

Consider
David Foster Wallace
Critical Essays

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CONTENTS

✓ DAVID HERING—*Editor's Preface*.....9

✓ GREG CARLISLE—Introduction:
Consider David Foster Wallace..... 12

✓ CLARE HAYES-BRADY—The Book, the Broom and
the Ladder: Philosophical Groundings in the Work of
David Foster Wallace..... 24

✓ GRAHAM FOSTER—A Blasted Region: David Foster
Wallace's Man-made Landscapes 37

✓ CONNIE LUTHER—David Foster Wallace: Westward with
Fredric Jameson.....49

✓ PHILIP COLEMAN—Consider Berkeley & Co.: Reading
“Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way” 62

✓ GREGORY PHIPPS—The Ideal Athlete: John Wayne
in *Infinite Jest*75

DAVID HERING—*Infinite Jest*: Triangles, Cycles,
Choices, & Chases.....89

✓ KIKI BENZON—“Yet Another Example of the Porousness
of Certain Borders”: Chaos and Realism in *Infinite Jest*..... 101

✓ MATT TRESKO—Impervious To U.S. Parsing:
Encyclopedism, Autism, and *Infinite Jest*..... 113

✓ CHRISTOPHER THOMAS—Infinite Jest:
David Foster Wallace & Laurence Sterne..... 123

✓ ADAM KELLY—David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in
American Fiction..... 131

but their existence, and Kenkle's monologue, represent what seems like a direct reference to Sterne's flamboyant, arrogant yet likeable characters.

David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction

Adam Kelly

I

My point of departure for this article is the widespread agreement, which has by now become almost a cliché among readers, fans, and critics, that David Foster Wallace affirmed and embodied sincerity as a crucial value in his life and work, perhaps even as that work's defining feature. Whether one is inspired to this thought by Wallace's critique of irony and the call for "single-entendre principles" in "E Unibus Pluram" (Supposedly 81), by the regular thematic treatment of sincerity in *Infinite Jest*, or simply through the feeling one gets from the voice of Wallace's prose in one's own head, the notion of sincerity has from early on marked discussions of his work at all levels of debate. On the back cover of Wallace's first collection *Girl With Curious Hair*, for example, Madison Smartt Bell describes the stories therein as "serious and sincere," while in an influential mid-career assessment, A.O. Scott identified "the feedback loop of irony and sincerity which animates so much of Wallace's writing." Since Wallace's early death, this attribution of sincerity has become particularly ubiquitous: in a major recent assessment, Jon Baskin remarks that "it would be difficult to imagine a writer more committed and sincere in our time," while in his long biographical essay for the *New Yorker*, D. T. Max refers both to "Wallace's opaque sincerity" and to "the robust sincerity of his writing" (Max). With this broad consensus in mind, I want to ask two critical questions here: firstly, in terms of literary and intellectual history, what does this attribution of sincerity to Wallace mean? And secondly, is there something fundamentally new about Wallace's sincerity, a re-working of the concept as a complex and radical response to contemporary conditions?

In attempting to answer these questions, a good place to start is Lionel Trilling's 1972 study *Sincerity and Authenticity*, in which Trilling

offers historical outlines of these two key concepts. He begins by defining sincerity as “a congruence of avowal and actual feeling” (2), and traces its origin to the advent of Renaissance humanism, citing Polonius’s famous advice to Laertes in *Hamlet*:

This above all: to thine own self be true
And it doth follow, as the night the day
Thou canst not then be false to any man. (3)

For Trilling, the crucial aspect of Shakespeare’s formulation is that truth to the self is conceived of as a means of ensuring truth to the other, and—via readings of Rousseau, Diderot, Hegel and Jane Austen among others—Trilling goes on to suggest that this conception of sincerity would become “a salient, perhaps a definitive, characteristic of Western culture for some four hundred years” (6). But by the twentieth century it had gone into sharp decline, superseded by the ideal of authenticity, which conceives truth to the self as an end and not simply as a means. Whereas sincerity places emphasis on inter-subjective truth and communication with others, and on what Trilling calls the “public end in view” (9), authenticity conceives truth as something inward, personal, and hidden, the goal primarily of self-expression rather than other-directed communication. Thus, the role-playing associated with the theatrical origins of sincerity is repudiated in favor of a plunge into the Conradian heart of darkness; and, indeed, Trilling closely associates the cultural trumping of sincerity by authenticity with the intense but non-confessional exploration of the self characteristic of literary modernism. Connected to this, and equally crucial, is the way the modernist idea of the artist as aloof genius, as persona rather than person, shattered the older, traditional view, perhaps best articulated in Wordsworth’s understanding of poets as “men speaking to men.” Citing various formulations by Eliot, Joyce and Gide, Trilling suggests that the modernists’ aesthetic of impersonality means that “the criterion of sincerity, the calculation of the degree of congruence between feeling and avowal, is not pertinent to the judgement of their work” (7), a position, he argues, that would go on to become enshrined by the New Critical denigration of intention, so central to any conception of sincerity, as a fallacy in the

