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<https://doi.org/10.18297/etd/979>

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CONSIDER DAVID FOSTER WALLACE, OR RECONSIDERING DFW: LITERARY  
SELF FASHIONING AND SLACKER GENIUS

by

Michael Franklin Miller  
B.A., University of Kentucky, 2011

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of the  
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English

University of Louisville

Louisville, Kentucky

May 2013

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A Thesis approved on

May 11, 2013

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my parents, David and Patricia Miller. Without their unwavering support I would not have been able to complete this thesis. Thanks Mom, thanks Dad. I'll miss you in Texas. I would also like to thank Dr. Tom Byers for sharing his expertise and experience with me over the course of these two years. Finally, I'd like to thank Dr. Aaron Jaffe for his careful reading of this thesis and, most of all, for his mentorship.

## ABSTRACT

### CONSIDER DAVID FOSTER WALLACE, OR RECONSIDERING DFW: LITERARY SELF FASHIONING AND SLACKER GENIUS

Michael Franklin Miller

May 11, 2013

In the five years since he took his own life, the literary world has witnessed an explosion of interest in the late David Foster Wallace. Two posthumous books have been published; countless newspaper articles and magazine pieces have been written; and a niche of literary scholarship simply called “Wallace Studies” has infiltrated English departments across the world. Needless to say, David Foster Wallace’s celebrity has not waned. However, none of the published scholarship to date has examined the creation of the David Foster Wallace celebrity persona, a persona I call the Slacker Genius. This thesis seeks to analyze the numerous book reviews, magazine profile pieces, interviews, and photographs surrounding David Foster Wallace’s work. I argue that these sites of cultural production are part of a system of medially distributed authorship wherein the author, or, for my purposes, the Slacker Genius persona, must be conceptualized as a co-creation between biographical author and the media.

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## INTRODUCTION

Every Man has a Property in his own Person -- John Locke

I suspect that Mr. Wallace's persona—at once unbearably sophisticated and hopelessly naïve, infinitely knowing and endlessly curious—will be his most durable creation --

A.O. Scott

David Foster Wallace bluntly begins his opening editorial remarks to the spring 1996 edition of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* with a confession: “Hi. I’ve never really edited anything before,” he admits, “but I’m the one who’s edited this ‘Quo Vadis’ number at *RCF*” (“Quo Vadis” 7). Translated into English from the original Latin, the title of Wallace’s short introduction, “Quo Vadis,” more or less means “where are you going?”, which makes perfect sense when you consider the name of the speculative edition was “The Future of Fiction: A Forum Edited by David Foster Wallace.” In the spring of 1996, it’s fair to say, there was indeed considerable interest in fiction’s future. Where it was going was anyone’s guess.

Wallace’s edited volume of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* flew off the presses just after his enormous novel *Infinite Jest* landed on booksellers’ shelves. The timing of the two publications’ release—one a massive, barely readable novel, and the other a respected academic journal—seems just too perfect to chalk up to chance. Why was Wallace chosen to guest edit that particular volume? Was there something more insidious, calculated, taking place in the literary economy?

The fact of these two publications' simultaneous release hints toward the existence of a broad system of intentional authorial self-fashioning on the part of David Foster Wallace. His entire introduction is written in a signature style that has attained adjectival status: "Wallacian." His tone is personal, informal, and funny. As David McLean of the *Boston Book Review* noted in his write up of *Infinite Jest*, "Wallace's style (Wallacian)...manages to be enthralling, beautiful, clear, clichéd, and sometimes infuriatingly repetitive" (McLean). Since the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*—a publication that considers itself a mouthpiece for the avant-garde—is a nationally distributed, well-known, and highly respected literary journal, it strikes one as odd that Wallace, whose excruciatingly self-conscious and colloquial style seems to fly in the face of traditional academic prose, would be chosen to guest edit a serious publication. Yet, with the media hype around *Infinite Jest* still in overdrive, editing the *RCF* proved to be a propitious path for Wallace to advance his public image. How could it not be? What better venue for David Foster Wallace to exert control over *Infinite Jest*'s reception and promote his flourishing literary fame than in an academic journal?

To attribute sole authorship for the creation and maintenance of Wallace's literary fame to the biographical Wallace would be to ignore egregiously the myriad cultural systems that frame literary reception and manage authorial reputation. In order to come to terms fully with this model of authorship, we must first acknowledge that David Foster Wallace's now-ubiquitous persona—referred to hereafter simply as DFW in order to resist confusion with the biographical person—has become a culturally complex signifier existing parallel to *Infinite Jest*.

After the behemoth novel's publication in 1996, David Foster Wallace attained celebrity status. With *Infinite Jest* prompting from reviewers pronouncements of authorial genius, Wallace's growing popularity among readers and the press was due in no small part to the way in which he embodied in toto the figure of what I term the "slacker-genius." Within the slacker-genius, I contend, one finds a discernible trace of the Romantic creative author-genius—examples of which can be found in the press's obsequious reviews of *Infinite Jest*, for instance—colliding with 1990s slacker, or grunge, culture. The defining dialectic of work and leisure that is tied inextricably to the slacker-genius emerges from this point of convergence. The slacker-genius's ability to resignify its marked disposition toward flânerie or "slacking off," delayed adolescence, disregard for structured work, colloquialism, and asceticism, formality, and high intellectual labor, helps to account for its broad appeal as a cultural signifier. While the qualities most associated with the DFW persona appear to be at odds with one another, they form, I argue, the constitutive components of a trademark style best referred to in its adjectival form as simply "Wallacian."

And thus it is necessary to unpack briefly what I define as DFW's "trademark style." The DFW persona is indeed a highly stylized, fragmented, and trademarked persona that is distributed medially through two primary discursive modes of cultural practice: writing and photography. Unique to each medium is its own set of Wallacian trademarks. Found in almost all subsequent texts post-*Infinite Jest*, we find a staggeringly significant number of endnotes, footnotes, and complex sentences that never seem to end—the defining stylistic quirks of the DFW persona in Wallace's written work and which reviewers and critics were quick to attribute to his literary genius. In the majority

of photographs, however, we find Wallace donning accoutrements more in line with the grunge, or slacker aesthetic of the 1990s, like his trademark bandanna or shabby t-shirts, for instance. To that end, these trademark apparel items of the DFW persona serve the purpose of neutralizing the charges of genius leveled at him in the press.

Before moving on, however, I want to return briefly to the slacker-genius dialectic of work and leisure, for the implications I draw from this presumed opposition in the DFW persona have significant bearing on my conception of authorship. As I argue in more detail in the following chapters, the label of authorial genius in the slacker-genius dyad was conferred predominantly upon DFW by reviewers and critics in the mainstream press and a handful of scholars; while the slacker component of the dyad stems from my joint reading of Wallace's publicity photographs. Instead of a well-groomed genius, most photos of Wallace depict a kind of 1990s slacker, clothed shabbily in second-hand, blue-collar adornments. In turn, I suggest that the slacker-genius persona was not an immanent component of Wallace's work, but was the product of a system of medially distributed authorship

Nevertheless, the crux of my argument ultimately hinges upon my main contention that the DFW persona surrounding Wallace's work was created out of the system of hype generated by *Infinite Jest* and was deployed reflexively by the biographical Wallace in a strategic attempt to frame his literary reception and exert control over the promotion of the DFW persona. This persona, however, was not necessarily intrinsic to Wallace's work; instead, the slacker-genius aura of DFW, I argue, must be conceived as the product of medially distributed authorship. This system of medially distributed authorship, however, poses a series of complications that seek to

question the degree of agency an author possesses over his texts. Authorial agency, autonomy, possession over meaning—these poststructuralist battles were famously fought long ago. However, in the battle over authorship neither side in the debate has ceded to the other. And so I now turn to a brief overview of the way in which three prominent poststructuralists—Barthes, Foucault, Derrida—have argued for the “death of the author.”

As one begins to think deeply about 20<sup>th</sup> century critical accounts of authorial agency and textual meaning, it’s always wise to begin with the question: didn’t Barthes famously pronounce the author “dead” in 1967? And didn’t Foucault come up with a similar conclusion in 1969’s “What is an Author?” These two oft-cited essays have evolved over time into the canonical sites of theoretical excavation which critics continue to mine in their futile attempt to discover something new in poststructuralism’s critical account of authorship. For these two theorists, and even going back to Wimsatt and Beardsley’s twin essays concerning the intentional and affective fallacies, whatever interpretive or affective effects an author intends or embeds in a particular work is of secondary importance to what the reader hermeneutically mines from the text. In other words, an “author’s” purported ownership of his written work is delegitimized; instead, the written text is given to resignification and repossession by multitudinous readers, open to any and all interpretation. The author, then, is merely an effect produced by the process of resignification, an understanding of which helps account for the popular critical reception the notion of “the empty signifier” received, especially in light of Jacques Derrida’s influential essay “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences.” He writes, “Henceforth, it was necessary to begin thinking that there

was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play” (280). In other words, broadly speaking and simply put, “fixed meaning is impossible.” We can see how this idea resonated so profoundly with Barthes’ and Foucault’s critical accounts of authorship. Without a centered, creative author endowed with conscious intent, the text is propped wide open for readers to interpret it in any way they deem most appropriate. However schematic (and reductive), the foregoing account has become a kind of “high” postmodernist orthodoxy—and, for my purposes, it has curiously defined the critical climate in which DFW and other second-wave postmodernists self-consciously labored.

