

# Getting Away From It All: The Literary Journalism of David Foster Wallace and Nietzsche's Concept of Oblivion

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*Wallace, best known for the novel Infinite Jest, greatly admired literary journalism's power to keep both practitioners and readers alert, curious, and conscious of the world. Yet the literary journalism he himself produced must be understood within the context of what Nietzsche termed 'oblivion'*

On a dry Saturday morning in late May 2005, the writer David Foster Wallace delivered the commencement address to the graduating class at Kenyon College in central Ohio. He sought to tell them why their liberal arts degree had “actual human value instead of just a material payoff.” For Wallace that value lay not in the old cliché of learning how to think, but rather in learning how to exercise control over what to think about: “It means being conscious and aware enough to choose what you pay attention to and to choose how you construct meaning from experience. Because if you cannot or will not exercise this kind of choice in adult life, you will be totally hosed.”<sup>1</sup> The speech, both colloquial and compassionate, was the clearest articulation of a philosophy that guided Wallace's writing and life.

A little more than three years later, on a warm September evening, Wallace went into the backyard of his home in Claremont, California, bound his hands with duct tape, and hanged himself from his deck. He was forty-six years old.

In the weeks and months that followed his death, remembrances and tributes abounded online and in print. *The Guardian* of London called him “the most brilliant American writer of his generation.”<sup>2</sup> *The New York Times* said the same.<sup>3</sup> Author Jonathan Franzen told the audience at one of the four public memorials given for Wallace, that he was “as passionate and precise a punctuator of prose as has ever walked this earth.”<sup>4</sup> Most notably, David Lipsky of *Rolling Stone* and *The New Yorker's* D. T. Max each produced lengthy and well-received profiles that led to book deals to write biographies of Wallace.<sup>5</sup> Rather than hagiographic, these posthumous accolades were actually a continuation of the praise that Wallace received during his literary career.

Wallace is perhaps best known for his second novel, the one-thousand-seventy-nine-page *Infinite Jest*, published when he was thirty-four years old. Critics at the time called the novel “a genuine work of genius” and described Wallace as a “writer of virtuosic talents who can seemingly do anything.”<sup>6</sup> They greeted his collections of nonfiction with equal enthusiasm, often noting their irreverence. Reviewers described *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* as a collection of “vivid, hilarious essays” and “irrefutable proof of his comic genius.”<sup>7</sup> Equally, Wallace garnered praise for “holding up the high comic tradition—passed down from Sterne to Swift to Pynchon” with the publication of his second collection of nonfiction, *Consider the Lobster*.<sup>8</sup>

As these critics make clear, Wallace greatly influenced the direction of American fiction and nonfiction during the past twenty years. But none of the past reviews or current obituaries

describe his magazine and newspaper stories as literary journalism. Although this omission may point more to a mainstream marginalization of the term rather than a willful oversight on behalf of critics, it is nonetheless important to understand that Wallace wrote in the tradition of the literary journalist, because the form and its field of study provide a whole catalogue of approaches to understanding his stories in relation to his reviews, speeches, and essays. Specifically, Norman Sims has said, “[L]iterary journalists recognize the need for a consciousness on the page through which the objects in view are filtered.”<sup>9</sup> Wallace was awash in this consciousness; in fact, it is the defining feature of his literary journalism. It compelled him to be curious and caused him to chronicle nearly everything he encountered.

Although Wallace himself never commented explicitly about literary journalism, there is evidence that he knew the form, and that he regarded it highly. In his introduction, as guest editor of *The Best American Essays 2007*, he cited Mark Danner’s story, “Iraq: The War of the Imagination,” as one of several pieces of literary journalism in the collection. He lumped many of these stories with other essays into a subgenre he called the “‘service essay,’ with ‘service’ here referring to both professionalism and virtue . . . but what renders them most valuable to me is a special kind of integrity in their handling of fact. An absence of dogmatic cant.”<sup>10</sup> For Wallace, such journalistic dependability was in woefully short supply. In a 2003 interview with Dave Eggers, he lamented that “there’s no more complex, messy, community-wide argument (or ‘dialogue’); political discourse is now a formulaic matter of preaching to one’s own choir and demonizing the opposition. . . . How can any of this possibly help me, the average citizen, deliberate” about any number of complicated policy issues?<sup>11</sup> Of course, not all literary journalism attempts or achieves this service, but Wallace believed that stories which did, helped readers live the type of conscious life that he advocated in his Kenyon speech. He called the stories he selected for the collection “models—not templates, but models—of ways I wish I could think and live in what seems to me this world.”<sup>12</sup>

Wallace’s beliefs about this style of writing are congruent with what some of the leading scholars in the field have said about the power and purpose of literary journalism. In a foundational statement, Sims wrote, “Whether or not literary journalism equips me for living differently than other forms of literature, I read it as if it might.”<sup>13</sup> Later, in his historiography of the form, John Hartsock claimed that literary journalism’s “purpose is to narrow the distance between subjectivity and the object, not divorce them.”<sup>14</sup> And most recently, Kathy Roberts Forde promoted the idea that literary journalism realizes a Deweyian relationship between art and politics: “To my way of thinking, the American profession of journalism would better serve democratic ends by giving up its quixotic claim of representing ‘objective truth’ in news reports and working instead toward the discovery and presentation of pragmatic truth (or truths).”<sup>15</sup> Wallace both affirmed and practiced these ideas in his own journalism. His reporting does not simply chronicle who, what, when, and where; rather, it examines the larger cultural assumptions and significances imbued within a topic.<sup>16</sup> He believed in the power that Sims identifies. He abided by Hartsock’s purpose. And he sought the type of contingent truth, and its attendant political consequences, that Forde advocated. The paradox, unfortunately, is that while Wallace was professionally and politically compelled to ask and interpret, he was also personally troubled by much of what he encountered. What made him a great journalist also caused him great anxiety.

Moreover, I submit that the best way to understand that anxiety—which is to say, the best way to understand his journalism—is to view it through the lens of Friedrich

Nietzsche's idea of 'oblivion,' defined in his second essay of *The Genealogy of Morals* as "an active screening device, responsible for the fact that what we experience and digest psychologically does not, in the stage of digestion, emerge into consciousness any more than what we ingest physically."<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche is useful here because Wallace's journalism displays his extreme consciousness, both in the details of the observable world and the impressions they make on his psyche. Often, he was plagued by what he could not let go. And his stories are beset by digressions and introspections—most of which are collected in footnotes. He suffered from an absence of oblivion, whose active role, according to Nietzsche, is "that of a concierge: to shut temporarily the doors and windows of consciousness; to protect us from the noise and agitation ... to introduce a little quiet into our consciousness."<sup>18</sup> But as a journalist, Wallace's job was to collect and organize the noise and agitation of the phenomenal world.

