



On Not Reading DFW

We've learned from D. T. Max's biography of David Foster Wallace, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, that the author of *Infinite Jest* enjoyed "audience pussy." That was his friend and sometime lover Mary Karr's term for the hookups that Wallace's *Infinite Jest* book tour made possible.¹ This chapter's argument is inspired by this admittedly prurient detail of Wallace's life; the chapter is, at first, about writing, reading, and misogyny, but it ultimately aims to show how different practices of reading shape literary culture in the present. "Audience pussy" becomes interesting in a literary sense when we consider Wallace's biography as a whole alongside the theories of one of his early writer-figures, Mark Nechtr. Nechtr features in the story "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way," a story that embodies Wallace's comprehensive response to the ideas of metafiction—including the self-conscious relationship between writers and readers—exemplified by his literary model and nemesis, John Barth. Wallace's biographer notes that Wallace felt that "Westward" was such a comprehensive statement of all he wanted to do in fiction that he had trouble moving on from it for several years, turning instead to journalism before finally starting work on *Infinite Jest*. Given the artistic significance Wallace himself assigned to this story, we might assign Nechtr some weight, then, when Nechtr opines that "a story, just maybe, should treat the reader like it wants to[,] . . . well, fuck him."²

The link between Wallace's art and his relationships with the people he slept with bears considering. Those people were by all accounts women, despite the possibly queer, and certainly aggressive, resonances of Nechtr's male pronoun for the reader. There may be nothing inherently wrong with consensual celebrity hookups—plenty

of people might treasure the memory (and the story) of sleeping with a famous person—but the very idea of “audience pussy” on a book tour suggests that the logic of Wallace’s relationships with women in his life practice might in fact have a structure similar to the logic of the writer-reader relationship invoked, and formally embodied, in Wallace’s work and the reading practice it imagines. And in the wake of that suggestion, it is worth asking a question that is heretical for most literary scholars: Does that link have any bearing on whether his work is worth reading—worth, that is, the investment of anyone’s reading time, first and foremost, but also the investment of attention, thought, teaching time, and writing effort that might follow from any professional or scholarly reader’s choices about what to read? If there was something rotten in Wallace’s relationships with women (the facts in the biography suggest there was), and if those relationships shared a common dynamic with the relationship he imagined between writer and reader, might there be something rotten in the writer-reader relationship, too?

This question addresses not only a particular author (Wallace) but also, and more importantly, two developments in the cultural conditions under which literature is made now: first, the undeniable fact of literary overproduction, and second, the rising call for the academic humanities, including literary criticism, to become more *human*—to be less concerned with the endless complexifying of specialized histories on the one hand, or the ever-abstracting grandeur of “world history,” “deep time,” “species history,” or “the planetary” on the other. Readers within the academy and without are calling for humanists to speak in voices that can be heard by people outside of specialized academic audiences.³ To suggest that the things imagined in books have a grounding in the world of human behavior—and in the behavior of specific human beings, at that—and thus to question how completely autonomous the work of art can be, counts as an effort in this direction.

Overproduction has been a feature of literary history since at least the 18th century, but since the invention of desktop publishing software in the mid-1980s

production has reached a new scale: to date, over 60,000 new novels a year are published in the US alone (by way of contrast, between 1940 and 1999 new fiction titles in the US ranged between 5,000 and 10,000; by 2010 the number was 55,000).⁴ Our methods for cultural sorting—reviews, schooling, advertising, personal recommendations, market segmentation, and so on—have not adapted to the increase in volume, rendering a reader’s work of choosing both freer (a good thing) and more arbitrary (a hard thing, at least for scholars or other readers looking for systematicity, representativeness, best-ness, or historical impact). It has seemed fruitful to train the methods of historicism on the growing edge of literary history, especially as academic writing about what used to be called “contemporary literature” became the “field” of “post-1945” or “20th century,” but overproduction at this scale makes historical approaches difficult.⁵ At the same time, affect studies have gained ground in literary criticism, and out of the conjunction of thinking about readers’ feelings and frustration with the limits of historicism, Rita Felski has articulated a striking challenge to historicism as a method. She notes that in focusing on a work’s embeddedness in its cultural and chronological point of origin, “the critic is absolved of the need to think through her own relationship to the text she is reading. Why has this work been chosen for interpretation? How does it speak to me now? What is its value in the present? To focus only on a work’s origins is to sidestep the question of its appeal to the present-day reader. It is, in a Nietzschean sense, to use history as an alibi.”⁶

The situation of academic reading bears directly on the case of Wallace and the question about whether his work is worth reading. While Felski’s questions about what historicism can’t see would apply to any work under consideration, and naturally lend themselves to works far removed from the scholarly reader in time, a contemporary case collapses the space between “historical” readers whose responses might be the subject of study and the live reader covered by history’s alibi. What’s more, Felski’s assessment of historicism’s blindness comes hand in hand

with an embrace of evaluation. Even after several decades of “blistering critiques of canonicity and traditional value hierarchies,” she argues that as such arguments

all too clearly demonstrate, evaluation is not optional: we are condemned to choose, required to rank, endlessly engaged in practices of selecting, sorting, distinguishing, privileging, whether in academia or in everyday life. We need only look at the texts we elect to interpret, the works we include in our syllabi, or the theories we deign to approve, ignore, or condemn. The critique of value merely underscores the persistence of evaluation in the very act of assigning a negative judgment.⁷

What happens if the scholarly reader steps out from behind the alibi of history, and allows herself to be condemned, in open court, to the act of choosing?