In relative short order, however, critics undertook a cautious reappraisal of some of the excesses of the high “postmodern” position. For example, in *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* (1992), Seán Burke argues that the canonical poststructuralist texts announcing the death of the author are in dire need of being reconceptualized critically as textual manifestations of a singular, author-producer. While Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, and their many interlocutors seem to operate under the assumption that they have philosophized themselves out of their respective texts announcing the death of the author, Burke suggests that an implicit binary between implied author and reader—and given this particular context, authors whose texts are explicitly *about* the death of the author—is indeed a false one. Just because a text announces the death of the author, he contends, does not automatically assert the author’s absence from the written proclamation, and it most certainly does not mean any interpretation is up for grabs.

Appearing as a contemporary corrective to the issue, Benjamin Widiss's *Obscure Invitations: The Persistence of the Author in Twentieth-Century American Literature* (2011) attempts to readdress the issue of authorship after poststructuralism and 1960s metafiction by drawing heavily upon the notion of play. In his account, one textual strategy 20<sup>th</sup> century authors have relied upon in order to make their work more attractive to readers is the playful, reflexive acceptance that a key component of most critical, interpretative strategies is the conflation of author and work, a move which allows the author to participate in a kind of textual play within the text that enables him or her to play a literary game of authorial hide and seek. It is through self-conscious self-portraiture, he argues, that authors have been able to confirm the readers' presence and expectations. When these expectations are acknowledged and anticipated by the author, it grants license to him to either conform to or playfully disrupt readers' reading experiences by effectively drawing them further into the text through the strategic oscillation between textual anticipation and disruption (Widiss 4). Widiss defines this tactic as an "obscure invitation." He writes:

The hermeneutic strategies we have been taught by modernism, and taught as well that they serve to elucidate texts that at the very least seek to be hermetically sealed, instead derive essential energy from the specter of the author standing behind and beyond—whether as aid, arbiter, or prize for the process for interpretation. That this author has been placed intrinsically off-limits by poststructuralist theory and is (I agree) never wholly accessible should not blind us to the fact that she or he is very much in play notionally in texts from every point in the century. (ibid.)

In other words, the kind of play Widiss has in mind—two of his examples are Nabokov’s *Lolita* and Dave Eggers’ derivative and Wallace-influenced *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*—neither reinstates the author as textual authority nor confirms the death of the author. By extending an “obscure invitation” to readers to “play” the game, he is asserting that there are indeed “rules” in this 20<sup>th</sup> century literary climate, rules made assertively by authors that readers can either agree or not agree to abide. “The more hidden the author, the more fixated the reader becomes on finding him or her,” he writes, “and the more fixated the reader, the more subject to being choreographed in that search by the author—precisely the opposite result from the new freedom and self-determination Barthes triumphantly proclaims” (6). Author and reader enter into a symbiotic relationship built on textual play in which appeals to the reader to continue reading—or buying—a particular author’s work are constantly made. With readers absorbed fully in the text, they are invariably guided by the author to arrive at their own conceived sense of meaning, but unlike poststructuralist accounts, meaning is not completely open to interpretation, nor is it fully disclosed intrinsically within the text. Textual identity or meaning, then, becomes a “function of reception rather than a precursor to it” (20). The shift away from strict hermeneutical interpretative strategies to examination of the cultural processes of reception that shape the identity of literary works is indispensable for understanding 20<sup>th</sup> century literary culture. It’s not so much *what* a text means but rather *how* it means that has warranted newfound critical attention.

In the wake of poststructuralism, the recent critical turn to the cultural reception of literary works has been significant and long overdue. Of course, when attempting to account for the reception a literary work receives in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one will be



obligated in his methodology to examine closely the broad cultural arenas of publishing, media, and the respective roles each plays in book marketing and the creation of literary celebrity. Interestingly enough, the bulk of this critical work has been performed almost exclusively by modernist scholars. A few standout examples include but are surely not limited to: Loren Glass's *Authors Inc.: Literary Celebrity in the Modern United States, 1880-1980* (2004); Aaron Jaffe's *Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity* (2005); Judith Brown's *Glamour in Six Dimensions: Modernism and the Radiance of Form* (2009); Aaron Jaffe's and Jonathan Goldman's edited collection *Modernist Star Maps: Celebrity, Modernity, Culture* (2010); and Jonathan Goldman's *Modernism is the Culture of Celebrity* (2011). What many of these studies share in common is a keen attentiveness to the products of what Jaffe terms "secondary literary labors," such as "reviewing, introducing, editing, and anthologizing" (3). Modernist authors like Eliot, Pound, Joyce, and Lewis, he contends, "mobilized their textual signatures—their authorial imprimaturs—into durable promotional vehicles for their careers, hybridizing bodily agency and textual form" (ibid.). As authors engaged in operations of "secondary literary labors," they were simultaneously self-fashioning their literary celebrity.

A brief assessment of the state of contemporary literature reveals that the self-fashioning of authorial imprimaturs is not limited exclusively to the heyday of modernism. While Jaffe, Brown, and Goldman draw examples from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century—the classic icons of high modernism—Widiss and Glass (and I join them in this assertion) maintain that the "modernist" controversies about authorship, promotion, and reputation refuse fundamentally to be contained in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and

remain irrefutably operative after WWII and on into the contemporary, presumably “postmodernist” scene.

And so, in a roundabout way, we end up right back where we started, at David Foster Wallace’s editorial introduction to the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*. The coinciding of Wallace’s edited *RCF* with the publication of *Infinite Jest* in early 1996 reveals, I contend, an exemplary case of an author “mobilizing” his “authorial imprimatur into a durable promotional vehicle.” The secondary literary labor of editing and writing an introduction to a respected academic journal was a surefire way for David Foster Wallace to stamp his authorial imprimatur on new printed territory. This process of authorial self-fashioning is what will be the main focus of this project.<sup>1</sup>

My thesis is concerned first and foremost with the various cultural and institutional mechanisms that shaped the reception and promotion of David Foster Wallace’s persona. My main contention proposes that the DFW slacker-genius persona is, in effect, the cultural product of a collaborative, reflexive effort between David Foster Wallace’s authorial self-fashioning, the massive book review industry, and his publisher’s marketing campaign for *Infinite Jest*. Centered around 1996’s *Infinite Jest*, the book to which Wallace’s reputation is most closely tied, I argue that the fervor with which reviewers concentrated on Wallace’s alleged genius—exemplified by his trademark use of footnotes, endnotes, and page-long sentences—allowed Wallace and his publisher, Little, Brown, to reflexively self-fashion an image of literary celebrity that

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<sup>1</sup> It is necessary for me to be explicit about my motivations for undertaking this kind of project. To date, all of the scholarly work on David Foster Wallace has been concerned with performing “a reading” of some kind or another on one of his texts, with the most ink spilled by far over *Infinite Jest*. While this work is often interesting, it largely ignores the cultural institutions of literary reception that help shape literary celebrities and personae. We may be interested in thinking about David Foster Wallace alongside Derrida’s conception of sincerity, as one scholar does, but we never stop and ask ourselves *why* we are interested in David Foster Wallace in the first place. This project aims to act as a corrective to what I perceive as a broad gap in Wallace Studies.

would ensure the continued sale of his books. In very simple terms, if one seeks to explain why Wallace's persona remained static after *Infinite Jest*, one might find a grain of truth in the bromide: if ain't broke, don't fix it.

My first chapter traces through the vast archive of book reviews and scholarly articles devoted to Wallace's work key instances in which reviewers and scholars focus specifically on Wallace's literary style as an extension of his persona, a persona I call "DFW" for the sake of simplicity and to resist confusing this signifier with the actual person. By examining in close detail a wide swath of book reviews, profile pieces, printed interviews, and scholarly work, I argue that these myriad printed documents play a fundamental role in what I define as a system of medially distributed authorship that works in concert with Wallace's self-fashioning to help create the "genius" of the slacker-genius persona. I maintain that Wallace was fully cognizant of what influential critics deemed constitutive of his genius. Knowing full well what elicited positive critical reactions and what did not, his awareness thereby allowed him to reflexively enfold into his subsequent texts the trademark stylistic quirks that would guarantee the successful promotion and positive critical reception of the DFW persona. In this sense, the genius of the DFW slacker-genius persona must be understood as a co-creation between David Foster Wallace's authorial self-fashioning and his critics.