study of literature. And the initial reactions to modernism—the existentialist and absurdist literature of mid-century Europe (which we might note draws its bearings from Heidegger’s notion of authenticity as a concern with the “ownmost self” [eigenste Selbst]), as well as American Beat writing and confessional poetry—only added to the privilege afforded to authenticity, in that any demonstrable awareness of a public self, again an important characteristic of sincerity, becomes associated with bad faith or an artificial dishonesty.¹ This state of affairs leads Trilling to write of the “anachronism” now involved in the notion of sincerity, how when we speak the word, “we are likely to do so with either discomfort or irony” (6). Yet what Trilling could not anticipate in 1972 was that irony was in the process of taking over, and with the rise of poststructuralism in the academy, and of postmodernism in the arts, the surface/depth model of the self assumed by both sincerity and authenticity would soon be superseded by the privilege afforded to the inaugurating powers of capital, technology, culture, and especially language.

This is where David Foster Wallace comes in. That Wallace from early on characterized his artistic project as a response to the contemporary prevalence of irony in American literature and culture is well-established, and there is no need to reconstruct the argument of “E Unibus Pluram” here. But what I want to suggest is that Wallace’s project ended up even more far-reaching than he claimed it would be in that key early essay, and that from *Infinite Jest* onward it became primarily about returning to literary narrative a concern with sincerity not seen since modernism shifted the ground so fundamentally almost a century before. In his essay comparing Dostoevsky’s fiction to “our own lit’s thematic poverty,” Wallace commented upon this shift: “The good old modernists, among their other accomplishments, elevated aesthetics to the level of ethics—maybe even metaphysics—and Serious Novels after Joyce tend to be valued and studied mainly for

¹It is important to note here Trilling’s contention, pace Donald Davie and others, that although the modernist doctrine of the persona was challenged by the English and American poets that followed high modernism, this did not mark a return from authenticity to sincerity, “because it does not involve the reason that Polonius gives for being true to one’s own self: that if one is, one cannot then be false to any man” (9).

their formal ingenuity" (*Lobster* 272). According to Wallace, this modernist legacy has formed part of a more general "intellectualization and aestheticizing of principles and values in this country," one of the things, he argued, "that's gutted our generation" (Interview, Salon.com). As a contrast to the modernist concern with authentic forms of representation, Dostoevsky is explicitly presented by Wallace as an ideological writer who possesses the required "degrees of passion, conviction, and engagement with deep moral issues that we—here, today—cannot or do not permit ourselves" (*Lobster* 271). Yet elsewhere Wallace often made it abundantly clear that it could not simply be a question of contemporary literature's returning to the precise kind of sincerity he saw as informing Dostoevsky's fiction. In one of his last interviews, he claimed that while terms like "moral" and "ethical"—concepts that have to do, like sincerity, primarily with not being false to others—might be apt for describing the era of Dostoevsky or the European Romantics, these terms had become thorny and problematic for those born in the age of television (Interview, Bookworm 2006). For Wallace, any return to sincerity must be informed by a study of postmodernist fiction, in order to properly take into account the effects wrought by contemporary media, particularly TV and advertising. He told another interviewer that "the biggest thing [...] that was interesting about postmodernism is that it was the first text that was highly self-conscious, self-conscious of itself as text, self-conscious of the writer as persona, self-conscious about the effects that narrative had on readers, and the fact that readers probably knew that. It was the first generation of writers who'd actually read a lot of criticism, and there was a certain schizophrenia about it" (Interview, Charlie Rose 1997). Coming himself from an American generation that had attended college when critical theory was at its zenith, and with these highly self-conscious writers as his direct precursors, Wallace found that he could not reject their insights for older and more naive forms of communication.²

² Wallace highlighted the importance of critical theory for the writers of his generation in his first published essay, arguing that one of its effects was to show that "the relations between literary artist, literary language, and literary artifact are vastly more complex and powerful than has been realized hitherto" ("Fictional Futures" 14).