For example, reporting from the 2003 Maine Lobster Festival for *Gourmet* magazine, Wallace faces a question that he says is unavoidable: "Is it alright to boil a sentient creature alive just for our gustatory pleasure?"<sup>19</sup> He admits that addressing this question opens up a Pandora's box of related concerns that are not only complex, but uncomfortable, especially for anyone, himself included, who "enjoys a variety of foods and yet does not want to see herself as cruel and unfeeling."<sup>20</sup> Wallace confesses that his main way of dealing with conflicts, such as this one, is to dissociate, to "avoid thinking about the whole unpleasant thing."<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, his professional obligation trumps his attempts at oblivion and since the "assigned subject of this article is what it's like to attend the 2003 Maine Lobster Festival ... it turns out there is no honest way to avoid certain moral questions."<sup>22</sup> If dissociation brings peace, then journalism brings pain, as Wallace admitted years later, saying, "Writing-wise, fiction is scarier, but non-fiction is harder—because nonfiction's based in reality, and today's felt reality is overwhelmingly, circuit-blowingly huge and complex."<sup>23</sup> But as a journalist he must explore that reality, and his stories bear the marks of that processes psychic pain.

That story, "Consider the Lobster," is one of the eleven pieces of literary journalism, among dozens of other works of nonfiction that Wallace authored in his lifetime.<sup>24</sup> Although the topics ranged widely from the Adult Video News Awards, which he covered for the now-defunct *Premiere* magazine, to riding the Straight Talk Express for *Rolling Stone* during John McCain's failed bid for the 2000 Republican presidential nomination, the trope that structures these stories is escape, which, for Wallace, was tantamount to sadness. Pornography is sad: "Much of the cold, dead, mechanical quality of adult films is attributable, really, to the performers' faces."<sup>25</sup> Politics is sad: "Modern politicians make us sad, hurt us deep down in ways that are hard even to name, much less talk about."<sup>26</sup> Sports are sad: "Midwest junior tennis was also my initiation into true adult sadness."<sup>27</sup> And vacations are sad: "There is something about a mass-market Luxury Cruise that's unbearably sad."<sup>28</sup> All of these subjects involve supplanting everyday reality with fantasy, which Wallace believed was a too-common American phenomenon.

Vacations are the most literal embodiment of that escape trope, and Wallace wrote three stories exploring it. Along with the aforementioned "Consider the Lobster," which he wrote for *Gourmet* in 2003, Wallace also penned pieces on the 1994 Illinois State Fair ("Getting Away From Already Being Pretty Much Away From It All"), and a 1996 Caribbean cruise ("A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again") for *Harper's*.<sup>29</sup> David Lipsky called the two *Harper's* stories "some of the most famous pieces of journalism of the past decade and a half."<sup>30</sup> Vacations for Wallace are not relaxing. He describes them as "radically constricting

and humbling in the hardest way.”<sup>31</sup> The point of a vacation is to escape the everyday, to be oblivious to the attendant concerns and responsibilities of daily life, which is something Wallace is both unwilling and unable to do. Consequently, he believes mass tourists are “alien, ignorant, greedy for something you cannot ever have, disappointed in a way you can never admit.”<sup>32</sup> The key to understanding this contempt comes in that second adjective: ignorant. To be ignorant is to lack consciousness, which is why vacationers cannot admit their disappointment: they cannot perceive it. But for Wallace a lack of consciousness has larger ramifications. To get away from it all is to abdicate a moral responsibility, to dire effect. In 2007, he wrote, “We are in a state of three-alarm emergency—‘we’ basically meaning America as a polity and culture.” He believed such an emergency would not have happened “if we had been paying attention and handling information in a competent grown-up way.”<sup>33</sup>

This imperative to be present is a clear thread that runs through all of Wallace’s nonfiction, from his reviews, speeches, and essays, to his literary journalism. For instance, the people in all three of his vacation stories indulge in escapism. They have allowed oblivion to close the door on their consciousness and in exchange they are happy—or at least believe they are happy. Rural Midwesterners get away from their isolated existences by flocking to public events like state fairs to share in community and celebrate land.<sup>34</sup> Passengers aboard the Zenith luxury cruise ship—which Wallace immediately rechristens the Nadir, an ironic joke that loses its humor in the aftermath of his suicide—get away from their landlocked worries via onboard pampering and “Managed Fun,” which infantilizes them to a preconscious state.<sup>35</sup> And carnivores at the Maine Lobster Festival indulge gourmet fantasies by consuming discounted lobster en masse and thus lose their class consciousness.

Each embodiment of escape, however, unsettles Wallace. Unconsciousness leads to group-think, gluttony, and self-delusion. He notes that the fairgoers exhibit a herd-like quality as they unconsciously react to the fair’s various stimuli. Cruise passengers mistake pampering for actual human compassion, and, worse, are never satisfied with the amount of indulgences they receive. And lobster eaters attain a false sense of taste (and class) because they deny the essential questions at the heart of the gourmet experience.

Despite these perditions, the vacationers’ countenance is unchanged because the very structure of these vacations discourages awareness. Of the “Managed Fun” aboard the Nadir, Wallace notes bitterly: “They’ll micromanage every iota of every pleasure-option so that not even the dreadful corrosive action of your own adult consciousness and agency and dread can fuck up your fun. Your troublesome capacities for choice, error, regret, dissatisfaction, and despair will be removed from the equation.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, the vacationers are unaware and unbothered by these contradictions. Wallace, however, is aware of them and feels doubly burdened. He is not only troubled by their lack of consciousness, but the excess of his own weighs on him. During his cruise, Wallace becomes agitated by the insincerity of the staff’s “Professional Smile,” the affected disposition that he calls “the pandemic of the service industry.” He spends three hundred twenty-two words in a footnote chronicling not only the despair-inducing effects of its insincerity, but also how its absence now causes him psychic harm. He wends through various hypothetical situations to reach the conclusion that “the Professional Smile has now even skewed my resentment at the dreaded Professional Scowl.” Clearly shaken by his mind’s capacity to dwell, Wallace ends the footnote despairingly: “What a fucking mess.”<sup>37</sup> This mess embodies what Nietzsche makes clear: a surfeit of consciousness is unhealthy.<sup>38</sup> He wrote, “The concierge maintains order and etiquette in the household of the psyche;

which immediately suggests that there can be no happiness, no serenity, no hope, no pride, no present, without oblivion.<sup>39</sup>