Fuck the Reader

Wallace’s relationships with women, D. T. Max’s biography reveals, were complicated. Some of the aforementioned audience pussy was underage, for example, or so Wallace claimed in a letter to a friend.⁸ And sometimes his randy habits hurt people he cared about: in order to get some, he was willing to abandon old friends who had arranged to meet him at readings.⁹ We also learn from the biography that at this point in his life Wallace slept with his female students at Illinois State. This could be inconvenient: “That’s a three-day weekend I am still paying the credit card bill on,” Prof. Wallace noted in a letter regarding one such spurt of recreation. That’s the problem with the teacher/student sexual dynamic: the emotional promissory note extended on Friday to the infatuated student can’t be called due by her come Monday morning. Max’s observation that Wallace “affected not to care” that some of his bedmates were his students seems to miss the point. The power imbalance inherent in the relationship ensures that Prof. Wallace could last out the bills till the girl went away. He could afford not to care. At college the girls always do go away, and there’s always another student to take her place next term. Hookups within Wallace’s AA re-

covery groups were stickier, where the power balance wasn't so clear and emotional fragility was abundant. At one point, Max's biography tells us, Wallace described the situation of walking into his local AA meeting and seeing that among the ten women present he'd slept with three and "come close with one or two more." Recounting this period of Wallace's life, Max notes that "his behavior seemed, even to him, at times hard to justify" since he "was leaving a lot of hurt in his wake. *But his bigger worry was that all this seducing was most damaging to himself.*"¹⁰ (Emphasis mine.)

The story of Wallace's relationships with women has a long thread of what might be called abuse—physical and psychic—running through it. Apparently Wallace, at about the age of 12 or 14, knocked his younger sister Amy down during a sibling spat then dragged her through the family dog's shitting yard. Youthful anger management issues, we might say. But later relationships with women featured stalking, yelling, throwing things, and trying to push his girlfriend from a moving car. Some of these things occurred while Wallace was drunk or high; some after he got sober; perhaps most when he was manic, since he suffered from manic depression throughout his adult life. Wallace's self-professed problem—that he seemed determined to "stick my penis into as many vaginas as possible"—required some therapy, and when he got to talking, he found that the problem was his mother. Her perfectionism stood at the root, so he stopped speaking to her for five years or so, except when he had a knotty grammar question. "They could talk about grammar even when they weren't speaking," Max notes fondly, evoking the redemptive qualities of linguistic minutiae, and perhaps, as might follow, of literature itself. And then there was the time that Wallace set up an appointment to buy a gun so that he could kill the husband of Mary Karr, the woman he'd been infatuated with, and stalking, for the better part of a year. (He thought twice about the plan in the end, and didn't keep the appointment, though he kept stalking Karr, who only intermittently objected. They became lovers.) When Wallace, at 36, finally decided it was time to get serious about a woman, he told friends that he wanted to be with "either a nurse or a social worker." He was

introduced to Juliana Harms, who was the latter, and was briefly engaged to her. She broke it off when he confessed that he was “thinking about” sleeping with a graduate student in his department. Harms moved out and the student moved into his bed.¹¹ One could go on; interested readers can find more details in the biography.

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Max’s biography of Wallace, though clearly driven by admiration for Wallace’s work, has allowed us to see these aspects of Wallace’s life and personality clearly for the first time. Much credit goes to Max for his research and his honesty (and to his sources, for their willingness to talk), for these things are revealed even though Max is sympathetic to his subject, rigorous in research, and generous about Wallace’s human flaws. We cannot escape the sense that Wallace’s formidable struggle with the diseases of depression, alcoholism, and drug addiction had effects on every aspect of his life. With Max’s approach as a humane model, it might seem churlish and arbitrary to question the value of literary output on the basis of an author’s private and mostly consensual behavior with women. After all, our favorite book lists are bound to include the works of rogues, misogynists, and manipulators of all genders and orientations.

An objection to the work on the ground of manipulative promiscuity and abuse may seem a little like the banal controversy over Tiger Woods’s sexual exploits; he too enjoyed audience hookups. But what did private sexual practice have to do with Green Jackets and a spectacular fade off the tee? What did one drive have to do with the other? On reflection, and having read the fairly restrained comments of Woods’s former trainer (whom he had fired) about how invisible other human beings seemed to be to Woods, there might be a connection. The competition of a televised, big-money men’s sport combined with the arduous solipsism of golf itself—competing against your own record year after year, spending hours a day in silent concentration on a repeated yet ever-shifting set of movements and conditions—has something in common with novel writing as Wallace practiced it. Blocking out human noise while needing to feel something human seems related to what seem like narcissistic encoun-

ters with other people. But in Wallace's case the connection between novel writing and misogynistic narcissism matters more than that between great golf and narcissism, for two reasons. Since his death Wallace has been surrounded with the glow of "Saint Dave," proponent of love under hostile postmodern conditions, exhorter of young people to think for themselves. Wallace's 2005 graduation speech delivered at Kenyon College is often cited by fans as the classic summing up of his humane wisdom. (I defy readers to find a fresh idea in that speech—then again, to be fair, fresh ideas may not be the point of graduation speeches.) The glow of Saint Dave casts its hazy effects on the reputation of the man and his fiction, making both harder to see.

The second reason matters more: we should care about how Wallace treated women because what is at stake in the relationship between writing and misogyny is not sexual morality—about which we all might differ—but the quality of the art Wallace produced. It's that art, and its putative quality, that makes him the subject of a biography at all. It's the art to which the literary scholar is asked to be responsible. And from what we see in the biography, there was a profound connection between Wallace's treatment of women and his literary project, a connection indicated by Mark Nechtr's sense, in "Westward," that the writer sets out to fuck the reader. Nechtr's statement shares a logic not only to Wallace's literal behavior with readers, both on book tour and on campus, but also to Wallace's reflections on his relationship to readers in the context that should matter most to the current discussion—that is, in his writing.

