense interpersonal rewards; and they can be quite boring as pastimes go.”

10. Wallace 2006:932
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8. Blair 2012. Spoiler Alert: At the conclusion of Infinite Jest, Gately is shot while intervening for justice, and refuses narcotics during his treatment.

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(211). DFW works to assert how Gately normalizes as he outlines the lessons that Gately learns (slowly and not without questioning and doubt) in a halfway house, using just the right combination of cliché, detailed fact, and vernacular to allow us to understand “that no matter how smart you thought you were, you are actually way less smarter than that,” “that it is statistically easier for low-IQ people to kick an addiction than it is for high-IQ people,” and “that the cliché ‘I don’t know who I am’ unfortunately turns out to be more than a cliché” (203, 204). This kind of description allows us to connect with Gately and understand how he is normal. Through developing Gately as a character and describing him in just the right way, DFW undermines the man’s initial characterization. This parallels another part of DFW’s project of critical inquiry, in which he asks us to rethink our stereotypes and assumptions.

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Thus the problem is not us or the world, exactly, but rather our comfort with our own thoughts, and our unwillingness to challenge and rethink our knee-jerk reactions. While DFW only challenges us in-text, we take these lessons out-of-text, and this kind of
critical engagement can help us determine how to live our lives and contend with those things that exist outside of us.¹¹

Perhaps we can understand the problems of mindlessness by taking it one step too far and inhabiting the dystopia of *Infinite Jest*. At the same time, perhaps the cure is *The Pale King*—the recognition of the excitement of the quotidian, or the strangeness hidden in the ordinary.¹² DFW’s project is about shifting our mode of thought from one in which we are unthinking to one in which we are creating meaning through engaging with the world. While this theme of critical engagement pervades much of his work (from vignettes about the Illinois State Fair to stories about “Being There”¹³), it is most clearly identified in *This is Water*, DFW’s commencement address at Kenyon College, when he discusses the only kind of freedom that we truly have: the freedom to think for ourselves and escape the self-centered default-setting of our own brains. As he takes on the “consumer-hell-type situation” that is checking out at a grocery store (93), DFW shows something more fundamentally central about our society: Naturally, in this situation, you can hate it. You can be angry at people talking on their cell phones while waiting in line, and that checkout lady who says, “‘Have a nice day’ in a voice that is the absolute voice of death” (71). Upon repeat ad nauseam, this seems like the way to make living miserable, and yet DFW offers the freedom to construct our own reality. Rather than being the kind of dreadful experience that makes us hate our lives, a trip to the grocery store can instead be a site of constant renegotiation, of personal growth, and of new knowledge. This is the critical engagement DFW seeks: Rather than rely on stereotype and ritual, we can liberate ourselves from these increasingly narrow conceptions of reality. We have the freedom to choose what and how we think. In other words, we have the freedom to interact with the world in meaningful ways—in ways that are more like a critical engagement than empty routine-following. This freedom is one that requires thought, effort, and attention; but for DFW, it is the only way in which we can live in the world without being withdrawn from it as slaves to our own minds. And freedom, as we all know, is something theoretically liberating.

We could apply these themes to our understanding of DFW himself as a curio or tortured artist. While we could look at DFW as a symbol of our generation or a myth, we should look past this narrow conception to recognize him as the complicated figure he was. While we may not be able to understand or engage directly with him post-mortem, we can still engage with his remains—his work. DFW’s ideas about how to live and how to engage with the world as it exists are important, and potentially life-changing in a way outside of your bookstore-roaming preferences. Taking his framework of critical engagement, we can challenge both ourselves and our notions about the way things work. To get started, I’d suggest that you read some David Foster Wallace.

¹¹. Whether those are the Illinois State Fair (*A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again*) or just the mundaneness of tax codes (*The Pale King*).  
¹². Of course, it had to “show people a way to insulate themselves from the toxic freneticism of American life. It had to be emotionally engaged and morally sound, and to dramatize boredom without being too entertaining” (Max 2012: 292).  
¹³. See “Octet” in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. 
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