One can find further evidence of the paralyzing effects of consciousness in Wallace's sports journalism. Wallace wrote one essay that is almost a memoir ("Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley"), one book review ("How Tracy Austin Broke My Heart"), and three pieces of literary journalism ("Tennis Player Michael Joyce's Professional Artistry as a Paradigm of Certain Stuff About Choice, Freedom, Discipline, Joy, Grotesquerie, and Human Completeness"; "Democracy and Commerce at the U.S. Open"; and "Roger Federer as Religious Experience") about tennis, which he told *Salon.com* was "the one sport I know enough about for it to be beautiful to me."<sup>40</sup> In all of these pieces, Wallace belabors the point of the sport's difficulty, but he identifies a trait that he believes allows top-tier players to perform at such a high level: like the happy vacationers, successful tennis pros possess an ability to suspend consciousness. He is fascinated by the fact that top athletes bypass their head and simply act. For example, in a footnote in "Tennis Player Michael Joyce..." Wallace admits that he is "kind of awed by Joyce's evident ability to shut down lines of thinking that aren't to his advantage."<sup>41</sup> Wallace himself was a regionally ranked junior tennis player growing up outside of Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, but he said the experience "was also my initiation into true adult sadness."<sup>42</sup> This sadness occurred because he lacked Joyce's ability to close out all distractions; consequently, he never excelled beyond that level. In his review of Austin's book he included a sample meditation on how hard it is not to be consumed by one's thoughts while under both the pressure of an important moment and the gaze of a watchful audience: "Don't think about it ... yeah but except if I'm consciously not thinking about it then doesn't part of me have to think about it in order for me to remember what I'm not supposed to think about ... shut up, quit thinking about it and serve the goddamn ball."<sup>43</sup> Wallace knew what it took to be a great tennis player, but he could not replicate it in himself. He possessed the physical, but not the psychic ability to excel; his lack of oblivion always got in the way.<sup>44</sup> Conversely, while oblivion helps athletes perform, Wallace also believes it prevents them from offering any meaningful insight into their own achievements. He concludes that "blindness and dumbness" are not the price for great athletic gifts, but are actually "its essence," and to write well is to be aware and have access to one's consciousness, and to present honestly life with all its flaws and imperfections; Austin does not have this and Wallace skewers her in a review of her autobiography.<sup>45</sup>

Wallace's excess of consciousness presents itself stylistically in the form of footnotes, which may be the most outwardly identifiable aspect of both his nonfiction and fiction.<sup>46</sup> When considered as literary journalism, Wallace's appropriation of this academic practice broadens the definitional characteristics of the genre, which also include "immersion reporting, complicated story structures, character development, symbolism, voice, a focus on ordinary people ... and accuracy."<sup>47</sup> The notes become an embodiment of those other characteristics; within them Wallace is able to achieve and accentuate each individual feature. At the same time, the notes allow Wallace to mirror his vision of American culture in his writing style:

There's a way, it seems to me, that reality is fractured right now, at least the reality I live; the difficulty about writing about that reality is that text is very linear, it's very unified. I, anyway, am constantly on the lookout for ways to fracture

the text that aren't totally disorienting. I mean, you can take the lines and jumble them up and that's nicely fractured, but nobody's going to read it, right? So, there's got to be some interplay how difficult you make it for the reader and how seductive it is for the reader to do it.<sup>48</sup>

Some critics, however, argued that the numerous footnotes were arrogant and evidence that Wallace needed a better editor.<sup>49</sup> The point that these critics miss, however, is that Wallace could have easily integrated many of the footnotes into the body of his main text. By designating them as notes, he not only complicates the narrative story structure, but he also indicates that they are pieces of information that are important, but not integral. In other words, remnants of his consciousness that he cannot part with. Wallace told Charlie Rose that the "footnotes get very, very addictive and it's almost like having a second voice in your head."<sup>50</sup> They illustrate his physical need, and psychic inability, to not only chronicle, but also interpret all of the stimuli he encounters during his reporting. He once told a reporter that he "received 500,000 discrete bits of information today, of which maybe 25 are important. My job is to make some sense of it."<sup>51</sup> It is a job whose responsibility becomes greater when it is institutionalized by a magazine assignment. Nietzsche characterizes this overtime as a desire for perfectionism. He said people without oblivion "can't be done with anything," but not in a way that is "purely passive succumbing to past impressions"; rather, they exhibit "active not wishing to be done with it."<sup>52</sup> In short, the footnotes exemplify Wallace's inability to be done with anything.

Nietzsche was a trained philologist who scrutinized etymologies in order to unmask firmly held truths and meta-narratives (and in that sense, he was a forerunner of deconstruction and postmodern philosophy). Wallace shared that obsession with genealogies and was, in fact, considered by many as his generation's foremost practitioner of postmodern aesthetics.<sup>53</sup> But despite having a philosophy degree and not being shy about incorporating past thinkers into his work, he only mentioned Nietzsche once in all of his nonfiction.<sup>54</sup> It comes in a parenthetical aside, embedded in the fourteenth footnote, in his review of literary scholar Joseph Franks's five-book study of Fyodor Dostoevsky. But the note is instructive. Wallace writes, "[I]n our own culture of 'enlightened atheism' we are very much Nietzsche's children, his ideological heirs."<sup>55</sup> When Wallace says we are all "Nietzsche's children," he is referring to an atomized culture where individuals eschew meta-narratives and will their ethical belief systems. But Wallace makes it clear in his Kenyon speech that such "enlightened atheism" is, in fact, a false prophet: "In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship." For Wallace, it is important to revere "some spiritual-type thing" and not material, ideological, or status gods because "anything else you worship will eat you alive.... It's the truth." This earnest appeal for "keeping the truth up front in daily consciousness" is actually an antidote to the irony that Wallace felt was pervasive and corrosive in American literature and culture, causing him to wonder "why we seem to require of our art an ironic distance from deep convictions or desperate questions."<sup>56</sup> Early in his writing career Wallace noted that irony is "not a rhetorical mode that wears well" because it "serves an almost exclusively negative function. It's critical and destructive; a ground clearing.... But irony's singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks."<sup>57</sup> Equally, irony is not a useful tool in his literary

journalism. If the entire point is to write “stuff about what it feels like to live, instead of being a relief from what it feels like to live”<sup>58</sup> then irony is, in fact, an impediment to that goal because it widens that gulf between subjectivity and its object.