For instance, summing up Wallace's achievement in *Infinite Jest*, Wallace's biographer makes the case that "*Infinite Jest*, for all its putative difficulty, cares about the reader, and if it denies him or her a conventional ending, it doesn't do so out of malice; it does it out of concern, to provide a deeper palliative than realistic storytelling can, because, just as in Ennet House, you have to work to get better. The book is redemptive, as modern novels rarely are . . . Wallace never forgets his pledge that 'all the attention and engagement and work you need to get from the reader can't be

for your benefit; it's got to be for hers."¹² Writing to Elizabeth Wurtzel (the author of *Prozac Nation*, whom he'd met in New York and tried, unsuccessfully, to sleep with), Wallace explained that "the crux, for me, is how to love the reader without believing that my art or worth depends on his(her) loving me. It's just about that simple in the abstract. In practice it's a daily fucking war."¹³ How to read those last two words? In the context of Wallace's lived relationships with women, it is tempting to see the adjective as a verb, "fucking" as the activity of war (a "fucking-war") rather than as a measure of how frustrating the fight can be. The talk of loving the reader without requiring that "she" love him back resonates with a selfless chivalric nobility that caught on as a narrative about Wallace: it is remarkable how often his work is said either to be about, or to demonstrate, love. But Wallace, it seems to me, did not need the reader's love because he was already his own greatest love and his own work's most devoted fan—which was perhaps the obverse of the ordinary-guy self-deprecation that characterized his public manner.

Betrayal was Wallace's stock-in-trade, according to what we learn in the biography, and the logic of betrayal in his life is the same logic articulated in the fiction. One might return to his character Mark Nechtr's advice about how to treat the reader: "Pretend the whole thing's like love. Walk arm in arm with the mark through the grinning happy door. Shove. Get back out before the happy jaws meet tight. Reader's inside the whole thing. Not at all as expected. Feels utterly alone."¹⁴ Just because Wallace knew what he was doing, and let us know he knew what he was doing, doesn't mean that being his mark is somehow a mark of distinction.

Critical Not-Reading

It seems significant that the story chosen for the title of Wallace's first story collection is "Girl with Curious Hair," implying thereby a primary interest in a female figure. Wallace's first novel, *The Broom of the System*, is named for a saying of his grandmother's—that apples are, digestively speaking, "the broom of the system."

Brief Interviews with Hideous Men speaks for itself about the work's concern with gender, though a question remains about whether the stories revel in or revile the hideousness of their men. Given Wallace's own version of hideousness, which shines through even in a sympathetic biography, one might be forgiven for wondering, especially in the absence of clear textual cues. I have relied on other readers to observe the ambiguity, as I've only read a few of the stories, and those long ago. And I have not reread them.

And here is my heretical declaration: I will not read any further in Wallace's work. Of course, the textual facts I've just noted in Wallace's titles suggest to any literary-critical brain that there is a pattern here to be explored. Wallace was obviously thinking hard about what he called the "erotics" of reading. He was aware of the suffering that sparks from a failed relationship and he wrote about it, intending the written suffering to feel true to the experience. He could describe, and reproduce on the page, the emotional vortex of depression and abuse. He knew what misogyny sounded like, and he was a good enough writer to dangle these things out front in titles and themes, tempting a reader to think that he had something profound to say about those subjects. But does David Foster Wallace really have anything to say about women, or gender, or sex, or misogyny that's worth attending to? Does he have anything worth saying about reading as an erotic practice? What is the evidence that he does? How does one decide, on the basis of the evidence in hand, to invest the time to study his work?

Smart people often sense where good questions lie, and sometimes such people help us all by formulating a good question accurately. When we and they are lucky, smart people put in the load of labor required to answer a good question and in doing so to raise new questions we never thought to ask. Wallace was obviously smart: a well-educated, achievement-mad student, a hard worker, an obsessive thinker and researcher on a wide range of subjects. He did what smart people do—he sensed where an interesting question lay. In his case, that question lay in the

recursive, relentless dynamic between self-conscious narcissist and world, and the question's answers promised to play out in the sheer force of need and desire that fuels that dynamic.

But what evidence do we have that Wallace did anything more than put us in sight of a good question and the materials of an answer, when it comes to the sexualized exchange between writer and reader that he imagined? Why should one believe that he has anything smart to say about the dynamics between men and women and reading, given a reasonable body of secondary knowledge about him and his work (in this case, things gleaned from Max's biography, research that my students have done on his work, critical essays, and so on) and what I personally have read and taught by him ("The Depressed Person," and a few of the *Brief Interviews* stories, and "Westward the Course of Empire Makes Its Way")? The fact that Wallace makes a subject out of the aspect of his behavior that I find objectionable—and the fact that he is self-aware, and intermittently regretful about his behavior toward women—doesn't mean that he has anything intelligent to say about that subject even if he would qualify, by many measures, as "smart."