With the system of genius creation firmly established, my second chapter examines author photographs of DFW and analyzes his stylized appearance. Since Wallace has become one of the most recognizable authors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I attempt to outline via a cultural studies approach key components of his signature slacker-genius look such as the long hair, shabby t-shirt, stubbly face, and of course, his trademark

bandanna. A close analysis of DFW's accoutrements reveals that his signature look—what I'm suggesting is essentially a 1990s grunge or slacker style—was part and parcel of his literary self-fashioning and Little, Brown's marketing campaign for *Infinite Jest*. By depicting Wallace as a 1990s grunger decked out in blue-collar dress, the DFW persona was able to appeal to readers who would not normally buy a book of such massive size—like *Infinite Jest*—and neutralize the intimidating charges of genius that chapter 1 sought to demonstrate. In other words, Wallace's self-fashioned appearance served Little, Brown's purpose of presenting the slacker-genius persona and the product in which it can be found—the published work—as more accessible to casual readers. How else could they sell an unsellable book?

In chapter 3 I turn briefly to two of Wallace's nonfiction essays: "Getting Away From Already Being Pretty Much Away From It All" and "Big Red Son." In each piece Wallace is dropped into a different situation—the 1993 Illinois State Fair and the 1997 *Adult Video News Awards* in Las Vegas—and expected to deploy his persona as the all-seeing, roving flâneur—the epitome of the slacker-genius. As J.R. "Bob" Dobbs, mythical "founder" of The Church of the SubGenius reminds us, for the slacker-genius, "the idea is to make PLAY into a *paying profession* or life scam!" since "the ONLY SANE MOVE would be to...**QUIT YOUR JOB AND SLACK OFF** before you're *too far gone*" (SubGenius 67). All kidding aside, for the DFW persona of these observational essays, the concept of work is transformed notionally into play, or mere flânerie, and the experiential accounts are thus the products of his seemingly immaterial form of slacker labor. The catch, of course, is that the aura of genius firmly established around the slacker-genius's written work surrounds the essays, too. The DFW persona, then, is

deployed most explicitly in Wallace's nonfiction pieces, and I argue that its clear visibility in these instances is best understood as an effect of the slacker-genius, or leisure-work, dialectic. Borrowing from Michel Serres, I suggest that the slacker-genius persona functions in these essays as a kind of parasite which "has placed itself in the most profitable positions, at the intersection of relations. The elementary link of his individual activity was to relate to a relation; its performances are far better in spots where several relations cross or meet" (Serres 45). Rounding out what I have referred to as a system of "medially distributed authorship," I come to argue that the self-fashioned slacker-genius persona is deployed reflexively by Wallace in the attempt to exert influence and control over the reception and promotion of his literary work, thus establishing for my purposes the DFW persona as the co-creation of varied cultural institutions of literary reception.

My epilogue concludes with a brief account of a few obituaries and an examination of three photographs of Wallace without his trademark bandanna appearing on the three biographical books that have been published thus far (none of them by Little, Brown, however): David Lipsky's *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace* (2010); Stephen J. Burn's *Conversations with David Foster Wallace* (2012); and D.T. Max's *Every Ghost Story is a Love Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* (2012). These photos, I argue, entice readers into cracking their respective covers by offering an "unbound" glimpse into Wallace's life through his bandanna-less head. By providing readers an access point into the mind of a genius, the photos appeal to and satisfy our cultural desire for celebrity hagiography.

David Foster Wallace's cultural stock is still quite high. Popular biographical interest in the person has ceased to wane, and a growing body of scholarly work has even

been termed “Wallace Studies.” Two books have been published posthumously by Little, Brown: the unfinished novel *The Pale King* (2011) and *Both Flesh and Not: Essays* (2012). While it’s still too early to assess fully Wallace’s impact on contemporary literature, it’s fair to say that he has been apotheosized into a monumental standout figure for many readers. According to some popular critics’ opinion, he may in fact be the last author-genius of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. To that end, this project proposes we reexamine the legacy of David Foster Wallace. The popular literary persona known as DFW, as we will see, was not the manifestation of a singular author-genius but was instead the product of a system of medially distributed authorship. The author is not dead (poor taste, I know) as some have proclaimed, nor is he alive and well, flexing the muscle of creative genius behind the text. Instead, David Foster Wallace and the cultural mechanisms of literary reception worked together and formed a holy union, if you will, a union out of which the figure popularly known today as “Saint Dave” was born.

## CHAPTER 1

Reviewers far more disciplined than I can tell you what *Infinite Jest* is about. They'll  
assure you  
it's a masterpiece -- Lisa Schwarzbaum

Now, at 33, he might actually get **read** if all the buzz doesn't scare people off -- David  
Gates

Some contemporary writers are involved in transactions requiring genius, but it seems to  
me to be sort of required on both sides -- David Foster Wallace

On the twelfth of September, 2008, David Foster Wallace hanged himself in the  
garage of his sunny southern California home. It should go without saying: David Foster  
Wallace would never write another word. While the living, breathing author is no longer  
alive, his death does not preclude the persona of David Foster Wallace from continuing to  
influence literary culture. Critic Bruce Weber's September 15<sup>th</sup> obituary for the *New  
York Times* begins:

David Foster Wallace, whose prodigiously observant, exuberantly plotted,  
grammatically and etymologically challenging, philosophically probing  
and culturally hyper-contemporary novels, stories, and essays made him  
an heir to modern virtuosos like Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo, an  
experimental contemporary of William T. Vollmann, Mark Leyner and

Nicholson Baker and a clear influence on younger tour-de-force stylists like Dave Eggers and Jonathan Franzen...(Weber)

Weber's consciously derivative style—clearly meant to imitate Wallace's masterfully crafted sentences—is nothing but a mere residuum of the late author's broad influence on contemporary prose. It is as if David Foster Wallace haunts his own obituary.

In early January 1987, a twenty-five year old graduate of Amherst College, aspiring fiction writer, and second-year MFA matriculant (Master of Flatulent Arts—Wallace's term, not mine) at the University of Arizona, published one of his two undergraduate theses as the first installment in Viking Penguin's new series of contemporary American fiction. Just when Brat Pack minimalism had all but sucked the life out of the anemic literary market, *The Broom of the System* hit the scene as a maximalist antidote to the pervasive sense of hip, minimalist nihilism that dominated the bestsellers' list. The infamous *New York Times Book Review* critic Michiko Kakutani became the first reviewer in the mainstream press to write about the novel, clearly inspired by Wallace's "wealth of talents—a finely-tuned ear for contemporary idioms; an old-fashioned story-telling gift [and] a seemingly endless capacity for invention and an energetic refusal to compromise" (Kakutani 1986). She concludes her review with a concession, "*Broom* is no mean achievement—and yet only a shadow of what the author might accomplish given the application of some narrative discipline and the exchange of other writers'

voices for a more original vision" (ibid.). Despite the few minor faults she finds with Wallace's first novel, her review's tone is mostly approbatory. The now-shopworn



comparisons to Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) Kakutani makes don't strike us as particularly fresh or inventive today, but it's important to remember our history: since glam-and-glitter-fiction ruled the literary roost in the 1980s, Wallace's *The Broom of the System* was graciously perceived as a refreshing throwback to 1960s metafiction. With the comparisons to Pynchon in mind, we must pay special attention to Kakutani's ending suggestion. As she wonders what Wallace could accomplish "given...the exchange of other writers' voices for a more original vision," we, too, must hypothesize along with her. What if Wallace traded in "other writers' voices" and found his own? Why are we so sure Wallace even had a voice? What if the voice we now attribute to Wallace isn't his at all? Would this change the way history remembers the late David Foster Wallace?

In the immediate aftermath of his sudden suicide in 2008 the media—and print media in particular—came down with a bad case of Wallace fever, their hearts and minds captured by the author's death. Countless obituaries mourning who A.O. Scott pronounced as "The Best Mind of His Generation" flooded internet magazines and national print publications and *Five Dials Magazine* quickly published a book of eulogies from Wallace's memorial service. Dave Eggers' *McSweeney's* ran a series of short remembrances and to date four books about Wallace's life have been published: David Lipsky's *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself* (2010); Stephen J. Burn's edited collection of interviews *Conversations with David Foster Wallace* (2012); publisher Melville House's *David Foster Wallace: The Last Interview and Other Conversations* (2012); and D.T. Max's *Every Ghost Story is a Love Story* (2012). In addition to the few dozen academic articles on Wallace's work, a few scholarly books have also appeared within the last few years: Marshall Boswell's *Understanding David*

*Foster Wallace* (2003), Greg Carlisle's *Elegant Complexity: A Study of David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest* (2007), David Hering's edited collection of essays *Consider David Foster Wallace* (2010), Stephen J. Burns's two editions of *David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest: A Reader's Guide* (2003, 2012), and Samuel Cohen's essay collection *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* (2012). The fact that popular and critical interest in David Foster Wallace has not only persisted but continues to grow demonstrates the broad influence his books have had and will continue to have on literary culture.

