Approaches to Teaching the Works of David Foster Wallace

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Introduction

While David Foster Wallace began publishing in the mid-1980s, it was really the next decade that would see his work generate sustained scholarly readings and the publication of associated pedagogical materials. The justly famous 1993 *Review of Contemporary Fiction* issue devoted to Wallace, William T. Vollmann, and Susan Daitch anchored early criticism of Wallace’s fiction to developing debates about the end of postmodernism. Within a few years, his short fiction began to appear in volumes that placed his work in a similar context, including such teacher-friendly anthologies as *Postmodern American Fiction*, edited by Paula Geyh and others (1998), which reprinted “Lyndon”; *Innovations*, edited by Robert L. McLaughlin (1998), which began with “Little Expressionless Animals”; and *After Yesterday’s Crash: The Avant-Pop Anthology*, edited by Larry McCaffery (1995), which included “Tri-Stan: I Sold Sissee Nar to Ecko.” A solid body of critical work developed across Wallace’s lifetime, with early, influential essays by Tom LeClair (1996) and N. Katherine Hayles (1999) establishing *Infinite Jest* in particular as a subject of serious scholarly attention in academic journals. At the same time, his mainstream cultural relevance was bolstered by the publication of such seminal review essays as A. O. Scott’s February 2010 *New York Review of Books* essay, “The Panic of Influence.” The sheer volume of both academic and popular writing about Wallace, however, grew exponentially in the dark shadow cast by his suicide in 2008, as younger writers—and specialists from other disciplines—pressed his work into broader territories.

This volume appears in the context of that post-2008 expansion of interest in Wallace’s work. The survey associated with this volume invited instructors to comment on which of Wallace’s works they teach and in what contexts, which secondary supplements they assign to students or employ for their own research, and which thematic and formal issues they emphasize. More than one hundred educators replied, and the information provided in this section is informed by their helpful responses.

Novels and Short Fiction

Over twenty years David Foster Wallace published five books of fiction: the story collections *Girl with Curious Hair* (1989), *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999), and *Oblivion* (2004), and the novels *The Broom of the System* (1987) and *Infinite Jest* (1996). His final work-in-progress, *The Pale King*, was assembled by his longtime editor, Michael Pietsch, and published posthumously in 2011. These books can be thought of in three pairs (each combining a novel-length work with a collection of short stories) that represent his early, mid, and late career phases:
Broom and Girl were both largely drafted during Wallace’s student years; Infinite Jest and Brief Interviews represent his highly successful middle period; and Oblivion, parts of which were originally intended to be part of The Pale King, forms a natural partner to Wallace’s posthumous volume. Taken together, these works are diverse in thematic content and technical accomplishment, and their pedagogical challenges range from those raised by unsettling material (e.g., Oblivion’s “Incarnations of Burned Children”) to those presented by sheer length (e.g., the thousand-plus pages of Infinite Jest).

Despite the scale of Infinite Jest, the majority of survey respondents concentrated on this work, following the critical orthodoxy that has established Wallace’s long novel as his signature achievement. Beyond Infinite Jest, teachers variously draw on every stage of Wallace’s career, from his earliest published story, “The Planet Trillaphon as It Stands in Relation to the Bad Thing” (1984), through to The Pale King. Amid these diverse selections, Oblivion’s “Good Old Neon” is the most frequently chosen individual story, presumably for its condensation of the mature Wallace’s essential themes. Despite its relative length, “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way” is the next most frequently taught story, no doubt for its close relation to Wallace’s seminal essay “E Unibus Pluram.” In order, the next most frequently taught stories are “The Depressed Person,” “Incarnations of Burned Children,” “My Appearance,” “Octet,” “Little Expressionless Animals,” “Lyndon,” and “The Soul Is Not a Smithy.”