It is perhaps ironic that Wallace argues so vehemently against irony because many critics felt that it was the defining feature of his literary aesthetic.<sup>59</sup> And while his short stories and novels do exhibit a fractured style and an arch, self-knowing tone, such an overarching label is an easy caricature. It conflates style with content and disregards ideology, whether latent or manifest. Moreover, Wallace’s nonfiction is decidedly not postmodern, ironic, or avant garde. Although it does share the same maximalist writing style as his fiction, and utilizes rhetorical techniques like parody and pastiche, the narratives are also linear, realistic, and, most importantly, earnest. For example, near the end of his story about John McCain’s 2000 presidential run, Wallace stops the article “for a quick *Rolling Stone* PSA” in which he directly addresses young voters:

If you are bored and disgusted by politics and don’t bother to vote, you are in effect voting for the entrenched Establishments of the two major parties, who please rest assured are not dumb, and who are keenly aware that it is in their interests to keep you disgusted and bored and cynical and to give you every possible psychological reason to stay at home doing one-hitters and watching MTV on primary day. By all means stay at home if you want, but don’t bullshit yourself that you’re not voting. In reality, there is *no such thing as not voting*; you either vote by voting, or you vote by staying home and tacitly doubling the value of some Diehard’s vote.<sup>60</sup>

This public service announcement is decidedly unironic and exemplifies the ideological gravity that undergirds Wallace’s journalism.

In a 2006 interview in Italy, Wallace described his writing style as “using postmodern techniques, postmodern aesthetic but using that to discuss or represent very old traditional human verities that have to do with spirituality and emotion and community and ideas that the avant-garde would consider very old-fashioned so that there’s a kind of melding, it’s using postmodern formal techniques for very traditional ends, if there is group . . . that’s the group I want to belong to.”<sup>61</sup> This distinction helps explain why one critic called Wallace an “old-fashioned moralist in postmodern disguise all along.”<sup>62</sup> Still, I would argue that the disguise was as much a projection by critics as it was a cloak to cover Wallace’s true intentions. Both modern and postmodern writers have examined fractured cultural landscapes. The difference is that “the modernist laments fragmentation, while the postmodernist celebrates it.”<sup>63</sup> And Wallace makes it clear throughout his literary journalism that he is not at all happy to be witnessing the events that he does. Of his onboard experience during the Caribbean cruise, Wallace wrote: “I have felt as bleak as I’ve felt since puberty,” later adding, “there’s something deeply mind-fucking about the Type-A-personality service and pampering on the *Nadir*.”<sup>64</sup> And yet, those comments and that story do not come across as smug or condescending. During a radio interview about his Caribbean cruise Wallace explained how “it’s very easy just to be mean. Let’s make some very easy, mordant comments about Sybaritic pleasure and commercial American culture.”<sup>65</sup> Instead, Wallace displayed a strong fidelity to the reader by casting himself as complicit in culture. He spells his writing philosophy out

clearly in letters he wrote to Anne Fadiman's (herself a literary journalist) creative nonfiction writing class at Yale. In two of the letters, published posthumously in *Harper's*, Wallace once again emphasizes his obligation to his readers:

Maybe the root challenge here is to form and honor a fairly rigorous contract with the reader, one that involves honesty and unblinkingness (if the latter's a word). So that the reader gets the overall impression that here's a narrator who's primarily engaged in trying to Tell the Truth . . . and if that truth involves the putziness of other people or events, so be it, but if it involves the narrator's own schmuckiness, limitations, prejudices, foibles, screw-ups at the event, etc., then these get told too—because the truth-as-seen is the whole project here (as opposed to just mockery, or just self-ridicule, or just self-superiority, etc.).<sup>66</sup>

Wallace's commitment to an empathetic awareness of the humanness of himself and his subjects epitomizes Thomas B. Connery's belief that "literary journalism attempts to show readers life and human behavior, even if what actually emerges is life's incomprehensibility and the inexplicability of human behavior."<sup>67</sup>

The literary journalists whom Wallace most closely resembles are Hunter S. Thompson and Joan Didion. Wallace shares Thompson's dark worldview and manic prose style. Thompson's 1970 piece, "The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved," chronicles "the inexplicability of human behavior" in much the same way as Wallace's later stories about the state fair and his Caribbean cruise. Similarly, Wallace shares Didion's eye for the revealing detail sharp as well as her personal dread. In much the same way that Didion's *The White Album* chronicles the peculiarly personal anomie of the 1960s, Wallace's journalism of the last two decades examines the "lostness" of Generation X.<sup>68</sup>

In his taxonomic essay, "The New Journalism and the Image-World," David Eason categorizes Thompson and Didion as modernists in contrast to realist writers like Tom Wolfe and Gay Talese. According to Eason, "[R]ealism assures its readers that traditional ways of making sense still apply in society," whereas modernist texts "describe the inability of traditional cultural distinctions to order experience."<sup>69</sup> Extending Eason's classification beyond the 1960s, and continuing my earlier argument that he is not postmodern, I would also place Wallace in that modernist camp. Similar to Connery's description, Wallace had little faith that his observations or interpretations would reveal a larger symbolic truth. He once said that writing fiction (and presumably nonfiction) is "about what it is to be a fucking human being."<sup>70</sup> And humanity does not always make sense.