With this profusion of printed materials circulating freely in the literary economy, we are naturally inclined to consider these personal-interest books and refereed articles worthy contributions wedded to the tradition of hermeneutical critique and, to a greater extent, the attempted explication of literary genius—skim any review of *Infinite Jest* and I guarantee you'll inevitably come across at least a few superlatives. However, I am not interested in contributing to the already dense pile of literature exalting the figure sardonically dubbed “Saint Dave” by novelist Jonathan Franzen.<sup>2</sup> Instead, I am concerned with the extent to which these printed materials contribute to David Foster Wallace's authorial self-fashioning of the DFW persona. For our purposes, I find it most helpful to conceptualize David Foster Wallace as surrounded on all sides by a literary economy in which the material circulation of written texts and images work in concert to form a system of medially distributed authorship. I do not mean to suggest that “the author is dead” or has vanished. Far from it. In this chapter I argue that the authorial persona DFW cannot be attributed solely to the figure of the singular author-genius and instead must be reconfigured as a cultural co-creation between author and print media. In this sense, then,

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<sup>2</sup> In his controversial borderline-smear piece for the *New Yorker*, Franzen writes, “The people who knew David least well are most likely to speak of him in saintly terms.” See Jonathan Franzen, “Farther Away: *Robinson Crusoe*, David Foster Wallace, and the island of solitude.”

I'm attempting to "find," to deploy Widiss's use of the verb, the authorial persona of David Foster Wallace in the thick quagmire of printed material surrounding the author's texts. By carefully sifting through the vast archive of book reviews, author profile pieces, and published scholarly work, I show how the authorial persona of David Foster Wallace is in fact the product of a cultural system of medially distributed authorship. I argue that the abundant use of footnotes and endnotes in Wallace's texts play a critically fundamental role in creating the DFW persona by operating reflexively as signs of textually manifested genius. In other words, Wallace's recognition of the review industry's persistent pronouncements of genius enabled him to mobilize the slacker-genius persona textually as the product of medially distributed authorship. To insist on the idea that Wallace's texts, or those of any popular author, for that matter, are mere materializations of a singular, creative genius, is to fail to take account of the myriad cultural forces and institutions that contribute and lend themselves, in one way or another, to the creation and self-fashioning of literary persona.<sup>3</sup>

To date, none of the published scholarly work on David Foster Wallace has given due consideration to the important role various print institutions play in the genesis and propagation of literary persona. For this explicit reason, then, my aim in this chapter is to suture over this broad gap in "Wallace Studies." But before we can begin tracing Wallace's literary persona, we must first examine the tradition out of which it is born.

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<sup>3</sup> For more on this point, see David Saunders and Ian Hunter, "Lessons from the 'Literary': How to Historicise Authorship." They emphasize, "[T]he delineation and attribution of authorial personality is governed not by the logic of subject formation but by the historical emergence of particular cultural techniques and social institutions....The personalities made available by these institutions...are positive forms of social being distributed across individuals and institutions in a variety of ways ....The expressive author represents a particular configuration of this shifting distribution" (483).

To categorize David Foster Wallace strictly as a '60s-styled postmodernist would not be the most appropriate categorization,<sup>4</sup> but if we take him at his word, he's not a post-postmodernist or Brat Packer, either, once famously telling Larry McCaffery those terms send him "straight to the bathroom" (qtd. in McCaffery 36). Although he certainly cut his teeth on the now-great postmodern practitioners of metafiction such as Robert Coover, John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, and Vladimir Nabokov, Wallace stated repeatedly in interviews that he viewed them more as the objects of his literary patricide than direct influences (ibid. 48). But the hermetic self-referentiality and hyper self-consciousness that ultimately became the defining characteristics of the self-styled renegade metafictionists ended up through readerly osmosis in Wallace's own work, thereby helping to define him as a "prodigious" literary force one would indeed be wise not to mess with.<sup>5</sup> For example, as Michiko Kakutani points out, *The Broom of the System* does indeed share many structural and stylistic similarities with Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*. And even though Wallace renounced in so many ways the influence of the metafictional Fathers, much of the criticism to date has largely ignored the great extent to which texts like *Infinite Jest*, among his others, utilize techniques initially pioneered by the '60s experimentalists.

It's no big revelation that self-reflexivity plays a central role in Wallace's work. His nonfiction and fiction alike are jam-packed with self-reflexive, self-conscious quips

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<sup>4</sup> Scholar Marshall Boswell curiously argues that "Wallace might be best regarded as a nervous member of some still-unnamed (and perhaps unnameable) third wave of modernism" (1). He does not, however, define what exactly modernism's third wave would look like. See Boswell's *Understanding David Foster Wallace*. For another example of a critic conferring the label "postmodern" upon Wallace, see Timothy Williams, "Postmodern Writer Is Found Dead at Home."

<sup>5</sup> For an example of only one of the multitudinous comparisons to Pynchon, see Tom LeClair, "The Prodigious Fiction of Richard Powers, William Vollmann, and David Foster Wallace." He writes, "*Infinite Jest*...is invigorating evidence that a Pynchon protégé can both collaborate with his fellow prodigies and create prodigious original work (37).

and asides. The tradition from which Wallace learned these techniques is evident, as noted above: it's straight back to the '60s, baby. But perhaps Wallace is best known for his exhaustive use of reflexive footnotes and endnotes, and along with his breathless, inimitable style and often daring formal experiments, they have come to define overwhelmingly the style of his broad literary output. David McLean of the *Boston Book Review* observes of *Infinite Jest*:

The novel has footnotes, 388 of them covering nearly 200 pages, which is to say, the text spills over, and the notes are used alternately for information, jokes, commentaries, explanations, conversations, and whole displaced chapters. The reader has to engage *Infinite Jest*, not simply lie back and flip pages right to left in an orderly fashion. By the time you finish reading it, your copy will have a shattered spine and your arms may be sore from physical nature of the project. (McLean)

When hard pressed to explain his decision to complicate the text by adding footnotes/endnotes, Wallace explained that the notes are meant to mimic “the information-flood and data triage I expected to be an even bigger part of US life” (qtd. in Nadel 219). Contemporary life, Wallace believed, was fractured so badly that traditional iterations of big-R realism failed to account for the nonlinear cognitive mapping of everyday consciousness.<sup>6</sup> For Wallace, then, the footnotes/endnotes are his way of fracturing the narrative experience for readers.

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<sup>6</sup> Reviewer Sven Birkerts picks up on this theme in his February 1996 review for *The Atlantic*, in which he notes, “To say that the novel does not obey traditional norms is to miss the point. Wallace’s narrative structure should be seen instead as a response to an altered cultural sensibility.” See Sven Birkerts, “The Alchemist’s Retort: A multi-layered postmodern saga of damnation and salvation: A Review of *Infinite Jest*.”

We can recognize, on the one hand, Wallace's strategic attempt to transpose one media form into another—televisual culture into print—as a mimetic device.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, without rehearsing the seemingly never-ending debate concerning “the death of the author,” we can conceptualize Wallace's use of footnotes/endnotes as an invitation to “find” the author. Following this line of thought, I argue that Wallace's extensive use of notes in his work serves two primary purposes: first, they present a clear picture of an author-genius while simultaneously obscuring him from view, a move which, following Widiss, invites us as readers into an intimate relationship with the text. With readers fully drawn into Wallace's texts, I suggest that the second purpose of Wallace's notes is to act as a vehicle for the reflexive mobilization of literary persona, or DFW. Examining the co-constitutive role book reviews and printed interviews play in the creation of the stylized “Wallacian,”<sup>8</sup> or DFW persona, I argue that his literary persona is consciously self-fashioned in his texts by employing stylistically the footnote/endnote pair as a sign of textually manifested genius. Through the reflexive realization of and simultaneous distancing from his abundant intellectuality—let's just call it “genius” for now—that was a favorite topic for critics and reviewers, Wallace is able to mobilize his literary persona as the production of textually distributed authorship that is circulated and advantageously exploited in the contemporary literary economy. This strategy of luring readers into his texts, however, proves problematic for Wallace's role as singular author, as we will soon see.

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<sup>7</sup> I make this statement with some hesitation, however. Wallace refused the categorical binary realism/experimental, telling McCaffery, “A certain amount of the form-conscious stuff I write is trying—with whatever success—to do the opposite. It's supposed to be uneasy....I'm not much interested in in trying for big-R Realism...because the big R's form has now been absorbed and suborned by commercial entertainment” (Qtd. in McCaffery 34).

<sup>8</sup> The prescient David McLean of the *Boston Book Review* wrote in 1996, “With the publication of *Infinite Jest*, David Foster Wallace...has taken another step towards his inevitable status as an adjective.” McLean, “Modifying the Future.”