Wallace is not the only writer whose work throws off literary cues (turns of phrase, conceits, titles, plots, and so on) that suggest he or she is working through some major topic, but then fails to deliver genuine insight. When I was writing about religion and meaninglessness in contemporary American literature, Paul Auster and John Updike emerged, through my secondary research, as promising writers on my subject. Each wrote about religion in their books; each featured characters less interested in doctrine than in material language or transcendent feeling. In *City of Glass*, Auster invented a character that seemed made for my questions: a man who had been shut in a room as a child and left to grow, unspoken to, year upon year. His father had hoped that by isolating him from human language the boy would emerge speaking the language of God. Updike, for his part, offered an equally intriguing premise for *Roger's Version*: a professor of theology is challenged,

both intellectually and sexually, by a brilliant graduate student in computer science who is using a machine to prove the existence of the divine, and who, on the side, is also seducing the professor's wife. I began to read the work of these writers, and in the end decided that though both of them juggled all the balls that my research questions had in play, they didn't do more than that. The themes went round and round, but insight never landed. "These ideas are related," the authors seemed to insist, and being the good writers they are, they made them seem related in the organic ways that fictional form allows. But their novels didn't teach me anything about those ideas or how and why they are entwined. Did I read everything they wrote? No. Like a good scientist, I decided it would be a poor use of resources (in this case, time) to extend an experiment that had already produced what I considered negative results. And of course, maybe lying unknown to me in one of Updike's other novels is the insight I was hoping for; be that as it may, my decision to stop reading was not unreasonably made.

Wallace seemed ultimately uninterested in whether his ability to voice misogyny in fiction had anything to do either with insight into gender dynamics or with a prejudice lurking within, against his better judgment: "Some friends who've read [*Brief Interviews*] have come back and said, 'Man, there has got to be a part of you that's a pretty serious misogynist because you do misogyny pretty well.' I don't know what to tell them. If you do a convincing thing about a serial killer, does that mean you have murder in your heart? Well, maybe, I guess. . . . More than the average person? I don't know."¹⁵ (It's a shame he didn't know; this question could lead to insight.) He also didn't seem to know, or at least didn't care, that he frequently resorted to language and assumptions that we'd think of as misogynist. For example, take his characterization of *New York Times* reviewer Michiko Kakutani in his defense of *Infinite Jest's* length:

If the length seems gratuitous, as it did to a very charming Japanese lady from the *New York Times*, then one arouses ire. And I'm aware of that. The manuscript that I delivered

was 1700 manuscript pages, of which close to 500 were cut. . . . If it looks chaotic, good, but everything that's in there is in there on purpose.¹⁶

Or consider his patronizing worry about how his girlfriend would take *Brief Interviews*, and whether she could possibly understand the Intentional Fallacy:

I really love this woman, and I am a little worried that she is going to read this thing and . . . she is not in the business . . . I'm worried I am going to have to explain intentional fallacy to her, that this is not in fact me talking.¹⁷

From the evidence I have, the critical self-consciousness for which among other things Wallace is praised cannot run very deep. I have done my homework and have decided that reading more of Wallace's work in order to gain insight into the erotics of reading just isn't worth it. Or to put it in the very terms of Wallace's erotics of reading: Wallace proposes to fuck me. Unlike the "charming Japanese lady" whose job it was to review *Infinite Jest* for the *Times*, I can refuse the offer, and so I will.

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Who tells us that it is worth it to read more of Wallace's work, on this subject or any subject? It is every person who suggests that any scholar of the 20th- and 21st-century novel worth her tenure should read *Infinite Jest*, every essay in the literary press that proclaims his work's importance, every gushy celebration of his wisdom on the internet, every essay that builds a literary-critical argument on his novels. The very fact that a serious, deeply researched, and well-written literary biography of Wallace came out just a few years after his death testifies to how quickly Wallace is being promoted from hot contemporary novelist to serious required reading. The message is issued in ways large and small, direct and indirect, by the institutional engine of precanonization, as Richard Ohmann described it in his groundbreaking essays from the 1980s about the mechanisms of literary culture.

Closer to home, it was Dave Eggers who told readers they should read *Infinite Jest* in a preface to the reissued edition of the novel in 2006. The exhortation was

hedged in an Eggersian way, but it was unmistakable as such and worth quoting at length:

Here's a question once posed to me, by a large baseball cap-wearing English major at a medium-sized western college: Is it our duty to read *Infinite Jest*? This is a good question, and one that many people, particularly literary-minded people, ask themselves. The answer is: maybe. Sort of. Probably, in some way. If we think it's our duty to read this book, it's because we're interested in genius. We're interested in epic writerly ambition. We're fascinated with what can be made by a person with enough time and focus and caffeine and, in Wallace's case, chewing tobacco. If we are drawn to *Infinite Jest*, we're also drawn to the Magnetic Fields' *69 Songs*, for which Stephin Merritt wrote that many songs, all of them about love, in about two years. And we're drawn to the 10,000 paintings of folk artist Howard Finster. Or the work of Sufjan Stevens, who is on a mission to create an album about each state in the union. He's currently at State No. 2, but if he finishes that, it will approach what Wallace did with the book in your hands. The point is that if we are interested with human possibility, and we are able to cheer each other on to leaps in science and athletics and art and thought, we must admire the work that our peers have managed to create. We have an obligation, to ourselves, chiefly, to see what a brain, and particularly a brain like our own—that is, using the same effluvium we, too, swim through—is capable of. It's why we watch Shoah, or visit the unending scroll on which Jack Kerouac wrote (in a fever of days) *On the Road*, or William T. Vollmann's 3,300-page *Rising Up and Rising Down*, or Michael Apter's *7-Up*, *28-Up*, *42-Up* series of films, or . . . Well, the list goes on.¹⁸