As Sims has written: Literary journalism stands as "a humanistic approach to culture as compared to the scientific, abstract, or indirect approach taken by much standard journalism."<sup>71</sup> Such an understanding helps explain why pieces such as "Consider the Lobster" are more than just individual digressions packed around a central journalistic purpose: "Consider the Lobster" is as much about defining what it means to be a gourmet as it is about animal rights. Although he goes to great lengths to discuss the neurological, bioethical, and philosophical factors that come into play when deciding the ethics of cooking lobsters, he ultimately leaves the matter unresolved—except to resign and say that the decision is still, ultimately, up to an individual's principles. (And that lackluster



conclusion doesn't come until the second paragraph of footnote twenty, two pages from the article's end.) For Wallace, the bigger question is whether or not we should think about these matters at all; whether we should be conscious. He ends the essay with a series of earnest rhetorical questions directed at *Gourmet* readers. "After all," he asks, "isn't being extra aware and attentive and thoughtful about one's food and its overall context part of what distinguishes a real gourmet?"<sup>72</sup> Here Wallace elevates taste to the level of consciousness—and it's not hard to make the leap from that question to the larger ontological question: Isn't questioning everything the essence of what it means to be alive? But just as soon as he raises the proposition he resigns and ends the piece by saying, "There are limits to what even interested persons can ask of each other."<sup>73</sup> Translation: Although these questions may be important, he recognizes that it's too much to ask readers, much less vacationers, to also shed their oblivion.<sup>74</sup>

Wallace's death sent critics and fans alike scrambling back to his texts in search of clues and explanations. But this is a mistake. I abide by *New York Times* critic A. O. Scott's admonition that "the temptation to regard Mr. Wallace's suicide last weekend as anything other than a private tragedy must be resisted." But, Scott admits, "the strength of the temptation should nonetheless be acknowledged. Mr. Wallace was hardly one to conceal himself within his work; on the contrary, his personality is stamped on every page—so much so that the life and the work can seem not just connected but continuous."<sup>75</sup> This is no truer than in his literary journalism, as he told Lipsky: "The *Harper's* pieces were me peeling back my skull. You know, welcome to my mind for 20 pages, see through my eyes."<sup>76</sup>

It is easy to see this anxiety and sadness in Wallace's stories now that he is dead. But the despair, of course, like his decades-long battle with clinical depression, was there all along. And Wallace, in fact, did little to hide it. In this regard, Wallace's two biographers Lipsky and Max misread his non-fiction in their profiles. Lipsky said, "[T]he difference between the fiction and the nonfiction reads as the difference between Wallace's social self and his private self. The essays were endlessly charming.... Wallace's fiction, especially *Infinite Jest*, would turn chilly, dark, abstract. You could imagine the author of the fiction sinking into a depression. The non-fiction writer was an impervious sun."<sup>77</sup> And early in his profile, Max claimed that "depression often figured in his work." He then cited copious details from one alarmingly sad short story called "The Depressed Person." As a counterpoint, Max added: "He never published a word about his own mental illness."<sup>78</sup> While technically correct, it is inaccurate to say that his depression was not apparent in Wallace's nonfiction. For example, early in "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again" he devotes an entire section to explaining how being on the ship leaves him suicidal:

The word's overused and banalified now, despair, but it's a serious word, and I'm using it seriously. For me it denotes a simple admixture—a weird yearning for death combined with a crushing sense of my own smallness and futility that presents as a fear of death. It's maybe close to what people call dread or angst. But it's not these things, quite. It's more like wanting to die in order to escape the unbearable feeling of becoming aware that I'm small and weak and selfish and going without any doubt at all to die. It's wanting to jump overboard.<sup>79</sup>

Often, though, Wallace supplanted his anguish in both the readers' and reviewers' minds by

his unexpected description (for example, at the state fair he notes that horses' faces are "long and somehow suggestive of coffins"<sup>80</sup>), his humor (on the first night of his Caribbean cruise he confesses to an "atavistic shark fetish" and asks the wait staff for "a spare bucket of *au jus* drippings from supper so I could try chumming for sharks off the back rail of the top deck"<sup>81</sup>), and his intelligence (in Maine he says that solving the lobster question requires "metaphysics, epistemology, value theory, ethics"<sup>82</sup>). These are the descriptions that readers and critics remember, but it is equally important not to forget that, as Wallace told Charlie Rose, "[U]nfortunately a lot of [the stories] I think are about me."<sup>83</sup>

Wallace often attributed the source of his anxiety to his particular geography. He blames his unease at the fair to the fact that he is "not spiritually Midwestern anymore."<sup>84</sup> Aboard the *Nadir*, he sublimates his nervousness onto the ship's confined space and his semi-agoraphobia, and at the Maine Lobster Festival, he blames his unhappiness on his inability to understand why "so many people's idea of a fun vacation is to don flip-flops and sunglasses and crawl through maddening traffic to loud, hot, crowded tourist venues."<sup>85</sup> Perhaps a more accurate location for his disquietude rests in what he calls his "default setting, hardwired into our boards at birth."<sup>86</sup> In fact, Wallace alludes to his nervous psychological state in several stories. Early in "Getting Away From Pretty Much Already Being Away From It All" he half-jokingly admits that his neurological make-up is "extremely sensitive: carsick, airsick, height sick," before adding hauntingly, "my sister likes to say I'm 'life sick.'" What Wallace meant as a joking aside reveals, when probed, a "great and terrible truth." His sister, Amy Havens Wallace, told *Rolling Stone* that in high school her brother "pinned an article about Kafka to [his bedroom] wall, with the headline the DISEASE WAS LIFE ITSELF."<sup>87</sup> As an adult, Wallace taught and admired Kafka's literature. In 1998, he delivered a speech entitled "Laughing With Kafka" to the PEN American Center. In that speech Wallace claimed that the central joke in Kafka's fiction is "that the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle. That our endless and impossible journey toward home is in fact our home."<sup>89</sup> The joke, of course, is terrifying, and it does not take a substantial leap to recognize that the same paradox presided over Wallace's life and is reflected in his writing.

Although his journalism illustrates how despair results from consciousness, his Kenyon College commencement address argues that consciousness can also be a way to alter or get free "of my natural, hardwired, default setting."<sup>90</sup> Wallace begins his speech by retelling a familiar parable: Two young fish encounter an older fish swimming the opposite direction. He greets them, saying, "Morning, boys. How's the water?" The younger fish swim on for a bit and then one asks the other, "What the hell is water?" Wallace explains that the point of this story is to illustrate that "the most obvious, ubiquitous, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about." Wallace uses the rest of the speech to argue that the value of consciousness is to "keep from going through your comfortable, prosperous, respectable, adult life dead, unconscious, a slave to your head and to your natural default setting of being uniquely, completely, imperially alone day in and day out." He ends the speech by urging the students to cultivate simple awareness of the seemingly obvious; to repeat the incantation of the enlightened older fish: "This is water. This is water."<sup>91</sup>

But Wallace's advice takes on a darker resonance when it's read against his introduction to the 2007 edition of *Best American Essays*. Again imploring readers to be more conscious of their surroundings, Wallace invokes another water metaphor, this time to emphasize the

difficulty in processing all the information necessary to be a mindful, moral adult: “Or let’s not even mention the amount of research, background, cross-checking, corroboration, and rhetorical parsing required to understand [it all] . . . . There’s simply no way. You’d simply drown. We all would.”<sup>92</sup> This contradiction epitomizes the insufferable paradox of Wallace’s philosophical worldview: It is imperative to be conscious, but to be conscious is to be impaired.