In the (post?) postmodern world in which we live, technology's proliferative penetration into the day-to-day lives of just about everyone who's bothered to notice has become a source of constant concern for contemporary fiction writers. Symptomatic of this cultural distress, Wallace's famous essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" attempts to diagnose the effects television has had on the state of contemporary fiction. If literature wanted to remain culturally relevant, Wallace believed, it had to compete with the passive, sexy allure of TV, though it must be careful not to fall prey to mass culture's "join 'em if you can't beat 'em" kind of totalizing logic. He cites Mark Leyner's *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist* (1990) as an exemplary case of literary fiction merely mimicking television, or, as he calls it, "image fiction" (81). Rather than reappropriate the literary tricks and techniques of the metafictional Fathers or adopt a more TV-friendly approach, Wallace ultimately concluded that the next big movement in literature just might be a return to the sincere and realistic (ibid).<sup>9</sup>

However, Wallace's texts did not always practice what he so earnestly preached. Beginning around 1993 after W.W. Norton's publication of the short story collection *Girl with Curious Hair*, Wallace's developing style became increasingly more self-reflexive and self-conscious, seemingly more attuned to the press. In her review of *Girl with Curious Hair*, critic Jennifer Levin announced, "He succeeds in restoring grandeur to modern fiction, reminding us of the ecstasy, terror, horror and beauty of which it is capable when it is released from the television-screen-sized confines of minimalism" (Levin). Landing a dig against '80s minimalism and extolling Wallace's "extraordinary

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<sup>9</sup> For an interesting discussion of Derrida's conception of sincerity in Wallace's fiction, see Adam Kelly, "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction." 131-6.

talents” in the same breath, Levin manages to laud Wallace’s collection of short stories as restorative and rejuvenating, all the while echoing Kakutani’s review of *The Broom of the System*. Note the rhetorical similarities between Kakutani’s earlier claim that Wallace possesses a “wealth of talents” and Jennifer Levin’s assertion that he is a “dynamic writer of extraordinary talents.” Both reviewers, reviewing two different books at two different times, unanimously agree: if there’s one asset David Foster Wallace possesses as a writer, it’s *talent*. These two reviews, one made in 1987, the other in 1993, are best understood as conversing with one another within the literary economy, circulating and colliding in the space around David Foster Wallace and ultimately contributing to the creation of DFW. And while there’s no surefire way to prove that Kakutani’s review directly influenced Levin’s, both pieces did appear in the culturally influential *New York Times* and *New York Times Book Review*, publications whose book reviews play a central role in shaping public literary opinion. Which is to say, because of their venue’s broad cultural influence, these reviews, I contend, managed to drum up public interest in DFW and entice readers into seeing for themselves what the fuss was indeed all about.

By developing a personal style that was consciously self-reflexive,<sup>10</sup> Wallace-as-author was able to embody both modernist and postmodernist authorial roles. Widiss clarifies:

With the enormous rise of self-depiction (thinly veiled or otherwise) in postmodernist literature, we have arrived at a literary history that defines the twentieth century as stretched between two opposed constellations of expectation: at its start, the modernist mandate of impersonality,

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<sup>10</sup> See A.O. Scott, “The Best Mind of His Generation,” in which he claims. “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.”



elusiveness, and allusiveness; at its end, celebrity culture's appeals for writing revelatory authorial personality and biography, writing that signals its accessibility and that cultivates within its readers a sense of intimacy.

(3)

This dual strategy of authorial obfuscation and presentation creates a sense of trust between reader and author. As the author inserts himself in a text via the strategic deployment of self-conscious notes and parenthetical asides—as in Wallace's case—he is *removing* himself from the text at the same time.<sup>11</sup> The signature hyper self-consciousness and –reflexivity in Wallace's texts act as a strategic invitation to *like* the author for his critical awareness of being absent from the text.<sup>12</sup> In other words, what this move does—reader likes author and wants to read more, author knows reader likes him—is to allow both reader and author to be in on the gag; the reader feels an intimate bond with the text and the author is able to present a version of his authorial persona and obscure his “real” identity (assuming there is one). “Far more often an apparent or incomplete authorial evacuation masks a deeper strategy of self-inscription—a studied self-occlusion that provokes in the reader not liberation or even indifference,” Widiss writes, “but rather a desire to find precisely that which initially eludes detection...[t]he

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<sup>11</sup> What I mean to suggest here is that the association between personality, text, and style inevitably evacuates the author of personal agency. For more on this point, see Loren Glass, *Authors Inc.: Literary Celebrity in the Modern United States, 1880-1980*. He clarifies, “For modernist artists, personality in the biographical sense tended to be sublimated into the concept of ‘style’...Personality continued to function as a factor in the literary field, even if one of the interpretative tenets of that field was to bracket it from the successful work of art” (6).

<sup>12</sup> In the 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace clarifies, “But there’s an unignorable line between demonstrating skill and charm to gain trust for the story vs. simple showing off. It can become an exercise in trying to get the reader to like and admire you instead of an exercise in creative art.” For an example of an exasperated critic who considers Wallace’s style as a desperate plea to be liked, see Maud Newton, “Another Thing to Sort of Pin on David Foster Wallace.” She writes, “Where the craving for admiration and approval predominates, intellectual rigor cannot thrive, if it survives at all.”

ostentatious absence of the authorial hand actually drives us to locate its traces” (6).<sup>13</sup>

Wallace’s dual strategy, then, prompts readers to dive headfirst into the text in order to locate “the authorial hand’s traces” and win the game of literary hide-and-seek.

But where exactly can one find “The Author” in Wallace’s texts? Is it even possible to locate him in his own work?<sup>14</sup> His texts certainly advance a clear picture of *an* author with a unique self-conscious style, but to what extent, and more importantly how, does Wallace capitalize on it? I suggest that the footnote/endnote combination works in tandem with the media to define and contribute to the self-fashioning of DFW. As Ira Nadel clarifies, “For Wallace, the footnote is the visual expression and confirmation of his nonlinear thinking. Footnotes or endnotes demonstrate the active intellectual and creative energy of Wallace on and off the page while also exhibiting the double consciousness of the text” (219). Never comfortable with the role of literary celebrity (or so he claimed), Wallace’s literary “double-consciousness” inevitably launched him into literary stardom.

Published in 1987 when he was at the ripe age of 25, Wallace’s first novel *The Broom of the System* was widely received by the literati with critical praise.<sup>15</sup> The novel—a heady cocktail composed of equal parts *The Crying of Lot 49*, a heavy dose of late

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<sup>13</sup> This search for “the authorial hand’s traces” may have a more economically sinister motive according to Henry Veggian. See Henry Veggian’s “Anachronisms of Authority: Authorship, Exchange Value, and David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King*.” He argues, “the death of authorship is the prosopopoeia that conceals other elements of literary production and muffles the seismic shifts that move its markets” (106).

<sup>14</sup> See Frank Louis Cioffi, “‘An Anguish Become Thing’: Narrative as Performance in David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*.” In his discussion of the material, generative effect *Infinite Jest*’s endnotes have on the reader, he argues, “Part of this ‘paratextual mode’ involves a physical ‘performance’ by the reader, who must consult footnotes or reference works on a continual basis throughout...[T]he reader cocreates the world of the novel nonoetically, in the manner of a stagehand” (162).

<sup>15</sup> At the time of its publication, however, only four national print outlets reviewed the novel: *The Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, *New York Times Book Review*, and *The Washington Post*.

Wittgenstein, and finished with a splash of poststructuralism<sup>16</sup>—prompted wild declarations of genius among the literati.<sup>17</sup> William Katovsky of *Arrival Magazine* dubbed it “the product of a wild and gifted imagination” (5); the notoriously-tough Kakutani gave it a mostly positive review; and Helen Dudar playfully titled her author profile for *The Wall Street Journal*, “A Whiz Kid and His Wacky First Novel.” With all of the hype swirling around the book, Wallace was soon inducted into the notorious gang of ‘80s writer-celebs that included Bret Easton Ellis, Tama Janowitz, Jay McInerney, and Rick Moody—better known “The Brat Pack”—as the hottest new voice on the literary scene. Wallace even goes so far as to include himself in this cohort of “Conspicuously Young Writers” in an essay from 1988, though he later distances himself from them in 1993. But even from the fortuitous outset of his career, Wallace expressed repeatedly his ambivalent relation to “The Brat Pack,” since he, unlike them, “hates to be the center of attention” (qtd. in *ibid.*), observing, “You can burn out by struggling in privation and neglect for many years, but you can also burn out if you’re given a little bit of attention” (qtd. in Kennedy and Polk 3).

As soon as *Infinite Jest* hit shelves in early 1996, however, the media’s fascination with Wallace spiraled into obsession. Early reviews of the 1,079 page novel deemed it “better than anything else being published in the U.S. right now” (Caro 54) and “The novel [that] has become what the hypesters like to call the literary sensation of this young year.” (*ibid.*).<sup>18</sup> As this chapter’s second epigraph shows, *Newsweek*’s David

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<sup>16</sup> For more on the connection between Wallace and Wittgenstein, see Lance Olsen “Termite Art, or Wallace’s Wittgenstein,” (204).

<sup>17</sup> Novelist Orson Scott Card just might win the prize for best concluding sentence in a book review. He warns, “This is Wallace’s first novel. God help us all when he gets some practice.” See Card, “Books to Look For.”