Instead, most crucial for the contemporary artist is to recognize "not just what's true for me as a person, but what's gonna sound true—what's going to hit readers or music-listeners [...] as true in 2006, or 2000, or 1995," all while taking into account a cultural context that is "vastly more complicated, difficult, cynical and over-hyped than it used to be" (Interview, Bookworm 2006).

But let us pause for a moment here, because if we wish to discuss Wallace's sincerity, it is clear that we are faced with a complication from the outset. If, according to Wallace, a writer must anticipate how his work will be received by readers in a complex culture, and thus about communicating what sounds true, rather than simply what is true, is he really being fully sincere? Is this "a congruence of avowal and actual feeling," or even an endorsement of "single-entendre principles?" Is there not a schizophrenic and/or manipulative quality at work here that counteracts the good intentions of the artist as communicator of truth? As Trilling recognized, and as Ernst van Alphen and Mieke Bal make clear in their introduction to the recent collection *The Rhetoric of Sincerity*, sincerity as a concept has from the beginning been wracked by this kind of difficulty, has never, in fact, evaded its theatrical connection to a notion of performance. "In a traditional sense," van Alphen and Bal tell us, "sincerity indicates the performance of an inner state on one's outer surface so that others can witness it. But the very distinction between inner self and outer manifestation implies a split that assaults the traditional integration that marks sincerity" (3). Moreover, in the age of theory, this characteristic split between inner self and outer performance is further complicated, and even displaced, by the interrogation and re-evaluation of basic concepts of selfhood, intention, and performativity. With this in mind, it might appear that the notion of sincerity becomes inutile, but such is not the case according to van Alphen and Bal: "Sincerity cannot be dismissed [...] because it is an indispensable affective (hence, social) process between subjects" (5). Rather than dismissal, what is required is "a new theorization of the concept" (17), a rethinking of sincerity's rhetorical basis, with particular regard to be paid to the formidable role of new media.

Both sincerity and authenticity, as Trilling defines them, assume a wholeness to the inner self, a lack of internal division regardless of what shows on the outside. The force of appearance/reality and surface/

depth distinctions is fully at work in both concepts, so that when André Gide famously remarks that "One cannot both be sincere and seem so" (qtd. in Trilling 70), this rejection of outward sincerity still involves a commitment to the wholeness of inner being that remains a characteristic of authenticity. David Foster Wallace's fiction, in contrast, asks what happens when the anticipation of others' reception of one's outward behavior begins to take priority for the acting self, so that inner states lose their originating causal status and instead become effects of that anticipatory logic. Former divisions between self and other morph into conflicts within the self, and a recursive and paranoid cycle of endless anticipation begins, putting in doubt the very referents of terms like "self" and "other," "inner" and "outer." Wallace's artistic method for dealing with this infinite cycle—this mirror or bind or aporia—involves a complex, contemporary logic; it is at this point, therefore, that I want to re-describe that method as the operation and promotion of a "New Sincerity." But before exploring examples from Wallace's fiction, and looking at his influence upon his contemporaries, I will first attempt to outline the principles underlying his New Sincerity with reference to the thought of Jacques Derrida.³

II

Although Wallace is usually most closely aligned philosophically with Wittgenstein, what connects him to Derrida is the similar set of historically novel concerns they shared, and their comparably acute responses to the period in which they wrote. Specifically, what most binds the two writers is their common recognition that the twin problems of narcissism and communicative uncertainty had, by the late twentieth century, become endemic in the

³ I should note here that the term "New Sincerity" has been employed before, by Jim Collins in a 1993 article on film theory. However, Collins uses the phrase to characterize early-nineties films, such as *Dances with Wolves* and *Field of Dreams*, which reject a postmodernist awareness of mediation in favor of the direct revision of American myths of origin. In Trilling's terms, this would be better described as a rejection of irony in favor of authenticity rather than sincerity, and indeed there is little to link this genre of film to the kind of new sincerity I identify with the work of Wallace and his contemporaries.