Nonfiction and Reviews

Wallace published two book-length nonfiction works (Signifying Rappers [1997] and Everything and More, a history of mathematical infinity [2003]) and two collections of nonfiction essays (A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again [1997] and “Consider the Lobster” and Other Essays [2005]) during his lifetime; a third collection (Both Flesh and Not [2012]) and a speech (This Is Water [2009]) were published posthumously. It is a testament to the power and richness of this nonfiction, and to the myriad ways it complements Wallace’s fiction, that survey respondents report assigning all or part of every one of these nonfiction works to their classes. Both Flesh and Not, while most recently published, contains some of Wallace’s earliest nonfiction work, including his first published essay, “Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young,” in which he lays out elements of his arguments about his place in literary history and his critique of contemporary visual culture that he would later develop in the better-known “E Unibus Pluram” and interview by Larry McCaffery. Many teachers assign one or more of these texts to introduce Wallace’s work in relation to his postmodern ancestors and to the ironic culture his work often challenges. Alongside “E Unibus Pluram,” most often assigned are “Consider the Lobster” (often in composi-
tion, philosophy, or animal studies), “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again” (in writing classes or alongside Infinite Jest), and This Is Water (alongside pretty much everything by Wallace).

While instructors use the diverse abundance of the rest of Wallace’s nonfiction to suit their own various purposes, the essays do suggest some obvious themes. “Greatly Exaggerated” argues for Wallace’s own contrarian view in postmodernism’s “death of the author” debate (Barthes), which sets him apart from that literary ancestry, while “David Lynch Keeps His Head,” “Some Remarks on Kafka’s Funniness,” “Joseph Frank’s Dostoevsky,” and “Borges on the Couch” can be used to situate Wallace’s work in a context and history wider than America and literature. Other essays, however, build intimate visions of Wallace’s America, particularly “Getting Away from Already Being Pretty Much Away from It All” and the post-9/11 “The View from Mrs. Thompson’s”; the extensive “Up, Simba” (published separately as McCain’s Promise) gives us Wallace’s view of American politics and might be excerpted alongside The Pale King. Two essays from “Consider the Lobster” confront issues of gender, power, and feminism head-on—“Big Red Son,” Wallace’s exposé of the pornography industry, and “Certainly the End of Something or Other,” ostensibly a review of Updike—and so could be taught fruitfully alongside Brief Interviews with Hideous Men in particular. The early work “The Empty Plenum,” a critical essay on David Markson’s Wittgenstein’s Mistress, also raises complex questions about gender and fiction writing while more overtly presenting some of Wallace’s ideas about the usefulness of metafiction. Finally, several composition instructors report using Wallace’s masterful “Authority and American Usage,” from “Consider the Lobster” (or the shorter version published as “Tense Present” in Harper’s), to bring Wallace’s characteristic humor and cleverness to their teaching of English usage.

**Readings for Students**

Survey respondents report teaching Wallace’s work in a wide range of contexts; consequently, their assigned topical readings range widely as well. These readings concern postmodern theory, media, and culture; debates within postmodernism, such as the “death of the author,” and surrounding the end of postmodernism; metafiction and image fiction; literary journalism; rhetoric and writing strategies; philosophy, especially of consciousness and language; and Wallace’s forerunners and contemporaries, particularly John Barth and Jonathan Franzen. Instructors reach for a wide range of criticism to accompany their teaching of Wallace, most often assigning portions of Marshall Boswell’s Understanding David Foster Wallace and Stephen J. Burn’s reader’s guide to Infinite Jest; when teaching Infinite Jest, some also rely on excerpts from Greg Carlisle’s Elegant Complexity as well as on two earlier essays on the novel, N. Katherine Hayles’s “The Illusion of
Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity” and Mary K. Holland’s “Braving the Narcissistic Loop of Infinite Jest” (which also appears in Succeeding Postmodernism). Many educators introduce Wallace’s work as a whole using the 1993 McCaffery interview, which they tend to pair with the “E Unibus Pluram” essay from the same issue of the Review of Contemporary Fiction, in order to explore Wallace’s ideas about contemporary culture, fiction, and the uses of irony in both. Others assign interviews from Burn’s Conversations with David Foster Wallace, or the interview by Charlie Rose in 1997 (“David Foster Wallace Interview”), excerpts of which they play in class. On Wallace’s innovations in irony, teachers assign articles by Paul Giles (“Sentimental Posthumanism”), Lee Konstantinou (“No Bull”), and Adam Kelly (“David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity”). Many accompany these critical sources with excerpts from biographical ones, most often D. T. Max’s Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story (or, for brevity’s sake, Max’s article “The Unfinished” from The New Yorker), but also David Lipsky’s Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself. One respondent wisely paired such excerpts with “The Intentional Fallacy” (Wimsatt and Beardsley).