<sup>18</sup> Looking back on *Infinite Jest* in 1999, Wallace told interviewer Patrick Arden, “It’s a good book. But it’s a difficult, long book and there’s no reason why it should have gotten that kind of attention. Much of the

Gates, who clearly had the most fun coming up with a title for his review (here it is in full: “Levity’s Rainbow: 1,079—count ‘em—pages! A hot young writer! A hurricane of hype! But a heck of a novel”), mused that “he might actually get *read* if the buzz doesn’t scare people off” (Gates). Clashing adjectives such as “experimental,” “virtuosic,” and “arbitrary,” “self-indulgent” pepper Kakutani’s infamous New York Times review; Lisa Schwarzbaum of *Entertainment Weekly* (why and how *ET* decided to review *Infinite Jest* will forever remain a mystery to me), who did not read the book, deemed it in exasperation an “infinite burden”; and *Salon*’s Laura Miller concluded “there’s something rare and exhilarating about a contemporary author who aims to capture the spirit of his age” (“The *Salon* Interview” 58). Other reviews praised Wallace as “a natural” and said that one should “Count on the literary world to bow down before him” (Streitfeld 69). These kinds of obsequious reviews, I suggest, are a key component to the self-fashioning of DFW.

Wallace, composed of equal parts confidence and self-doubt, once told an interviewer, “Part of me is extremely pleased and gratified, and part of me suspects a trap—that somehow there’s been a great deal of excitement but that nobody’s actually read it and that people are going to find out that this thing’s actually pretty hard, so all this fuss will have been based on a misunderstanding” (qtd. in Caro 54). In a letter to Don DeLillo dated 3 March 1996, Wallace complains that “[R]eporters who hadn’t read the book and wanted only to discuss the ‘hype’ around the book...seemed willfully to ignore the fact that articles about the hype were themselves the hype” (“Letter to Don DeLillo).

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attention was hype attention rather than literary attention, and so it didn’t get to me all that much. The book is partly about hype and sort of the spiritual consequences of hype, and then the book itself became an object of hype. For a while I was amused by the irony, and then it just kind of made me feel empty” (qtd. in Arden 97).

The hype Wallace observed was “meticulously engineered” by his publisher, Little, Brown, who, as part of their media campaign, mailed publicity postcards printed with the challenge, “Are you reader enough?” to roughly 4,000 media outlets and booksellers months before the book’s publication (Bruni). Patrick Arden recalls, “A Little, Brown sales representative told me, ‘We put more effort and money behind marketing that book than we ever had before...and it paid off’ (58). This strategy’s big payoff, as Max Gulias notes, was to sell books and advance the image of Wallace as a genius.<sup>19</sup> He writes:

David Foster Wallace™—including David Foster Wallace, Little, Brown, the reviewing and publishing industry, the mass media, and consumer-readers—has created an image of the author and the work of literary genius so masterfully that it has superseded the abilities of reviewers and readers to criticize it in any meaningfully specific way. (129-30).

Fully aware of how he was portrayed in the media—hyperbolic declarations of “genius” and “the voice of a generation” no doubt affected him—Wallace, in the same letter to DeLillo, wrote “If you try to be unpretentious and candid, a reporter comments on the unpretentious, candid persona you’ve adopted for the interview. It ends up being lonely and wildly depressing....A small fraction of the attention was thrilling, but most of it felt deeply false and wrong...and yet I know I’m now just whining and in fact got very lucky, in a way” (Letter to Don DeLillo). In one particularly telling instance, he recounts the experience of “doctor[ing] his house to control the perception of somebody from the press” before the interviewer’s arrival, suggesting a controlling need for appearance

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<sup>19</sup> For a particularly telling example, see Dave Eggers’s Foreword to *Infinite Jest*. He wonders, “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 (xiv).

management (see chapter 2 for more on Wallace's appearance). His trademark self-consciousness belies a keen awareness of others' perceptions in which he is routinely touted as an authorial genius. In other words, Wallace's "intellectual and creative energy" on and off the page (Nadel 219)—just look at the never-ending endnotes tagged at the end of *Infinite Jest* or the way in which digressive asides threaten to overtake the page in the essay "Host" in *Consider the Lobster* (2005)—plays into reviewers' overwrought announcements of genius. If we take Marshall Boswell at face value when he muses, "If he can manage to avoid becoming trapped by his own stylistic innovations—the endnotes, the obsessive narrative voice, the egghead erudition crossed with pop-culture savvy—he should continue to lead the literary pack well into the new millennium" (210), we would be severely downplaying the fundamental role Wallace's style plays in the self-fashioning of DFW. Boswell fails to account for the way in which the media's representations of Wallace helped create DFW and he ignores how the obsessive use of footnotes/endnotes enabled DFW to exploit the very features unique to his writing reviewers and critics deemed constitutive of his genius.

In 1997 David Foster Wallace was awarded a MacArthur Foundation grant for *Infinite Jest*. The MacArthur award—also called The Genius Grant—in effect, officially conferred upon Wallace the title of literary genius. The MacArthur, as I see it, was Little, Brown's ultimate achievement in the sense that it confirmed the persuasive power of marketing and the media not only sell a virtually unsellable book but to create a culturally influential figure of authorial genius—DFW. As Wallace's highly-stylized novel and the media's inexhaustible fascination with the author managed to construct, alongside Little, Brown's marketing strategy, an image of literary genius that was meant to sell an

unreadable book, one could say that Little, Brown's massive publicity campaign for *Infinite Jest* certainly paid off. Writing about this phenomenon, Max Gulas observes how "authors and texts become concretized as transcendent objects created by autonomous subjects, often called 'geniuses'" (89). In this sense, we can see how DFW can be easily conceived as a stylized, textual production of genius emerging from a system of medially distributed authorship that is constituted of literary texts, press reviews, and publishing houses. The reflexive nature of these three institutions of cultural production allows them to observe and enfold within their operative structures the features necessary for the dissemination and perpetual upkeep of the literary celebrity DFW.

1997 also witnessed Little, Brown's publication of Wallace's collection of essays, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*. With his reputation as literary genius firmly established by this point, reviewers began examining Wallace's newer work with a sharper critical eye. For the first time, really, Wallace's work received mixed reviews. Allen Barra of *Metro Magazine* (who has never been one of Wallace's more sympathetic critics) expressed his exasperation with Wallace's signature style. He writes, "[Contained in the book]...are essays about film director David Lynch and Dostoevski biographer Joseph Frank, the purpose of which is not to illuminate the subjects but to floodlight the inside of Wallace's head. Yes, yes, I know, it could be argued that all essays illuminate the inside of the writer's head, but some writers make an effort to get outside of their heads" (Barra). Michiko Kakutani, however, makes no fewer than three comparisons to *Infinite Jest* in her positive review:

Like *Infinite Jest*, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* is animated by Wallace's wonderfully exuberant prose, a zingy, elastic gift

for metaphor and imaginative sleight of hand, combined with a taste for amphetaminelike stream-of-consciousness riffs [...] Like *Infinite Jest*, the book boasts some marvelously demented set pieces [...] And like *Infinite Jest*, the book is sorely in need of some editing: even its liveliest, most compelling pieces are larded with repetitions, self-indulgent digressions and a seeming need on Wallace's part to set down whatever random thoughts or afterthoughts that happen to trundle through his mind.

(Kakutani 1997)

The *Boston Phoenix*'s Jordan Ellenberg emphatically notes that "Wallace's style...is one of relentless accumulation" that's part of "Wallace's struggle to surpass (what he sees as) the smart glibness of his early work" (Ellenberg). This inventive strategy, the *Chicago Tribune*'s Richard Stern writes, is the primary technique with which Wallace self-fashions a "self-portrait." Stern's assessment:

The portrait is of a precocious, physically timid, *endlessly self-conscious*, endlessly curious, naive sophisticate, a great shower and explainer, a loved and loving son, neurotic, *brilliant*, good-hearted and self-deprecating [author]....that saves these essays from what old-fashioned novel-readers like me thought was the narrative-killing excess of his 1,000-plus-page novel, *Infinite Jest*. (Stern)