connected spheres of Western culture and Western philosophy. For both writers, in their different ways, these problems had to do with an obsession with univocal meaning, which still framed understanding even in a supposed age of irony. For Derrida, responding to this situation meant taking issue with what he called "the ethico-theoretical decision of metaphysics," a decision at the core of philosophy that "postulates the simple to be before the complex, the pure before the impure, the sincere before the deceitful, and so on" (Hägglund 46). For Wallace, these same hierarchical oppositions had become metaphysically unsustainable for Americans of his generation through that generation's prolonged exposure to advertising, a previously peripheral discourse that had risen to paradigmatic status as the main form of public communication in the West. The most basic feature of advertising is that it addresses the other only as a means of highlighting the charms of the self. It is thus fundamentally narcissistic, and yet cannot easily be dismissed, because it has the effect of revealing the potential narcissism involved in all forms of communication. In the age of advertising, it becomes impossible to separate in an absolute manner those communications genuinely directed toward the benefit of the receiver from those that serve primarily to draw attention to the sender. To attempt such a separation is to desire the recovery of a pure sincerity, understood as the lost wholeness of intention associated with speech and presence. More useful, in Derrida's view, would be to construct a logic that can account for impurity and impossibility, that can respond to what he called "the increasingly powerful historical expansion of a system of general writing, of which the system of speech, consciousness, meaning, presence, truth etc., would be only an effect, and should be analyzed as such" ("Signature" 20). Wallace, who recognized that Derrida had "successfully debunked the idea that speech is language's primary instantiation" (Lobster 84), agreed that the effect advertising had of highlighting the complexity and impurity of all discourse could only be responded to by acknowledging one's own implication within this "system of general writing." One must begin by recognizing the lack of any transcendent, absolute, Archimedean point from which to judge the authentic from the

inauthentic, the sincere from the manipulative, truth from ideology, and so on.⁴

As a discourse that reads itself and tries to anticipate and direct its own reception, advertising is never innocent, and Derrida and Wallace likewise feel compelled to produce texts that display impatience with rhetorical innocence and self-justificatory claims of detachment or transcendence. They both develop a writing that relentlessly interrogates its own commitments, and a logic that reflects back on itself to the greatest degree possible. In doing so they aim to offer a critical alternative to what Paul Ricoeur termed a "hermeneutics of suspicion," the prevailing approach to literature and culture that emphasizes what it sees as the blindnesses caused by ideological investment, historical ignorance, and psychological repression. One problem with this approach is that it fails to recognize that under the sign of advertising, when traditional depth has been displaced by a syntagmatic chain of signifiers, truth should no longer be understood as simply existing beneath the surface, a contingent absence that can be rendered present via the processes of critique. In contrast, truth may be uncannily on the surface, impervious to those processes. In many ways, the America Wallace depicts in his fiction has exactly this character, is already radically over-exposed, with many secrets appearing in open view. In *Infinite Jest*, for instance, the transparently comic machinations of Johnny Gentile's Clean U.S. Party bear remarkable and prescient resemblance to the rather blatant ways in which the real-life Bush administration would carry out torture and invasion without appearing overly concerned to argue that what it was doing was lawful or morally right. Similarly, the open manner in which John Wayne and Avril Incandenza carry out their affair pre-empt Michael Pemulis's attempts at blackmail, which are based on the false presupposition that suspicion produces results.

⁴ This is why, in "E Unibus Pluram," Wallace regularly reiterates that his argument is not a lament or diatribe against TV and advertising, but rather an attempt to understand their power and suggest a response. Paul Giles calls this Wallace's "movement beyond a straightforwardly oppositional critical perspective" (333), and it is a crucial aspect of Wallace's innovative approach to non-fiction.