When placing Wallace’s work in the context of postmodern theory, teachers assign excerpts from Fredric Jameson’s Postmodernism; or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, Jean Baudrillard’s Simulations, and Marshall McLuhan’s Understanding Media, as well as Jacques Derrida’s “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences”; when connecting Wallace’s work to that of early postmodernists including Barth, they use Barth’s “The Literature of Exhaustion.” In situating Wallace in relation to post-postmodernism, they use Robert McLaughlin’s essay “Post-Postmodern Discontent,” Burn’s chapter “A Map of the Territory,” and excerpts from Holland’s Succeeding Postmodernism. Instructors frequently teach Wallace in relation to the fiction and nonfiction of his contemporaries, most often pairing his Brief Interviews with Zadie Smith’s chapter “Brief Interviews with Hideous Men: The Difficult Gifts of David Foster Wallace” (sometimes juxtaposed with James Wood’s essay on “hysterical realism”) and pairing Wallace’s work more generally with essays by Jonathan Franzen, including “Farther Away,” “Why Bother?,” and “Mr. Difficult.” Emphasizing Wallace’s philosophical roots, they use excerpts from Wittgenstein’s Tractatus and Philosophical Investigations, as well as essays by René Descartes, Aristotle, Paul Ricoeur, and Stanley Cavell.

The Instructor’s Library

Interviews and Biographical Materials

The frequency with which teachers select Wallace works that deal (albeit in displaced fashion) with personal suffering, such as “Good Old Neon” and “The
Depressed Person,” anecdotally indicates how the proximity of Wallace’s suicide informs classroom discussion of his work. Many respondents draw on Max’s detailed biography of Wallace’s suffering as a way of exploring “how biography becomes a curious kind of paratext” (Christopher Schaberg), while others simply see it as inescapable or as something that the students find particularly compelling. Some teachers match individual stories to particular moments in Every Love Story where Max recounts the context or writing of that work. Lipsky’s book-length interview with Wallace, Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself, is used less frequently in class, though it is often assigned as secondary reading. Other biographically inflected sources deserve mention. Wallace and Bryan A. Garner’s Quack This Way offers a transcript of a long interview about usage from 2006. Charles B. Harris’s Proofread or Die! was published after our survey, but its collection of writings by Wallace’s former students offers teachers intriguing juxtapositions (e.g., Suzanne Scanlon’s “Final Exam” might be set next to the various “interviews” from Brief Interviews with Hideous Men).

Just as many respondents disdain the full biography, considering it “too journalistic for sustained attention” (Joseph Tabbi), and instead emphasize a text-based approach. Even in such cases, Wallace’s reflections in interviews on his own position remain important. Interviews archived online, such as Wallace’s appearance on Charlie Rose or his discussions with Michael Silverblatt, are popular resources, and there are two print anthologies of Wallace’s interviews. Stephen J. Burn’s Conversations with David Foster Wallace collects twenty-two interviews from across Wallace’s career. David Foster Wallace: The Last Interview contains six interviews, three of which are also in Burn’s volume. By far the most important interview—as attested by the survey and by two decades of Wallace scholarship—is Larry McCaffery’s Review of Contemporary Fiction interview (the version collected in Conversations with David Foster Wallace restores about two thousand words that were cut from the version first published [xv]).