It's worth commenting that for Stern, apparently, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, like *Infinite Jest*, fails on all accounts except for the personalized and stylized. I find it interesting, too, that Stern labels himself "an old-fashioned novel-reader" who didn't like *Infinite Jest* because of its "narrative-killing excess." Regardless of the



reviewer's reading habits, as a reader, he seems to be looking only for "infinite pleasure, infinite style," to borrow a line from Little, Brown's publicity postcards for *Infinite Jest*. Compare Stern's assessment with Laura Miller's from the *New York Times*. She concludes, "Finally, Mr. Wallace's distinctive and infectious style ... makes him *tremendously entertaining* to read, whatever his subject. *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* proves that his accomplishment is far more than just a stunt" ("The road to Babbittville"). Miller, only one among many critics, appears to be endlessly entertained by Wallace's "distinctive and infectious" style, or simply put, DFW. The recurring emphasis on the importance of style in Wallace's work post-*Infinite Jest* manages to play a complicit role in the creation and propagation of DFW. If we take note of Miller's final sentence in the quoted passage, we see how she considers Wallace's style more than a put-on. Her claim that his style's success indicates something greater, more significant than a calculated stunt manages to conflate the singularity of style with something larger than an affectation, ultimately leading us back to the notion of genius, as discussed above. Miller's review proves an exemplary case in that it demonstrates the way in which press reviews managed to subtly equate Wallace's style with transcendental genius, thereby playing a co-constitutive role in the creation of DFW. In other words, with the near-obsessive levels of attention paid to Wallace's style, the press worked in concert with his actual texts to conflate style and persona into one, that "distinctive singular stamp of himself."<sup>20</sup> As Kakutani affirms in her review of Wallace's *Oblivion* (2004), "Clearly Mr. Wallace is a prose magician....[known for] his by now patented

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<sup>20</sup> See Harris 173. He confirms, "Wallace's signature style is, of course, the style of *Infinite Jest*, whose encyclopedic form, long, syntactically-dense sentences, footnotes and other extra-textual paraphernalia (these also turn up in some of his essays), and comically exaggerated situations are immediately recognizable." Also note how Harris's title is a pun on the father in *Infinite Jest* who is generally referred to as "Himself," and who commits suicide by sticking his head in a microwave.

methods of looping, loopy digressions; manic asides; wide satiric cartoon brush strokes; and exactly detailed, almost autistic descriptions of minutiae” (Kakutani 2004).

Kakutani and Miller, like so many other reviewers throughout the years should be given considerable credit for the role they, and many others in the press, played in the creation of DFW.

Thus far, history has been exceedingly kind to David Foster Wallace. With the exception of a few character-smearing editorials,<sup>21</sup> the picture that’s been painted of David Foster Wallace has been generally positive. Renewed interest in his writing exploded after his suicide in 2008 and the publication of his unfinished novel *The Pale King* (2011), resulting in an onslaught of biographies and scholarly work. Dedicated readers have scrambled through his oeuvre in the attempt to pinpoint spots where Wallace might have telegraphed his suicide.<sup>22</sup> Similar attention has been paid to D.T. Max’s *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story* (2012), the most detailed account of Wallace’s life to date. While it’s undoubtedly an interesting read, I question the underlying motives of those who pore over every salacious biographical detail and vigorously search for an explanation to Wallace’s death. Instead of asking ourselves why Wallace took his own life, we need to take a step back and examine why David Foster Wallace became such a literary celebrity worthy of our concern in the first place. This kind of scholarly work, I

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<sup>21</sup> I’m referring to John Ziegler’s self-published editorial “Death of a Salesman,” in which he claims, based on the two months Wallace spent shadowing him to write “Host,” that Wallace was a phony. He writes, “You see, I was in no way prejudiced by his reputation as a ‘genius’ and therefore was not blinded to the rather obvious reality that there was very little ‘there,’ there. . . . I strongly believe that a large ingredient in the toxic mix that ended up forming Wallace’s self-inflicted poison was the pressure he felt of living up to the hype surrounding his writing and the guilt he must have felt for not really having the true talent to back up his formidable reputation” (n.p.).

<sup>22</sup> See Annesley 132, where he writes, “At first sight, Wallace, an author with limitless intellectual energy and good humour, seems an unlikely victim of his own despair. The sad truth is, however, that the clues were everywhere.” Where exactly these “clues” reside is not made clear.

believe, needs to think critically about the creation of literary celebrity while engaging with a variety of cultural institutions and archives. The genesis and maintenance of the persona DFW, this chapter has argued, cannot be attributed to a singular, authorial genius. Instead, Wallace's literary persona must be understood as the co-creation between David Foster Wallace and the print media, a medium through which he was able to receive critical feedback and make strategic adjustments to his style that would ensure the continued presence of his persona on literary culture. Wallace once told an interviewer in 2005, "I am not very curious about the lives or personalities of other writers. The more I like someone's work, the less I want personal acquaintance to pollute my experience of reading her" (qtd. in Jacob 156). We must reconsider, then, if our obsession with biography has "polluted" our experience of reading Wallace. Instead of relentlessly rereading Wallace's texts and biographies, as many fans and scholars have done, perhaps we would do well to look beyond the author and begin to look elsewhere for answers, outside the mind of a dead man.

## CHAPTER 2

### PHOTOGRAPHING DFW: THE CREATION OF SLACKER-GENIUS STYLE

Whatever you get paid attention for is never what you think is most important about yourself -- David Foster Wallace

We're so trendy we can't even escape ourselves -- Kurt Cobain

Little, Brown has like twelve different shots of me—can't you use one of those? I'm tired of having my picture taken -- David Foster Wallace

The late David Foster Wallace: author of the bestselling and tragically underread novel, *Infinite Jest*. At least that's what typically comes to mind when the ubiquitous initials DFW are inevitably uttered in casual dinner conversation. Some readers may possess a passing familiarity with the two novels, two sizable volumes of essays, and three short story collections that comprise Wallace's oeuvre. Even fewer will have read it all.

But what David Foster Wallace wrote is mostly irrelevant to this chapter.

Which is not to discount his texts completely. What Wallace wrote matters a great deal. The contemporary literary landscape would indeed be a very desolate place had David Foster Wallace never published. To put it bluntly, without Wallace, a respectable number of contemporary authors would be out of a job. His influence is so broad and

wide-ranging that it is still too early to gauge its full impact, though a quick perfunctory glance at any bookseller's new release shelf will most likely reveal the sizable debt many contemporary authors owe him.<sup>23</sup>

But still. The odds are high that anyone with an ear attuned to the literary ground can picture a mental image of David Foster Wallace. Yes, *Infinite Jest* certainly attained celebrity status as a material object, but it was its author, the artiste du jour of 1996, who became one of the most recognizable authors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. How did this happen?

What interests me here is not so much a genealogical tracing of "Wallacian" influence on contemporary authors but how Wallace came to be an instantly-recognizable literary celebrity. While many know him for his texts, and *Infinite Jest* in particular, just as many are familiar with the image of David Foster Wallace based solely on his signature grunge look. How does Wallace self-fashion an image of literary celebrity out of these photographs? In this chapter I examine publicity photographs of David Foster Wallace and suggest that they, along with the joint apparatuses of Wallace's literary self-fashioning and his publisher's media campaign for *Infinite Jest*, work in concert to create the slacker aspect of the DFW slacker-genius persona, with which so many are familiar. His trademark bandanna, wire-rimmed glasses, shabby t-shirts, and work boots all index, rather paradoxically, I contend, a counter-image of authorial "genius" that has been continuously propagated in the mainstream press.

Much has been written in the emerging field of "New Modernist Studies" in the last decade. While there is no grand unified theory or universally agreed-upon

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<sup>23</sup> Though it would be impossible to fully account for all the authors who have been affected by Wallace's work, I'm thinking primarily of writers who have, in some medium or another, acknowledged Wallace's influence on their own fiction, such as Jonathan Franzen, Jeffrey Eugenides, Zadie Smith, Dave Eggers, Jonathan Lethem, Michael Chabon, Sheila Heti, Paul Murray, and Jennifer Egan, to name only a few.

methodology, this kind of scholarship focuses on the “matters of production and consumption, material culture, historical context, institutions, sundry cultural goods, and things” that constitute literary celebrity (Jaffe and Goldman 13). By adopting a similar methodological approach used in chapter one, I examine the material forces that contribute to the creation of the recognizable “Wallacian” celebrity image with which we are still so enamored, even today.<sup>24</sup> The driving impetus behind this kind of study, as laid out in the introduction, is to undertake a critical assessment of the ways in which primary, secondary, and tertiary material products of cultural labor—reviews, photographs, interviews, television appearances, etc.—help to construct the DFW slacker-genius persona. Through these extra-literary “imprimaturs” (Jaffe 1) of the famed slacker-genius, Wallace attempts to assert control and influence over the reception and promotion of his literary work. It is to this question of visually constructed author-celebrity that I now turn.

To what extent was Wallace’s “look” a creation of his own? As I discuss below, Frank Bruni and Laura Miller—only a select few among many other keen-eyed critics—suggested that Wallace’s trademark appearance was consciously engineered by the author and his publisher Little, Brown, and distributed through publicity photographs. How did those photos achieve such a wide circulation in the press? What other disseminative forces were at work in the creation of the visual brand of David Foster Wallace™?