In the end, two words resonate for Wallace more than any other: infinite and oblivion. These words not only factor into book and story titles, but also signify an ongoing tension in his work. They are the warring themes that bookend his prose. The endless, limitless, and immeasurable competing with the need to limit, close off, and forget. Infinite consciousness leads to an infinitesimal amount of oblivion.

Wallace reconciled these two forces, if only for a moment, at the end of his state fair story. In the original *Harper’s* publication, he ends the piece with a revelation that the real draw for fairgoers is not the rides and shows, but the crowd itself. In the collected essays edition, however, Wallace moved that insight to the middle of the story and instead allowed his final experience at the fair to resonate with the reader. The fact that Wallace changed the ending underscores the resonance of this final scene where he witnesses a thrill seeker being harnessed and hoisted into the air on a ride called the SKYCOASTER. A crane raises the man hundreds of feet off the ground, suspending him above the onlookers, before a clip is released and the man is dispatched to swing like a pendulum across the fairgrounds. The tension is too much for Wallace. Just before the man drops, Wallace dissociates. He closes his eyes. He confesses, “[J]ust then I lose my nerve, in my very last moment at the Fair . . . and I decline to be part of this, even as witness—and I find, again, in extremis, access to childhood’s other worst nightmare, the only sure way to obliterate all; and the sun and the sky and plummeting go out like a light.”<sup>93</sup> And that’s how the story ends. A foreshadow of a more lasting getaway, a more permanent oblivion.



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### Endnotes

1. David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water: Some Thoughts Delivered on a Significant Occasion, About Living a Compassionate Life* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009), 11, 55.
2. “Plain Old Untrendy Troubles and Emotions,” *The Guardian*, 20 September 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/sep/20/fiction>.

3. A. O. Scott, "The Best Mind of His Generation," *The New York Times*, 20 September 2008, [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/21/weekinreview/21scott.html?pagewanted=1&\\_r=1&hp](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/21/weekinreview/21scott.html?pagewanted=1&_r=1&hp).
4. Jonathan Franzen, "Tribute" (Presentation, "Celebrating the Life and Work of David Foster Wallace," Skirball Center for Performing Arts, New York University, 23 October 2008), collected in *Celebrating the Life and Work of David Foster Wallace*, [http://snevil.com/DFW/Memorial%20book/DFW\\_Memorial\\_1stpass.pdf](http://snevil.com/DFW/Memorial%20book/DFW_Memorial_1stpass.pdf).
5. Motoko Rich, "Another David Foster Wallace Biography Is Planned," *The New York Times*, 26 June 2009, <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/06/26/another-david-foster-wallace-biography-is-planned>. Also, Little, Brown and Company will publish Wallace's unfinished novel *The Pale King* in 2010. After his death, the company also collected and published Wallace's Kenyon speech in a devotional-sized hardcover and gave it the title, *This Is Water: Some Thoughts Delivered on a Significant Occasion About Living a Compassionate Life*.
6. Will Blythe, quoted in Frank Bruni, "The Grunge American Novel," *The New York Times*, March 24, 1996, <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/03/24/magazine/the-grunge-american-novel.html>. Michiko Kakutani, "A Country Dying of Laughter," *The New York Times*, 13 February 1996, <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/02/13/books/books-of-the-times-a-country-dying-of-laughter-in-1079-pages.html>.
7. Laura Miller, "The Road to Babbittville," *The New York Times*, 16 March 1997, <http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/03/16/reviews/970316.miller.html>. Adam Begley, dust jacket of *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments*.
8. Jeffrey Eugenides, dust jacket, *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays*.
9. Norman Sims, *True Stories: A Century of Literary Journalism* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 7.
10. David Foster Wallace, "Introduction: Deciderization 2007—A Special Report," in *The Best American Essays 2007*, ed. David Foster Wallace (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007), xxiii.
11. David Foster Wallace, interview with Dave Eggers, *The Believer*, November 2003, [http://www.believermag.com/issues/200311/?read=interview\\_wallace](http://www.believermag.com/issues/200311/?read=interview_wallace).
12. Wallace, "Introduction," xxiv.
13. Norman Sims, introduction to *The Literary Journalists*, ed. Norman Sims (New York: Ballantine Books, 1984), 6.
14. John C. Hartsock, *A History of American Literary Journalism: The Emergence of a Modern Narrative Form* (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 132.
15. Kathy Roberts Forde, *Literary Journalism on Trial: Masson v. New Yorker and the First Amendment* (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008), 205.

16. Wallace never considered himself a journalist (much less a political one), and he would often include his own reportorial ineptitude in his stories. For example, reporting from the Illinois State Fair he says, "I ask a kid to describe the taste of his Funnel Cake and he runs away." Later, while examining yearly prize-winning vegetable displays, he encounters a 17.6-pound zucchini. All he can say is, "One big zucchini, alright." These and other instances indicate to the reader that the traditional topics and tendencies of journalism fail to capture much beyond surface-level description. David Foster Wallace, "Getting Away From Already Being Pretty Much Away From It All" in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1997), 128. Readers of his Caribbean cruise article will find further evidence of Wallace's skepticism of conventional journalism. He begins the third section of that story with an anecdote about a sixteen-year-old man who had recently jumped to his death from an upper deck of a similar cruise ship. He concludes, "The news version was that it had been an unhappy adolescent love thing, a shipboard romance gone bad, etc. I think part of it was something else, something there's no way a real news story could cover." David Foster Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again," in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1997), 261.
17. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (New York: Anchor Books, 1956; reprint 1990), 189.
18. Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, 189.
19. David Foster Wallace, "Consider the Lobster," in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005), 243.
20. *ibid.*
21. *ibid.*
22. *ibid.*, 247.
23. Wallace, "Introduction," xiv.
24. In chronological order, those pieces are: "Getting Away From Already Being Pretty Much Away From It All," "Democracy and Commerce at the U.S. Open," "David Lynch Keeps His Head," "Tennis Player Michael Joyce's Professional Artistry as a Paradigm of Certain Stuff About Choice, Freedom, Discipline, Joy, Grotesquerie, and Human Completeness," "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again," "Big Red Son," "Up Simba: Seven Days on the Trail With an Anticandidate," "The View From Mrs. Thompson's," "Consider the Lobster," "Host," and "Federer as Religious Experience." All of these pieces, except "Democracy and Commerce at the U.S. Open" and "Federer as Religious Experience," are collected in either *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* or *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays*. Wallace revised and renamed nearly all of his nonfiction from its original publication form to its collected book form. He makes it clear on the copyright page of both books that he prefers the book versions of his pieces. In *Consider the Lobster* he writes, "The following pieces were originally published in edited, heavily edited, or (in at least one instance) bowdlerized form in the following books and periodicals." Therefore, all of my citations will refer to the book versions of his essays and journalism because they represent Wallace's vision for them.
25. David Foster Wallace, "Big Red Son," in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005), 17.