For both Derrida and Wallace, a second problem with the hermeneutics of suspicion, in its exposure-centered emphasis on authenticity rather than sincerity, is that it falls damagingly short of accounting for the persistence of the truly valuable in human life—traits such as love, trust, faith and responsibility. Yet in order to avoid the hermeneutical pitfalls outlined above, both writers find they can approach these traits only through the frame of paradox. Whence the crucial importance of double binds in the work of both writers. Wallace claimed in interview that "Interesting and true stuff in my life seems to involve double-binds, where there is a decision between two alternatives, but neither is acceptable" (Interview, Bookworm 1996), and the logic of the double bind is evidently a basic structure in his work, particularly in *Infinite Jest* (where one character even sets an exam in double binds [307-8]) and in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, where the majority of stories constitute riffs on basic double-bind scenarios. Meanwhile, in late texts such as *Given Time*, *The Gift of Death* and *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, Derrida developed a logic that highlights and addresses the double bind at the heart of concepts such as the gift, the secret, hospitality and forgiveness. A gift, for example, is structured by a paradoxical relation between, on the one hand, calculation, conditionality, and a self-conscious awareness of impurity—the gift as exchange, as a means of getting something in return, even if what one gets is only a moment of self-approval—and, on the other hand, the incalculable, the unconditional, a relation to the other that goes beyond all forms of cognition, manipulation, narcissism and self-promotion. Without this unconditionality, this openness to a horizon beyond anticipation, there can be no such thing as a true gift, and yet such unconditionality proves impossible to separate fully from conditionality, from the self-conscious anticipation of how the other will understand the gift, and how one understands it oneself. The two poles thus become interminably entangled in any action, and we can never know for certain, according to Derrida, if any single event of giving or receiving is the genuine article or not. And this impossibility of knowledge is not contingent, but fundamentally structural to the idea of a gift, something Wallace demonstrates with comic brio in the short stories in *Brief Interviews* that focus on the spiralling paradoxes involved in gift-giving ("The Devil is a Busy Man" and "Suicide as a Sort of Present" are two

examples). Like Derrida, Wallace places gift and economy in conceptual opposition: in interview, he contrasted “an artistic transaction, which I think involves a gift” with “an economic transaction, which I regard as cold” (Interview, Bookworm 2000). Yet Wallace also admits that no artistic gift can exist without economy, and has phrased this in terms of the writer’s sincerity: “There is, in writing, a certain blend of sincerity and manipulation, of trying always to gauge what the particular effect of something is gonna be” (qtd. in Lipsky).⁵ This suggests that sincerity has the same structure as the gift: it can always be taken for manipulation, and this risk is fundamental—it cannot be reduced by appeal to intention, or morality, or context—because true sincerity, if there is ever such a thing, must take place in the aporia between the conditional and the unconditional. Or in Wallace’s terms, sincerity must involve “intent” but cannot involve “motive.” This is a fraught distinction, and even the writer him- or herself will never know whether they have attained true sincerity, and the reader will never know either. And yet true sincerity happens, is in fact made possible by the impossibility of its certain identification.⁶ As Derrida makes clear on many occasions, what is at stake here is not primarily a question of knowledge, because knowledge can always be challenged by the claim to a deeper level of reading and exposure, in a chain of spiralling and ironic infinity. For Wallace, consciousness is precisely this kind of “infinite jest,” making absolute cognitive certainty concerning the difference between intent and motive impossible to finally ascertain.

⁵ It is worth noting that Wallace, along with contemporaries such as Jonathan Franzen and Jonathan Lethem, have expressed their admiration for Lewis Hyde’s *The Gift* as a model for contemporary artistic practice. Yet, as Derrida implies in *Given Time*, Hyde’s conception of the gift is less radical than these writers’ own exploitation of the gift-structure in their work: “As for the unconditionality evoked by Lewis Hyde in *The Gift* [...], it is explicitly limited to gifts among close friends, relatives, and most often close relatives. Which is to say that it is not what it is or claims to be: unconditional” (17-18n8). For more on the crucial role of gifts in Wallace’s work, see Zadie Smith’s essay in her collection *Changing My Mind* (257-300).

⁶ Thus Jane Taylor rightly observes of sincerity that “its affects and its effects must remain beyond calculation, must exceed rational description and instrumental reason. Sincerity cannot be deployed. Whenever ‘sincerity’ names itself, it ceases to exist” (19).

This distinction between intent and motive is drawn from *Infinite Jest*. On the one hand, Wallace suggests that intent is a basic human feature when we are told that the eyes of those who witness the film *Infinite Jest* become “Empty of intent” (508).⁷ On the other hand, Orin’s seduction of his “Subjects” is described as “*sincerity with a motive*” (1048, italics original), and elsewhere, concerning the AA Crocodiles, we are told that “Sincerity with an ulterior motive is something these tough ravaged people know and fear” (369). This latter quotation suggests that the distinction between intent and motive, and any possible affirmation of sincerity, can only be made by a particular kind of listener. More generally, it suggests that the possibility of sincerity depends upon its becoming dialogic in character, always requiring a response from the other to bring it into play. One mark this leaves on Wallace’s fiction is in his treatment of voice. Voices within Wallace’s work that are understood in terms of their potential sincerity—such as those of Madame Psychosis in *Infinite Jest* and of the Granola Cruncher in the final “Brief Interview”—tend to resist positive description: “not bored or laconic or ironic or tongue-in-cheek. It’s reflective but not judgmental, somehow” we are told of the transmitted voice of Madame Psychosis (189). Because all telling can be understood as a pose, there is no way to present sincerity positively in cognitive terms.⁸ Moreover, the technical elements of Madame Psychosis’s presentation—her demand for five minutes of dead air before and after her show, along with her ritualized and portentous opening—seem calculated to control the impact of her self-