One could be forgiven for noting that the genre of “genius” Eggers refers to has a masculine cultural shape. Wallace's is an artistic maximalism that while not exclusively a practice of white men is certainly, in Eggers's articulation of it, mainly the practice of that demographic (no female practitioner of this genre is mentioned). Even if there is no misogyny in Eggers's invocation of this tradition of “genius,” the value he assigns to “genius” at least raises the question of why something of such

ultimate humanistic value seems to reside in such a narrow subset of humanity. Except that Eggers also casts Wallace as “normal,” something he thinks will help him to “convince you to buy this book, or check it out of your library.” Eggers’s Wallace is someone known as “Dave Wallace,” a guy who “keeps big sloppy dogs,” wears a bandana at public readings to keep the sweat off his pages (implication: he doesn’t wear it to look cool), was a “nationally ranked tennis player,” “cares about good government,” and is (like Eggers) from the Midwest. Eggers’s assessment of Wallace as the ordinary guy who produced something extra-ordinary may suggest an accommodation to Wallace’s work that he himself had to make in order to fulfill an ethical obligation to “admire the work that our peers have managed to create” “if we are interested with human possibility, and we are able to cheer each other on to leaps in science and athletics and art and thought” (good things, all).

Eggers, who *didn’t* initially admire the work this peer managed to create, gave the novel a sharply mixed review a decade earlier in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. He immediately saw a connection, and not a flattering one, between the author and the novel: “The book is more about David Foster Wallace than anything else. It’s an extravagantly self-indulgent novel, and, page by page, it’s often difficult to navigate.” He suggests that Wallace is revealed in his “alter ego,” the avant-garde filmmaker Jim Incandenza, who “held his audiences in almost utter contempt.” Contempt for the reader is expressed in the book’s form and style, too, according to Eggers: “Besides frequently losing itself in superfluous and wildly tangential flights of lexical diarrhea, the book suffers under the sheer burden of its incredible length. (That includes the 96 pages of only sporadically worthwhile endnotes, including one that clocks in at 17 pages.) At almost 1,100 pages, it feels more like 3,000.” The review concludes with a reflection on how the novel treats the reader: “It’s an endless joke on somebody.”¹⁹

What accounts for the ten-year transformation in Eggers’s take on the novel’s value, and its value specifically for the reader who must give his or her time to finish it? We might look back to Ohmann and see two points on the historical DFW can-

onization curve. Eggers, as editor, had himself helped to bend that curve, featuring a story by Wallace in the first issue of *McSweeney's* in 1998, and another in *McSweeney's* no. 5 (2000), titled "Mr. Squishy" (under the pseudonym Elizabeth Klemm). Reading between the lines of Eggers's *Infinite Jest* introduction, we might also see an evolution in Eggers's own mission in literary culture. By 2006 he had become someone "interested with human possibility" and hoping to be part of a generation that will "cheer each other on to leaps in science and athletics and art and thought." In the introduction, Eggers stands not for the individual reader, as he seemed to when occupying the role of reviewer in 1996, but for his generation, and in this sense the preface is more about Eggers and creative advocacy (the obligation to "admire" whatever "our peers have managed to create" and to urge others to do the same) than it is about the value of Wallace's novel. What is judged—and in this case found wanting—is judgment itself, even as the discourse of value proceeds apace in the form of facts on the ground: a tenth anniversary edition, a celebrity writer's introduction, another wave of marketing.

One might argue that because Wallace's work has produced such facts on the ground in American culture, one must be responsible to it as a scholar, and most especially as a scholar of contemporary literature. If one is a critic, it is one's *job* to think about how literature functions in our social life. What do people want novels to do for them? What kinds of thought and meaning do literary works make available? What stories matter to a given culture at a given moment in history and what do they tell us about that culture? Wallace's works surely suggest some answers to those sorts of questions. And indeed, these are the sorts of questions that inspire scholars to read works that are repellent or that are written by people with whom they would rather not be friends. If historically people read or thought in significant ways about such works, then the works themselves are, *de facto* and historically, *important*. They have played a part in history and culture and if one wants to understand the part they played, one must read them and write about them further.

But with a contemporary work, a work that is still in the process of being integrated into the culture, the scholar finds herself in a different position. What if we just stop talking about such a work before it matters that much to the culture at large? Stop reading it, stop teaching it, stop studying it? What if we start suggesting something else to read, instead? To put the question of Wallace's work more personally: Is it ever acceptable, as a professional matter, to refuse the culture's rising call to attend to a literary work? Is the scholar the servant of the culture she studies? Is her relevance and authority contingent on her responding to the cues that flow without cease from editors, biographers, reviewers, and fans? Is attending to these what it means to be professional?

I am not arguing that there could never be a good reason to read David Foster Wallace's work. For instance, one of my doctoral students—the incomparable Leslie Jamison—is writing about 20th- and 21st-century addiction stories. It's a study of the American recovery culture that grew up in the 20th century after the founding of AA. Jamison asks what AA's therapeutic narratives have to do with literary narratives. In the context of memoir's rise in the publishing market and of some spectacular later 20th-century examples of addiction as a theme in novels (*Under the Volcano*, *The Lost Weekend*, and certainly *Infinite Jest*), her question makes reading Wallace essential; her research grows directly out of Wallace's novels and his life story. And she is both moved and inspired by his writing, which provides the engine of visceral interest that all scholars need to do their work well. For me, the most persuasive of reasons to be interested in Wallace right now is that as Jamison's advisor I want to be in conversation with her, and to be the best conversation partner I can be might in the end require that I read Wallace's novel. My respect for Jamison as a writer and thinker makes me open to the task.