26. David Foster Wallace, "Up, Simba: Seven Days on the Trail of an Anticandidate," in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005), 187.
27. David Foster Wallace, "Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley," in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (New York, Little Brown and Company, 1997), 12.
28. Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing...*, 261.
29. Their respective *Harper's* titles are "Ticket to the Fair" and "Shipping Out: On the (Nearly Lethal) Comforts of a Luxury Cruise."
30. David Lipsky, "The Lost Years and Last Days of David Foster Wallace," *Rolling Stone*, 30 October 2008, [http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/23638511/the\\_lost\\_years\\_last\\_days\\_of\\_david\\_foster\\_wallace](http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/23638511/the_lost_years_last_days_of_david_foster_wallace).
31. *Ibid.*, 240.
32. *Ibid.*, 240.
33. Wallace, "Introduction," xxi.
34. Wallace, "Getting Away...," 108.
35. Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing...," 320.
36. *ibid.*, 267.
37. *ibid.*, 290.
38. Wallace once told Lipsky: "There's good self-consciousness, and then there's toxic, paralyzing, raped-by-psyche-Bedouins self-consciousness." Lipsky, "The Last Days...," [http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/23638511/the\\_lost\\_years\\_last\\_days\\_of\\_david\\_foster\\_wallace](http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/23638511/the_lost_years_last_days_of_david_foster_wallace).
39. Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, 189.
40. David Foster Wallace, interview with Laura Miller, *Salon.com*, 8 March 1996, <http://www.salon.com/09/features/wallace1.html>.
41. Wallace, "Tennis Player Michael Joyce's Professional Artistry as a Paradigm of Certain Stuff About Choice, Freedom, Discipline, Joy, Grotesquerie, and Human Completeness," in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1997), 222.
42. Wallace, "Derivative Sport..." 12.
43. David Foster Wallace, "How Tracy Austin Broke My Heart," in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005), 154.
44. This theme is also evident in Wallace's short story, "Good Old Neon," where the narrator responds to his analyst's question about whether he plays chess by saying, "I used to in middle school but quit because I couldn't be as good as I eventually wanted to be, how frustrating it was to get just good enough to know what getting really good at it would be like but not being able to get that good, etc." David Foster Wallace, "Good Old Neon" in *Oblivion* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2004), 146.
45. Wallace, "How Tracy Austin Broke My Heart," 155.
46. In fact, Wallace footnotes his footnotes and then occasionally appends those notes with asterisks and daggers and whole mini-essay interpolations.

47. Sims, *True Stories*, 6-7. Wallace, himself the son of two professors, believed that actual academic prose was the epitome of bad writing. In a footnote in his review Bryan Garner's *Modern American Usage*, he both excoriated and lampooned the genre: "The truth is that most of U.S. academic prose is appalling—pompous, abstruse, claustral, inflated, euphuistic, pleonastic, solectistic, sesquipedalian, Heliogabaline, occluded, obscure, jargon-ridden, empty: resplendently dead." David Foster Wallace, "Authority and American Usage," in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005), 81.
48. David Foster Wallace, interview with Charlie Rose, *The Charlie Rose Show*, 27 March 1997, <http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/5639>. Wallace had a tendency to repeat himself in his interviews, often drawing his responses from his written work. Several years after his appearance on *The Charlie Rose Show* he told Steve Paulson of the public radio program *To the Best of Our Knowledge*: "I often feel very fragmented and as if I have a symphony of different voices and voice overs and factoids going on all the time and digressions on digression on digressions. I know that people who don't much care for my stuff see a lot of the stuff as just sort of vomiting it out. That's at least my intent. What's hard is to seem very digressive and bent in on yourself and diffracted and also have there be patterns and significances about it and it takes a lot of drafts, but it probably comes out just looking like a manic, mad monologue." David Foster Wallace, interview with Steve Paulson, *To the Best of Our Knowledge*, 19 July 1998, <http://www.wpr.org/book/98book3.htm>.
49. "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again" contains one hundred thirty-seven footnotes in ninety-seven pages of text, while the three hundred eighty-eight endnotes in his novel *Infinite Jest* span ninety-six pages, leading Kakutani, in her *Times* review, to quote Henry James in calling the novel a "loose baggy monster."
50. Wallace, interview with Charlie Rose, <http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/5639>
51. Lipsky, "The Last Days..." [http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/23638511/the\\_lost\\_years\\_last\\_days\\_of\\_david\\_foster\\_wallace](http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/23638511/the_lost_years_last_days_of_david_foster_wallace).
52. Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, 190.
53. For a stunning example of Wallace's interest in, and command of U.S. lexicography, see his sixty-one-page review of Bryan A. Garner's *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* (Oxford University Press), first published in *Harper's* as "Tense Present: Democracy, English, and the Wars Over Usage" (April 2001) and then collected in *Consider the Lobster* as "Authority and American Usage."
54. The title of Wallace's senior philosophy thesis at Amherst is "Richard Taylor's 'Fatalism' and the Semantics of Physical Modality." That same year he also wrote a four-hundred-page novel for his senior English thesis in English, which later became his first novel, *The Broom of the System*.
55. David Foster Wallace, "Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky," in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005), 264.
56. Wallace, "Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky," 271.
57. David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1997), 67.
58. Lipsky, "The Last Days..." [http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/23638511/the\\_lost\\_years\\_last\\_days\\_of\\_david\\_foster\\_wallace](http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/23638511/the_lost_years_last_days_of_david_foster_wallace).