⁷ This emphasis on the human importance of intent also returns us, of course, to Wallace’s quarrel with the modernist/New Critical rejection of “intention” as a factor in the judgment of literary art.

⁸ This is why sincerity can only be evoked through attestation, rather than direct description. Thus the hideous man in the final brief interview insists on the power of the Granola Cruncher’s delivery of her story while only being able to describe that delivery negatively: “She was not melodramatic about it, the anecdote [...] nor affecting an unnatural calm. [...] She seemed truly poseless in relating it, open to attention but not solicitous—nor contemptuous of the attention, or affecting a disdain or contempt” (*Brief Interviews* 253).

presentation on air, putting in doubt her sincerity. Yet this technicity functions (paradoxically) in the service of a vital “unknowing” quality that it takes Mario Incandenza, “the least cynical person in the history of Enfield MA” (184), to detect. “One of the reasons,” the narrator tells us, “Mario’s obsessed with her show is that he’s somehow sure Madame Psychosis cannot herself sense the compelling beauty and light she projects over the air, somehow” (190). Through Mario’s response, we glimpse the possibility of a more affirmative understanding of Madame Psychosis’s voice. For him, the voice has “the low-depth familiar[ity] [of] certain childhood smells” (189), and the word it brings to his mind is “haunting” (191). In *Spectres of Marx*, Derrida suggests that an alternative to the metaphysics of presence is to think concepts through a “hauntology,” and Psychosis’s lack of bodily presence, her invisibility even to the student who produces her radio show, suggest the disembodied haunting, the spectral uncertainty, that marks her particular brand of intent without motive, of sincerity. But that sincerity can only be attested to, not proven, always requiring the listener’s own response to the haunting call of the other.⁹

Of course, approaching sincerity in Wallace’s fiction means taking account not only of his treatment of character’s voices, but also of the term’s relevance as a description of his own narrative persona. As early as *Girl With Curious Hair* this had become a key issue for Wallace. Lines that occur in the final paragraph of “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way”—“See this thing. See inside what spins without purchase. Close your eye. Absolutely no salesman will call. Relax. Lie back. I want nothing from you” (*Girl* 373)—with their creepy tone of sales-speak, yet the resonance of genuine communicative truth-telling they hold within the story’s context, already demonstrate Wallace’s acute awareness of the co-implication of sincerity and spin. But the clearest working out of this bind in Wallace’s fiction is “Octet” from *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men*. The

⁹ The attestation of sincerity need not be provoked purely by the affective quality of the voice, as it is for Mario. It can also involve a conscious decision, as it does for Madame Psychosis herself in a later passage at an AA meeting: “He’s got your autodidactic orator’s way with emotional dramatic pauses that don’t seem affected. Joelle makes another line down the Styrofoam coffee cup with her fingernail and chooses consciously to believe it isn’t affected, the story’s emotive drama” (710).

key section, “Pop Quiz 9,” begins “You are, unfortunately, a fiction writer” (123), and is addressed to the self, reading at times like an anguished diary entry. In it, a writer is concerned about the successful communication of a “weird univocal urgency” (126) he feels in the conception of “a cycle of very short belletristic pieces [that are] supposed to compose a certain sort of ‘interrogation’ of the person reading them, somehow” (123). But because this interrogation requires the writer to “break the textual fourth wall and kind of address [...] the reader directly,” it inevitably ends up resembling the fourth-wall-puncturing that takes place in postmodernist metafiction, in which the writer congratulates himself for not manipulating his audience, but by doing so achieves precisely the opposite, “viz. not interrogating you or have any sort of interchange or even really talking to you but rather just performing in some highly self-conscious and manipulative way.” Anxious that he cannot seem to put himself in the place of a reader who is completely other to him, Wallace’s narrator ties himself up in knots about these issues, soon concluding that “none of this real-narrative-honesty-v-sham-narrative-honesty stuff can even be talked about up front” (125n2).