The idea that I should be the best teacher possible to a specific student is not the one, however, that prompts most people to tell me to read Wallace's work.²⁰ The recommendation often comes either from the person's own fondness for it, from

the ambient admiration for the sainted posthumous reputation that has grown up around Wallace, or out of a routine respect for a canon of literary works that are thought to constitute the shared material of literary conversation. That canon has long favored works that exhibit features associated with literary modernism, the movement that has for many decades held sway over the scholarly sense of what makes a work “literary” and that has reinforced the version of maximal “genius” that animates Eggers’s argument for reading *Infinite Jest*. Valued features include linguistic difficulty, allusive density, formal self-consciousness, a marked individual voice, ambition (manifested in the work’s scope, innovation, intensity, allusiveness, or sheer size), the expectation that readers should work at the reading and devote, as James Joyce once modestly put it, one’s “whole life” to it and to the celebration of individual genius—a category that as we’ve seen is imagined in persistently masculine terms.²¹

Wallace self-consciously worked at these aspects of writing. The value he accorded to them was evident in his self-presentation, trained as he was in academic settings where these things held primary value. For instance, resisting his editor Michael Pietsch’s complaints about incoherence in the manuscript for *Infinite Jest*, which Pietsch had ascertained would clock in at 1,200 book pages, Wallace admitted (“I guess”) that “maybe I have an arrogance problem—I think I’d presumed in some of this stuff that it was OK to make a reader read the book twice.”²² With this kind of orientation toward readers, and as the child of a philosophy professor and a dedicated grammarian, raised in decades of the 20th century when modernist literary values defined the teaching of both writing and literature in the academy, Wallace stood a good chance of writing novels that could adhere to such expectations. That he was a bright and intensely competitive student, an effective researcher and promising thinker when not hampered by depression or substance abuse, is undeniable. He made a point of getting A’s at Amherst, and in Max’s biography we learn that he worked extremely hard for them, logging hour after hour in

the library and at his writing desk. At the graduate writing program at the University of Arizona, he broadcast his ambition in recognizable ways, invoking “theory” as “what separated the serious novelist from the others” (and verging on an actual fight during a classroom argument over Derrida’s relevance).²³ His teachers responded accordingly; even the director at Arizona, Mary Carter, whom Max describes patronizingly as “an entirely conventional writer and not even a very good one,” offered him special double-credit class work, telling other students that “he’s going to make us all very proud.”²⁴ Max reflects that Wallace’s “interest in theory, like his fondness for stories with strong voices, also had a compensatory element. It served to satisfy energies that would have been frustrated had they gone into aspects of fiction writing he did not naturally excel at, like character development. It was a handy refuge for a writer who was still an odd combination of a mimic and engineer.”²⁵ All of which is to say that the conformity of Wallace’s work with the expectation of what is “serious” and “literary” in the academy is the product of a circular system of literary production. That conformity is not by itself evidence that this work is worth preserving within our always-changing canon, or that it has been important to the evolution—rather than simply the reproduction—of an art form.

One thing that Max’s biography of Wallace reveals is just how crucial a handful of people were to making Wallace into a literary celebrity. Acknowledging that few people actually read *Infinite Jest* even if they bought it, Max’s account makes an implicit argument about who and what made Wallace into a literary author to attend to: his agent, an editor, a particular reviewer, and two publishers respected for their literary offerings and powerful enough in the market to set the literary press in motion for a book they got behind.²⁶ The marketers knew their marks, projecting the aura of literary seriousness out toward reviewers who were already committed to a certain vision of what literary seriousness meant in the late 20th century, and daring them to man up, read a thousand pages, and prove that they had something

intelligent to say about it. Of the reviewers, Max trenchantly notes that “all agreed *Infinite Jest* was significant—or, at least, a novel others would think was significant, so their readers should know about it.” Critics had been given what Max calls a “dare” by the marketers at Little, Brown, and the reviews had, Max notes, “an undertone of obedience to their writing, of being relieved they could answer in the affirmative the dare Little, Brown had laid down.”²⁷ The strategy worked for Wallace, and incidentally, it worked for his editor, Michael Pietsch. In a recent article on Pietsch’s efforts as chief executive of Hachette Book Group to challenge Amazon’s discounting policy on ebooks, the first two paragraphs were about his work with Wallace a decade earlier, how he had “paid \$80,000” for *Infinite Jest*, “\$45,000 more than the next highest bidder,” and edited the book for over two years, publishing it in 1996 and thus launching “a literary sensation.”²⁸ The journalist didn’t bury the lede; the article, “Toe-to-Toe with a Giant” is about cultural power, and Pietsch’s power is measured in Wallaces.²⁹

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The dare, and its momentum, is preserved and extended by the literary press today, not only through publishers who promote books by or about Wallace, or through the representations of those like Pietsch whose careers were significantly bound up with Wallace’s, or through new editions of *Infinite Jest* that will bump sales again for a reliable title, but also through a body of other professional readers who have accepted the argument for canonicity. Among the latter we’d need to count an editor at the *LA Review of Books*, to whom a short version of this piece was submitted. The editor liked the idea of publishing a negative piece on Wallace to counter the “Saint Dave” phenomenon and balance “all the puff pieces” that had been published about Wallace in the last few years. He acknowledged that while he was an admirer of Wallace’s writing it was true that Wallace’s relations with women and his conception of sex were “ugly” in a way that was significant and that wasn’t getting much play. But he found it unconvincing that Wallace’s misogyny could be substantively related to

an argument about why one might stop reading his work, and the solution he recommended was, naturally, to read more DFW:

While of course I wouldn't expect you to go and plow through all of *Infinite Jest* with gritted teeth, I do think, for the essay to work as a convincing critique of Wallace and not just evidence of a personal antipathy, it needs to have more of a grounding in Wallace's writing: a little good old-fashioned close reading, in other words. . . . In particular, it seems like you really ought to engage a bit with the "Brief Interviews with Hideous Men," and maybe also the story "Adult World" in the same volume, both of which deal directly with misogyny and sex addiction; and perhaps you can elaborate on your readings of "Westward the Course of Empire . . ." and "Girl with Curious Hair," as well.³⁰

The editor assumes that Wallace's work "about" misogyny must somehow be revealing or smart about that subject—an assumption that the biography and my reading in Wallace's work already lead me to doubt, for the reasons I have laid out. More tellingly, the editor seems to assume that a decision to stop reading must be merely "personal" rather than scholarly or rational if a feeling (in this case, "antipathy") is attached to rational analysis. The assumption is that a refusal can't, in the absence of more reading, have an intellectual or scholarly relationship to a professional decision about resource allocation—about what to spend one's (limited) time doing.

The editor's advice allows us to step back and observe the mechanisms at work in the interaction: because the scholar in this case had tenure, and because she did not in a professional sense need to publish the essay, she could without significant cost choose to resist the engine of canonization. That canonization takes the form both of authoritative claims about the significance of certain works and of a process of cultural replication through which intellectual "conversation" about a certain writer perpetuates itself by credentializing those willing to join it. This machine of canonization asks people invested in literary capital to keep reading Wallace and keeps everyone talking about Wallace's work as if it had something important to say (in

this case, about misogyny), or as if a serious reader must be responsible for finding out for sure whether it has something important to say. The machine also implicitly directs people *not* to read something else, since time is finite and the jest is infinite, or nearly so. And this all works beautifully, because critics are good at making the things they read seem important, especially once a big chunk of work time has become a sunk cost. After all, great criticism is often achieved through the intellectual creativity of the critic's mind and not through the inherent quality of what they happen to be reading.

If the scholar in my example did need a publication, she might well have taken the editor's advice, put in another four or five weeks of work, and produced the essay that the editor had in mind—a piece that would balance our view of Wallace, but also a piece that would take for granted the idea that she, and we, should *have* a fully developed view of Wallace. This sort of balancing work is a good first step and useful to people convinced for their own reasons about the value of Wallace's work. This is what I take A. O. Scott to have done in his early omnibus review of Wallace's work, "The Panic of Influence," published in the *New York Review of Books* after the release of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* in 1999, and more recently what Mark McGurl accomplished in his scholarly deflation of Wallace (an article entitled "The Institution of Nothing: David Foster Wallace in the Program," in *boundary 2*, Winter 2013), which is alive with close readings and dedicated research, not to mention very funny on the subject of Wallace's gushing admiration of the Mel Gibson blockbuster *Braveheart*. But the fact that such work must be done over and over suggests the self-replicating nature of the canonizing process: Scott's insights about the limits of Wallace's work, while they may have balanced the early assessment of it, led only to more assessments. The wave of scholarly interest in the institutions of contemporary literary production and all their invisible actors is allowing us to see afresh exactly how the sausage of literary culture is made. Such studies allow the scholar of contemporary literature to see how contingent the survival of particular books is, and

to understand her own role as an institutional actor. And this is where my refusal to participate might count in some small way.

My refusal to read Wallace's work seems dramatic, even melodramatic, the product of personal antipathy, but it needn't. All of us, especially scholars of literature, refuse to read books every day. Consider again for a moment the problem of overproduction mentioned at the chapter's outset. What Matthew Wilkens calls "the problem of abundance" is a problem for every person on earth who has an internet connection, and it is a professional problem in every corner of literary study. Franco Moretti has been making this point for years about the novels of the 18th and 19th centuries. As a culture and as a profession, then, we are daily embracing the decision not to read even as literary scholars continue to read in every spare moment and worry more and more about how they choose.

Nonreading, seen in this light, is the way of the future (just as it has been the way of the modern past). And as the French sociologist of literature Pierre Bayard argued in the utterly sensible but provocatively titled book *How to Talk about Books You Haven't Read*, we live in a culture where the shared "library" of books that matter to the culture is so large that we must be able to *know about* books without reading them in order to build intellectual common ground in public culture. (Maybe, for conversation with Leslie Jamison, it is enough that I know about *Infinite Jest*.) This should not produce the shame, he suggests, that the brilliant David Lodge sent up in his 1979 novel *Changing Places*. There, a devious literature professor invents a game called Humiliation, where the goal is to rack up points by not having read famous books. You earn a point for each book that the other people in the game have read but you have not. Winning a departmental game of Humiliation may mean losing your promotion, as one hapless participant discovers.

My refusal to read—any refusal to read, in and of itself—is not radical; it is normal. It is not shameful; it is pragmatic. And unlike Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*, whose repeated response to his employer's request that he do his job

was “I prefer not to,” my refusal is neither unprofessional nor mysterious. In placing my reasons, and the evidence on which I base them, on the table, in suggesting the *kinds* of reasons it might be legitimate to consider as we make our best guesses about how to parcel out our reading hours, I hope to draw attention to the fact that refusal can be an intentional and transparent part of professional life for the scholar. In fact, it must be. The standard of evidence on which refusals are made is lower than our standard of evidence normally would be for judging a work we’ve read. How could it be any other way? We must make educated guesses about the experience of reading something we have not read, and must go from that guess to the investment, or withholding, of our reading time. And more: refusal is a tool we can use by our own lights as we—all us readers—take up the task of shaping culture with our aggregated purchases, clicks, views, syllabi, talks, articles, and books. David Foster Wallace understood this power: “The really significant education in thinking that we’re supposed to get in a place like this,” he said to the graduates assembled at Kenyon College in 2005, “isn’t really about the capacity to think, but rather about the choice of what to think about.” It’s a cliché worth repeating (though that doesn’t make it any less of a cliché).