Archival Materials

The Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, Austin, holds extensive archival materials that relate to every major Wallace work except Signifying Rappers. These materials include handwritten notes and drafts, interview and research notes, typescript drafts, proofs, and promotional materials, as well as personal documents including some of Wallace’s teaching syllabi; correspondence with his editors and with other authors, most notably Don DeLillo; and more than three hundred books, many heavily annotated, from Wallace’s library. Most of these materials are accessible only to those who travel to the archive, though some of them are available on the Ransom Center’s Web site (and are also collected at thehowlingfantods.com). One respondent reported students’ delight at seeing Wallace’s intimate and intellectual notes in the marginalia of his own writing and of others’ books. Early and late drafts allow study of Wallace’s writing
process, which is also often under discussion in Wallace’s correspondence with Don DeLillo. Exchanges with other authors can illuminate Wallace’s revisions, such as the changes he made to “Mister Squishy” after responding to a question from Dave Eggers on a draft. Wallace’s marginalia in other writers’ books can be used to consider influence and to trace his sense of literary history: for example, using his very heavily annotated copy of Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse*. For fun and by way of introduction, Wallace’s syllabi—characteristically funny, casual, and demanding at the same time—can be used to discuss his ideas about reading, writing, and learning, both as a teacher and as a writer.

**Critical Studies**

**Book-Length Studies**

The recent boom in Wallace studies means the body of criticism available to teachers and scholars is rapidly changing. As of this writing, eight monographs on Wallace’s work exist, two of them exclusively on *Infinite Jest*. Burn’s *David Foster Wallace’s Infinite Jest: A Reader’s Guide* (2003, 2012) offers a concise but detailed and wide-ranging examination of the novel’s structure, allusions, and themes; chapters on Wallace’s legacy and poetics; and an appendix containing a chronology of the novel’s events. Carlisle’s *Elegant Complexity* (2007) presents the novel as divided into twenty-eight thematically unified chapters and provides a host of useful tools for orienting oneself in the novel’s chaos, including a thematic outline, character lists, its own chronologies, a setting map, and an indexed list of references. Carlisle’s *Nature’s Nightmare* (2013) gives the same focused attention to *Oblivion*, relating its analyses of each story in the collection to Wallace’s career and to his last two novels.

Other monographs expand their frameworks across Wallace’s oeuvre. Boswell’s *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (2003) remains the sole book to provide a comprehensive introduction to and treatment of each of Wallace’s major works through *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, balancing theoretical and literary frameworks, close reading, and reader friendliness. Recent monographs have a narrower focus: Clare Hayes-Brady’s *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace* (2016) examines Wallace’s resistance to closure and the commodification of language; Adam Miller’s *The Gospel According to David Foster Wallace* (2016) uses short scenes from *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King* to explore religion, boredom, and distraction in the twenty-first century; and David Hering’s *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form* (2016) uses archival material to relate Wallace’s evolving compositional structures to his works’ themes. Most recently, Lucas Thompson’s *Global Wallace* (2016) challenges the orthodox view of Wallace as a narrowly American writer and places his work in dialogue with world literary studies; Jeffrey Severs, in *David Foster Wallace’s Balancing Books* (2017), examines Wallace’s interest in financial crises, and in the social implications of neoliberal policies in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as expressed over his entire oeuvre.
Essay Collections and Special Issues

As Wallace’s critical profile has risen, his work has been the subject of several special issues of academic journals and essay collections. This trend began with the Review of Contemporary Fiction’s 1993 special issue on younger writers but has rapidly gained pace in the last six years. Many collections originate in conferences devoted to Wallace: David Herig’s Consider David Foster Wallace gathered papers from a conference in Liverpool; Boswell’s special double issue of Studies in the Novel (later republished in book form as David Foster Wallace and “The Long Thing”) partly collects papers from a 2011 conference devoted to The Pale King, as did Luc Herman and Toon Staes’s 2014 special issue of English Studies: Unfinished: Critical Approaches to David Foster Wallace’s The Pale King. Zeroing in on Wallace’s novels or on The Pale King, specifically, these later collections follow a trend toward increasingly specialized focus on a particular book or aspect of Wallace’s work that is reflected in Roberto Lucchetti and Roberto Natalini’s special issue of Lettera Matematica (2016) on Wallace and mathematics, Steven M. Cahn and Maureen Eckert’s Freedom and the Self: Essays on the Philosophy of David Foster Wallace (2015), and Robert Bolger and Scott Korb’s Gesturing Toward Reality (2014). Boswell and Burn’s Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies (2013), by contrast, attempts to take in the full range of Wallace’s literary output by including essays on each of Wallace’s volumes of fiction alongside essays that address large themes in Wallace’s work. Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou’s The Legacy of David Foster Wallace (2012) helpfully mixes biographically oriented profiles with critical commentaries.