What this suggests, in effect, is that in Wallace’s fiction the guarantee of the writer’s sincere intentions cannot finally lie in representation—sincerity is rather the kind of secret that must always break with representation. In this, we can see the surface and depth model conventionally assumed to characterize secrecy displaced by structures of difference and deferral. For Derrida, the conditional secret, describable in terms of unveiling, within the logic of surface and depth, is about power—power lies in knowledge of the secret and the ability to uncover the truth it hides (*Gift of Death* 63-64). Most narrative, just like most political discourse, is structured by this kind of conditional secrecy. In contrast, the unconditional secret beyond representation would resist power and knowledge, instead inducing weakness and epistemological humility, the kind of weakness and humility that Wallace’s alcoholics must accept if they are to find a way out of their cage. “Nobody’s been able to figure AA out,” *Infinite Jest*’s narrator tells us (349), and it is this kind of secrecy, a secrecy hiding no knowledge that can be exposed, which allows AA the chance to succeed, but which also accounts for its structural similarity to Fascism.

Both ideologies require a surrendering of the will, "an almost classic sort of Blind Faith in the older guys" (351), a faith in the sincerity of their withholding of the secret. Indeed, the real secret here lies in never knowing whether the secret involved is conditional or unconditional, whether the sincerity of the "older guys" involves motive or intent. This constitutive openness to the possibility of what Derrida terms "the best and the worst" means that the secret beyond representation requires a blind response from the other to legitimate it; in "Octet," this other is the actual reader of the text. Far from the drive to "mastery" that Tom LeClair has argued marks the greatest American postmodernist fiction, Wallace's double bind in "Octet" allows only a "completely naked helpless pathetic sincerity" (131), a weak appeal to the reader to look beyond the text's self-conscious pre-empting of its own reception.¹⁰ It is only this reader (rather than the writer Wallace addresses as "you") who will "be able to tell [what] you're doing; even if she can't articulate it she'll know if you're just trying to save your own belletristic ass by manipulating her—trust me on this" (132n9). The last four words of this phrase are vital, because they repeat the maneuver of reinscribing trust in the very place where knowledge is claimed. This is why "Octet" must end with the demand, or appeal,

¹⁰ LeClair claims that the "massive novels" of the postmodernist generation "master the time, the methods of fiction, and the reader" (*The Art Of Excess* 1). Their role is to "judge us, our minds and memories and membership of American life" (2). The fiction of the New Sincerity promotes an entirely different model of writer-reader relations. In Wallace's terms, this difference is perhaps best understood through the distinction he makes in "Authority and American Usage" between the Logical Appeal and the Ethical Appeal. The latter, which accounts for the "genius" of Bryan A. Garner's *Dictionary of Modern American Usage*, and also characterizes Wallace's own genius, is explained thus: "What the Ethical Appeal amounts to is a complex and sophisticated 'Trust me.' It's the boldest, most ambitious, and also most democratic of rhetorical Appeals because it requires the rhetor to convince us not just of his intellectual acuity or technical competence but of his basic decency and fairness and sensitivity to the audience's own hopes and fears" (*Lobster* 77). This unremitting consideration of the reader's position accounts for Wallace's lack of complacency, his recognition that the gift of trust is always open to abuse, and his conscious fear that humility can shade into self-regard at any moment (or even that humility might already be a form of self-regard, as when Geoffrey Day tells Don Gately of his abhorrence of "this AA tactic of masking condescension behind humility" [*Jest* 1001]).

"So decide" (136). Even though this phrase is directed, diary-like, at the writer's self, it can only be answered by the reader, the text's true other. In the spiraling search for the truth of intentions, in an era when advertising, self-promotion and irony are endemic, the endpoint to the infinite jest of consciousness can only be the reader's choice whether or not to place trust and Blind Faith. In Wallace's terms, the greatest terror, but also the only true relief, is the passive decision to relinquish the self to the judgment of the other, and the fiction of the New Sincerity is thus structured and informed by this dialogic appeal to the reader's attestation and judgment.