Reading at the Limit

If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence.

George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

“Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending.” So says the narrator of George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, and so it is for any scholar of contemporary literature. In the roar of contemporary culture, to hear what is happening down in the grass, to truly hear and attend to it, would be to die of the noise. From that limit one sets out to choose, and such acts of choosing began, and now end, this book.

Eliot was more than commonly aware of the choices we all make, consciously and unconsciously, about to whom and to what we attend. Even an epic novel like *Middlemarch* was for her defined by its limits, while within those limits Eliot was committed to representing a broad cross-section of what she called “un-historic” lives and acts. Of her central character, the noble but flawed Dorothea, who disappears from public view at the end into happily married life as the helpmeet of her politician husband, Will Ladislaw, Eliot concludes thus:

Her finely touched spirit had still its fine issues, though they were not widely visible. Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive, for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on un-historic acts, and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.

Whatever we might think of this narrator’s faith in moral teleology—that “growing good of the world”—it is certainly true that the effects of hidden lives, represented in the context of Eliot’s epic, can be seen as “incalculably diffusive.” Perhaps that is because Eliot put them in the novel in the first place, or perhaps that quality inheres in certain actual lives regardless of whether they have a bard to sing them. I think Eliot hoped that unhistoric lives could have diffuse effects, though she surely understood that the chances were greater if someone stood by to write of them. The point is not to make a certain person or act qualify as historic, but to help the diffusion along. That has been the work of this book.

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“Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending.” The human limit of time has made me jealous of my reading choices. Sometimes, as I’ve said, I refuse to read a book, with reasons. More often I simply neglect to read books, without reasons, without even knowing what I am neglecting (who could know the approximately fifty-nine thousand nine

hundred and ninety new novels that even a quite dedicated reader of new American novels will turn away in a year?). And of course, many times I accept the invitations to read extended by the cultural institutions I live within. Critics, colleagues, friends, students, prize competitions, a beautiful cover, a fine review, exceptional obscurity, exceptional popularity, exceptional influence, strangers who simply make a good case: each of these recommend books, and I choose to accept, and I read. Sometimes it's great. Sometimes it's not. And sometimes I gain a friend of the mind forever.

Middlemarch is my case in point. In the summer of 2013, as I was working on the first draft of this chapter (and, it's true, trying to place a version of it in the *LA Review of Books*), I was also running for a half hour, and usually talking for a half hour more, early each morning with a friend and fellow professor. We were both teaching at the Ripton, Vermont, campus of Middlebury's Bread Loaf School of English, a paradisaical place where students who are mainly in their twenties and thirties, mainly high school English teachers, come for four or five summers to earn a Master's degree in English. The isolation of the campus—set within meadows and forest in the mountains outside of the town of Middlebury—and the sheer literary geekdom of the life we share there, make for a matchless scene of conversation and thinking about anything to do with literature. And so each morning my colleague and I and my dog panted our way down and then up a half-mile dirt-road hill, talking about novels and writing and teaching and children and friends. One of our themes that summer, when I wasn't blowing off steam about what I called my "Fuck the Reader" essay, was whether contemporary novels were worth reading in general. I bridled when he said, in his nebbishy way, that I should give up all that crapola I was writing about and accompany him back a century or so, and read some Proust, or some James, or especially, *Middlemarch*. It was all in good fun, of course—he is himself a distinguished scholar of contemporary literature, skeptical of the canon, someone who covers the novel from the Victorians forward. He was needling me, and it got me up the hill, and led us to many another topic.

But as a surprise for him, to be revealed on our first run the following summer, I decided to set aside the time required to read *Middlemarch*, which my graduate and undergraduate education had somehow never demanded, though the canon machine has, in general, preserved the novel well. It began with the audiobook, as I drove home from Vermont that August; by the time I reached New Haven six hours later I was hooked. The opportunity to finish came when I flew to Singapore and then Paris with my book-mad daughter later that year. Disappearing into our books could be done companionably on the long flights. I lugged an impractical hardcover, the silky Penguin “Drop Caps” edition, bright yellow; it was the only copy I could find at the bookstore on the day of our departure. Never had I been so aware of the reassuring presence of a big book—except perhaps when I read *Anna Karenina* in my early twenties, the summer after my brief first marriage ended. And my friend was right: the human wisdom and human mercy contained in Eliot’s novel overshadow anything I’ve read for decades, perhaps in my life. I quoted from it in remarks to graduating seniors in my college the next spring; I challenged my daughter to read it in Vermont the following summer. My spouse is reading it this summer before he falls asleep. The diffusion goes on, and I admit that I think the world might be better for it. I, at least, am better for it, and it lives permanently in me now.

Dave Eggers has said that he wants McSweeney’s books to “speak for themselves.” He is leery of critics throwing their voices around, taking things out of context, twisting the narrative into new shapes. Having written this concluding chapter, I certainly understand his concern: some of the sentences I’ve written here seem to beg for quotational misuse. But the image of reading that his sentiment evokes is profoundly private—it suggests that books speak best to the individual reader, alone in an endless room full of books, for it is only in that context that a book can be protected from the talkative and perhaps cynical or sinister reader; only there can it achieve its power to cross the space between page and mind with integrity. But we need not read

alone, and we do not read alone, and happily, readers will talk. Our unhistoric acts of reading diffuse through our own words about them, be they written, or spoken in a classroom, or thrown out on failing breath to a friend who meets us each morning to run the same hill.