Web Sites and Other Electronic Resources

The popularity of Wallace’s work in general (and of Infinite Jest in particular) with readers predisposed toward decoding, connecting, and obsessing has produced an impressive presence of Wallace-related materials on the Internet, some of which instructors will find helpful in orienting themselves or their students to Wallace’s work and worlds or in drawing connections between that work and students’ contemporary experience. One might start with Nick Manaitis’s The Howling Fantods, a Web site that gathers “David Foster Wallace news and resources since March 97.” The Web site lists and links to biographical and bibliographical materials, interviews, Wallace’s appearances in popular culture, and even uncollected fiction held at the Ransom Center, while also providing notes on Wallace conferences, a (rather incomplete) list of critical sources, and readers’ notes on Infinite Jest. It also links to the Wallace-l Listserv, run by Matt Burcher, where Wallace fans debate minutiae of Wallace’s life and works. The Wallace Research Group at the University of Glasgow hosts a regularly updated online bibliography devoted to academic criticism of Wallace.

For all things Jest, try the Infinite Jest Wiki (infinitejest.wallacewiki.com), which offers character diagrams; an alphabetic index of names, places, and events from the novel; readers’ annotations of the novel by page; overviews of characters,
plot, events, and settings; and links to *Jest*-inspired works of art. Internet searches will also turn up a slew of setting and event maps, including maps of Eschaton, of *Jest*’s Boston, and of its reconfigured North America; *Infinite Atlas* offers an interactive map that identifies important locations, events, and characters from the novel on a contemporary map of the Boston area and beyond. Sam Potts’s *Infinite Jest Diagram* expresses the relationships among all the major (and most minor) characters. Such sites, along with many other *Jest*-inspired products and documents, can be fun as well as genuinely helpful as students navigate the novel for the first time. The archived Web site of the first Infinite Summer—a communal reading of *Jest*, organized by Matthew Baldwin, in which readers around the world used a blog to discuss their reading experiences (infinitesummer.org)—also offers helpful introductory materials for first-time *Jest* readers, such as “How to Read *Infinite Jest*” (Bucher), while linking to yet more online reader resources. It can also be used as a template for organizing one’s own communal reading experience of the novel, in or outside class.

Many respondents report bringing Wallace’s own voice into the classroom while teaching his writing, most often by playing clips of his interviews with Charlie Rose and with Michael Silverblatt and by playing the audio (video is not available) of his 2005 commencement speech at Kenyon College, later published as *This Is Water*. This speech never fails to move students while clarifying some of the core ideas that motivate Wallace’s fiction. Teachers also use clips of Wallace reading his fiction (including “Incarnations of Burned Children” and excerpts from *The Pale King* [www.youtube.com/watch?v=UoU3l8trOnY]) and nonfiction (including “Consider the Lobster” [www.youtube.com/watch?v= _fZOI7C_vDI] and “Big Red Son” [www.youtube.com/watch?v=pJv_dhx6meE]).

Finally, as the “contemporary” world of Wallace’s writing recedes, savvy instructors have begun to supplement that writing with relevant cultural context, for example, playing commercials Wallace mentions in “E Unibus Pluram,” along with clips of shows—including *Saturday Night Live* and *The David Letterman Show*—he uses in his arguments or in his fiction. Students may also enjoy seeing a truly contemporary pop culture imagining of a key scene from *Infinite Jest*—the Decemberists’ video for “The Calamity Song,” which stages the disastrous Eschaton battle; or Wallace’s appearance as a cruiser wearing a tuxedo T-shirt on an episode of *The Simpsons* titled “A Totally Fun Thing Bart Will Never Do Again” (complete with a ship named *Nadir*). While this *Simpsons* reference is only available as captured images, all other clips mentioned here are currently available on *YouTube*. 
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