In a pithy formulation, Steven Connor has quipped that "[b]eing modernist always meant not quite realizing that you were so," whereas "[b]eing postmodernist always involved the awareness that you were so" (10). Within these terms, I would suggest, being a "post-postmodernist" of Wallace's generation means never quite being sure whether you are one, whether you have really managed to escape narcissism, solipsism, irony and insincerity. Again, this uncertainty is structural, allowing as it does for a genuine futurity that only the reader can provide. Hence Zadie Smith, in her introduction to a recent collection of stories by Wallace and his contemporaries, is right when she claims that their texts are primarily "attempting to make something happen off the page, outside words, a curious thing for a piece of writing to want to do" (Introduction xx). It is only by invoking this future off the page that dialogue can be engaged, and that both reader and writer can be challenged by the dialogic dimension of the reading experience. This call for a two-way conversation characterizes not only Wallace's work, but all the fiction of the New Sincerity. For example, Richard Powers, perhaps the most scientifically-focused of major post-boomer writers, has nonetheless described reading as "a kind of secular prayer, a conversation you hold with someone whose world is not yours" (Interview, Bookworm). Similarly, Michael Chabon has argued for the reclamation of the term "entertainment" from its "narrow, debased" connotation of passivity, to serve instead as "a two-way exchange of attention, experience, and the universal hunger for connection" (14, 17). In the work of younger writers whom Wallace has influenced, these dialogic concerns abound. For instance, Joshua Ferris's novel *Then We Came to the End* only breaks with its first-person

plural narrative "we" in its revelatory final two lines—"We were the only two left. Just the two of us, you and me" (385)—while in Benjamin Kunkel's debut *Indecision*, a coming-of-age novel that can be read as tracing his generation's turn from authenticity to sincerity, Eden is described at the end of the novel as a place where there is no third person, where there is "Only you and I, I and you" (203). This direct acknowledgement of reader by writer, and vice versa, is captured by the final line of Dave Eggers's *What is the What*: "All the while I will know that you are there. How can I pretend that you do not exist? It would be almost as impossible as you pretending that I do not exist" (535). Or as Wallace himself once put it: "Some [contemporary writers] are involved in transactions requiring genius, but it seems to me to be sort of required on both sides" (Interview, Bookworm 2000). Note the language here: reading is a transaction, an economy like any other in which goods are sold and received, but at the same time an element of genius allows the transaction to go beyond the economic, into the realm of the gift of sincerity. Like sincerity, this genius must remain a secret beyond representation, beyond theoretical definition, tied as it is to the very excess of writing itself. As Derrida remarked, in a line that could have been written for Wallace: "Sometimes theoretical arguments as such, even if they are in the form of critique, are less 'destabilizing,' or let's just say alarming, for 'metaphysical assumptions' than one or other 'way of writing'" ("Strange Institution" 50). Wallace's "way of writing," and his reconfiguration of the writer-reader relationship, displaces metaphysics while retaining a love of truth, a truth now associated with the possibility of a reconceived, and renewed, sincerity.

"Quote unquote love... a type of scotopia": David Foster Wallace's *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*

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In this paper I would like to attempt a brief reading of David Foster Wallace's "Brief Interviews with Hideous Men #20," the fourth and last homonymous short story from his homonymous collection of short stories. A love story—a story about a love story, to be more precise; the narrative of a love narrative/the narrative that is love, quote unquote; and as such, I would like to argue, an exemplary (if there is one), a proper "love story."

For "love" is surely not a proper name; it is just a banal, corny testimony to an irreducible, ungraspable experience. Of course, there is no such thing as "real" love; surely, every "I love you" is essentially pornographic. "The most worn down of stereotypes... [E]very other night, on TV, someone says: *I love you*," as Roland Barthes notes with exasperation (*A Lover's Discourse* 151). "Love" is nothing but a fabrication, a figure, an invention if you will; *it is a story—untruth.*

David Foster Wallace, however, will not make do with a postmodern cynicism that self-righteously proclaims the end of propriety, purity, intentionality, meaning, truth and so forth. In fact, as we shall see, his whole work is constituted out of just this resistance: to irony, to debasement, to a nauseous, abysmal self-reflection, to the veneration of the hollowness of language—in short, to the mandates of his intellectual inheritance. Wallace will rather speak of "love," of "what it really feels like," because he knows it is only that, the recital of love, a story, a declaration of love, here and now, which preserves its possibility. Too intelligent and too sincere to claim he can somehow hold on to or salvage love's authenticity, its "genuine" signified, Wallace will nevertheless choose to yield to this dreadful void, to immerse himself in the impossible. He knows that a face-off with the dreadful, unconditional assumption of one's fundamental loneliness