59. In her somewhat controversial review of *Infinite Jest*, Kakutani called Wallace a “pushing-the-envelope postmodernist.” In her “Appreciation” of him after his death she referenced his “mastery of postmodern pyrotechnics.” Michiko Kakutani, “Exuberant Riffs on a Land Run Amok,” *The New York Times*, 14 September 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/15/books/15kaku.html>.
60. David Foster Wallace, “Up Simba: Seven Days on the Trail of an Anticandidate,” in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005), 207.
61. David Foster Wallace, interview, *Le Conversazioni*, 2 July 2006, [http://www.leconversazioni.it/index.php?lingua=2&sezione=programma&evento=1&edizione=2&scheda=19&area=&ext ra=&page\\_news=1&page\\_multi=1](http://www.leconversazioni.it/index.php?lingua=2&sezione=programma&evento=1&edizione=2&scheda=19&area=&ext ra=&page_news=1&page_multi=1).
62. Pankaj Mishra, “The Postmodern Moralist,” *The New York Times*, 12 March 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/12/books/review/12mishra.html>.
63. Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1995), 84.
64. Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing . . .*, 258, 298.
65. Wallace, interview with Steve Paulson, <http://www.wpr.org/book/98book3.htm>.
66. David Foster Wallace, “It All Gets Quite Tricky,” *Harper’s*, November 2008, 32. In an interview with David Lipsky in the late 1990s, Wallace admitted that in his journalism, “There’s a certain persona created, that’s a little stupider and schmuckier than I am.” Yet his allegiance to the reader is real. In “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again” he spends a substantial amount of time criticizing the acclaimed author Frank Conroy for a promotional essay he wrote on behalf of the cruise ship. The Nadir’s brochure does not present the essay as an advertisement, but rather as an “authentic response” to his experience aboard. Part of what bothers Wallace is his admiration of Conroy, especially his memoir *Stop-Time*, which Wallace confesses “is one of the books that first made poor old yours truly want to try to be a writer.” Wallace finds Conroy’s essaymercial “graceful and lapidary and attractive and assuasive. I submit that it is also completely sinister and despair-producing and bad” because “an essay’s fundamental obligations are supposed to be to the reader. The reader, on however unconscious a level, understands this, and thus tends to approach an essay with a relatively high level of openness and credulity.” The essay is one more instance of the ship’s dubious advertisements which “don’t flatter your adult agency, or even ignore it—they supplant it.” The Conroy essay is a prime example of this loss of control. The attempt is to “micromanage not only one’s perception of a 7NC Luxury Cruise, but even one’s own interpretation and articulation of those perceptions. . . . As my week on the Nadir wore on, I began to see this essaymercial as a perfect ironic reflection of the mass-market-Cruise experience itself.” Wallace, “A Supposedly Fun Thing. . .,” 288-291.
67. Thomas B. Connery, *A Sourcebook of American Literary Journalism: Representative Writers in an Emerging Genre* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1992), 8.
68. In an interview with Laura Miller of *Salon.com*, Wallace described living in America at the turn of the millennium as “particularly sad . . . something that doesn’t have very much to do with physical circumstances, or the economy, or any of the stuff that gets talked about in the news. It’s more like stomach-level sadness. I see it in myself and my friends in different ways. It manifests itself as a kind of lostness.” Wallace, interview with Laura Miller, <http://www.salon.com/09/features/wallace1.html>.



69. David Eason, "The New Journalism and the Image-World," in *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Norman Sims (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990; reprint, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2008), 194.
70. Wallace, interview with Laura Miller, <http://www.salon.com/09/features/wallace1.html>.
71. Sims, *True Stories*, 12.
72. Wallace, *Consider the Lobster*, 254.
73. *Ibid.*, 257.
74. Wallace's conclusions at the Maine Lobster Festival are variations on a theme he chronicled earlier in his career. He came to the same conclusion during his Caribbean cruise: "Here's the thing: A vacation is a respite from unpleasantness, and since consciousness of death and decay are unpleasant, it may seem weird that Americans' ultimate fantasy vacation involves being plunked down in an enormous primordial engine of death and decay." Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing....," 263. He also believes it is also the reason that David Lynch's film *Fire Walk With Me* got terrible reviews: "It required of us an empathetic confrontation with the exact same muddy *bothness* in ourselves and our intimates that makes the real world of moral selves so tense and uncomfortable, a *bothness* we go to the movies to get a couple hours fucking relief from." David Foster Wallace, "David Lynch Keeps His Head," in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (New York, Little, Brown and Company, 1997), 211.
75. Scott, "The Best Mind of His Generation," [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/21/weekinreview/21scott.html?\\_r=2&pagewanted=1&hp](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/21/weekinreview/21scott.html?_r=2&pagewanted=1&hp).
76. Lipsky, "The Lost Years..." [http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/23638511/the\\_lost\\_years\\_last\\_days\\_of\\_david\\_foster\\_wallace](http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/23638511/the_lost_years_last_days_of_david_foster_wallace).
77. *ibid.*
78. D. T. Max, "The Unfinished," *The New Yorker*, 20 March 2008, [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/03/09/090309fa\\_fact\\_max](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/03/09/090309fa_fact_max).
79. Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing...*, 261.
80. Wallace, "Getting Away..." 92.
81. Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing...*, 261.
82. Wallace, *Consider the Lobster*, 246.
83. Wallace, interview with Charlie Rose, <http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/5639>.
84. Wallace, "Getting Away..." 132.
85. Wallace, *Consider the Lobster*, 240.
86. Wallace, *This Is Water*, 38.
87. Wallace, "Getting Away..." 99.
88. Lipsky, "The Last Days..." [http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/23638511/the\\_lost\\_years\\_last\\_days\\_of\\_david\\_foster\\_wallace](http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/23638511/the_lost_years_last_days_of_david_foster_wallace).
89. David Foster Wallace, "Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness From Which Probably Not Enough Has Been Removed," in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005), 64-65.
90. Wallace, *This Is Water*, 44.
91. Wallace, *This Is Water*, 3-4, 8, 60, 132-133.
92. Wallace, "Introduction," xxii.
93. Wallace, "Getting Away," 137.