Loren Glass notes that “the model of the author as a solitary creative genius whose work goes unrecognized by the mainstream collides with the model of the author

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<sup>24</sup> For just two examples of Wallace-inspired characters in contemporary fiction see Richard Katz in Jonathan Franzen’s *Freedom* (2010) and Leonard Bankhead in Jeffrey Eugenides’s *The Marriage Plot* (2011).

as part of a corporate publisher's marketing strategy. It is in the tensions between these two fields that the contradictions of modern American authorial celebrity emerge" (6-7). Borrowing the concept from Glass, I contend that the construction of the DFW visual persona stems from the convergence between the persistently popular notion of the "solitary creative genius" and the marketing strategy adopted by Little, Brown for *Infinite Jest*. It's important to note that Glass correctly touches on a key point—namely, the importance attributed to corporate publishers' role in the creation of literary celebrity. It should come as no great surprise, then, that Little, Brown spent a sizable fortune marketing *Infinite Jest* months before the book even hit retailers' shelves. The critic Frank Bruni quotes Viking Penguin's senior vice president of publicity, Paul Slovak, as describing Little, Brown's publicity campaign as "brilliant" (Bruni). And Max Gulias has recently observed that "the carefully orchestrated, 'painstakingly engineered' marketing campaign about the book and the author was obviously an attempt to create an image of genius that would sell an unsellable book" (99). Thus Wallace's visual persona became a key component of Little, Brown's marketing campaign. They weren't just selling a massive book; they were selling "an image of authorial genius that would carry sales on its own momentum" (100).

Part of *Infinite Jest*'s allure can be attributed directly to the way in which Little, Brown successfully marketed Wallace as a typical 1990s grunger with an "everyman" look. Though the book is physically massive, one concedes, and just might be a work of literary genius, or so the hype seemed to say, it *was* written by a guy who is just like you. As we will soon see, Wallace's meticulously engineered appearance was meant to

counteract the press's proclamations of genius and appeal to a wide readership whose reading habits ordinarily did not include tackling a 1,079 page novel. By deploying this marketing strategy, Little, Brown was able to sell *Infinite Jest* to a public that was most likely not accustomed to purchasing a book of such magnitude. The grunger "everyman" image propagated by Little, Brown helped create an empathetic bond between common reader and author whose sole purpose was to sell books. The image of Wallace was no longer a photograph of an author; it was a photograph of an object to be bought and sold.

And thus Wallace and Little, Brown wanted to have it both ways. They successfully constructed the image of authorial genius, represented by the complexity of *Infinite Jest* and its sheer physical bulk, while concurrently neutralizing even the faintest charge of elitist "genius" through widespread dissemination of publicity photographs. "Running in parallel with this overzealous attempt to make a 'common man' out of the fiction writer is a very strong sense of the exceptionalism and entitlement of being a fiction writer," Gulias writes, and attributes the sense of entitlement to Wallace's desire "to be everybody, just special and more famous" (118). And according to plan, Wallace was launched into literary stardom. The mainstream press eagerly ate up all of the hype generated by Little, Brown's publicity campaign while readers flocked to bookstores in droves, feeling a special kind of affinity with the bandanna-clad author pictured on the back of their recently-purchased tome. Interviews, photo shoots, and live readings occupied Wallace for months. And here I pay careful attention to my verbiage: I contend that Wallace, at this stage in his career, ceased to be a unified, solitary author-genius (not that he ever was one to begin with, I'd argue), and instead became an occupied individual transformed by market forces into a product, a brand name, a celebrity. As Nancy



Armstrong points out, “Celebrity transforms people rather than objects by turning some people into public personalities over whom consumers exercise a curious form of power” (239), and with Little, Brown’s publicity campaign for *Infinite Jest* operating strategically alongside the media’s voracious indulgence in the novel’s hype, David Foster Wallace was transformed into a commodified and stylized persona—DFW. Because photographs of Wallace were integral to Little, Brown’s marketing campaign, they played a fundamental role in helping shape the slacker component of the slacker-genius persona.

However, if Wallace was transformed into a stylized persona in part through the distribution of author photos depicting him as a “slacker” or grunger, then by extension, the level of authorial agency we attribute to the biographical Wallace over his texts is inevitably called into question. As the last chapter pointed out, it is imperative that the genius component of the slacker-genius persona be understood as a product of medially distributed authorship. And in turn, for my purposes, it will be crucial to examine the ways in which author photographs aided in the creation of the slacker component of the DFW slacker-genius persona. To aid in my discussion of this process, I draw on Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* and N. Katherine Hayles’s concept of embodiment and show how author photographs of Wallace helped strip him of bodily, and thus authorial, agency and, working against the press’s pronouncements of authorial genius, allowed cultural institutions of literary reception and promotion to resignify him as a “slacker,” thus culminating in the popular slacker-genius persona.

In his famous meditation on photography, *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes describes the discomfiting feeling of being “observed by the lens” when posing for the camera. Though the feeling is unnerving, it is also powerful. The feeling’s affective

power derives from the conscious recognition of its ability to transform the photographed subject into an image, and he is quick to point out, “[the image] creates my body” (10-1). In this precise moment of bodily creation, “everything changes” (ibid.). Barthes writes, “What I want, in short, is that my image...coincide with my (profound) ‘self’; but it is the contrary that must be said: ‘myself’ never coincides with my image” (12). The feeling of bodily abstraction Barthes describes is the result from the recognition that photographs are lacking in presence; the subject and its representation can never coincide. But Barthes doesn’t merely lament the realization that “myself...is light, divided, dispersed,” and instead opines, “if only Photography could give me a neutral, anatomic body, a body which signifies nothing!” (ibid.), leading him to the conclusion that as a result of this process of abstraction, “Photography transformed subject into object” (13).

The process of bodily abstraction occurring under the camera’s watchful eye that Barthes describes is in effect what N. Katherine Hayles defines as “embodiment” in *How We Became Posthuman* (1999). Embodiment, for Hayles, “differs from the concept of the body in that the body is always normative relative to some set of criteria” (196). In Barthes’s case, the photograph’s referent is always an idealized form of the physical body—in this instance, his. However, since the photograph is nothing but a representation of the idealized, physical body, the criteria with which the physical, normative body is best understood is displaced by the camera. In other words, the photograph’s referent’s subjectivity becomes contingent in the process of embodiment. Hayles continues:

In contrast to the body, embodiment is contextual, enmeshed within the specifics of place, time, physiology, and culture, which together compose

the enactment. *Embodiment never coincides exactly with 'the body,'* however that normalized concept is understood...Relative to the body, embodiment is other and elsewhere, at once excessive and deficient in its infinite variations, particularities, and abnormalities. (197, emphasis mine)

As Barthes poses for the camera, he is evacuated of agency as his centered subjectivity exits the physical body, becoming “other and elsewhere” precisely in the moment of understanding that “myself never coincides with my image.” With the self never coinciding with its image, then, we can best understand embodiment as “inherently destabilizing with respect to the body, for at any time this tension can widen into a perceived disparity” (Hayles 197).

The perceived disparity arising from embodiment’s destabilization of the body allows for Barthes’s wish for “a body which signifies nothing” to come to fruition. Since embodiment is wrapped up contextually in “the specifics of place, time, physiology, and culture,” circumstantial contingencies take precedence in the creation of subjects. As the process of photography “transforms subject into object” in Barthes’ earlier sense, the subject in front of the lens becomes embodied by a set of contextually dependent circumstances like culture, time, place, etc. which, in turn, exert power and influence over the embodied subject, thus “turn[ing] me, ferociously, into an object, put[ting] me at their mercy, at their disposal...” (Barthes 14).

The studied process of embodiment I have been describing works to help delegitimize David Foster Wallace’s authorial agency and open him up to resignification. Author photographs of Wallace, in effect, allowed for greater control over the creation and maintenance of the DFW persona to be exercised by his publisher, Little, Brown. The

slacker component of the DFW slacker-genius persona, then, is the reification of this process of resignification. As photographs of Wallace enabled him up to be resignified as a slacker, and not a genius as the press maintained, his publisher's widespread circulation of author photographs had the strategic effect of transforming Wallace-as-subject into Wallace-as-brand—the DFW slacker-genius. Nevertheless, it is worth attending in detail to press accounts of Wallace's appearance around the time of *Infinite Jest*'s publication and the broader implications they possess for my assessment of the slacker-genius persona's creation. With *Infinite Jest*'s publication situated squarely in the midst of grunge culture's heyday, in order to better understand the novel's critical reception, we must first contextualize it within 1990s grunge culture.

1996 was an important year for David Foster Wallace. His gargantuan magnum opus *Infinite Jest* was published in February and as a result of all the hype surrounding the book Wallace was thrust, out of a sense of obligation to his publisher Little, Brown, into an all-out media blitz. As part of the book's marketing strategy, Wallace consented to countless interviews and alongside Jonathan Franzen and Mark Leyner he appeared—rather uncomfortably, one might add—on PBS's Charlie Rose show. As my last chapter demonstrated, it was the print media that was hit hardest by the Wallace bug. The level of attention paid to Wallace's style, as we will see, illustrates the degree to which the media was smitten with the celebrity author of *Infinite Jest*.



*Image 1*

It's surprising just how many reviews made explicit reference to David Foster Wallace's attire. Frank Bruni's profile piece for the *New York Times Magazine* titled "The Grunge American Novel," was one of the first published articles to pay careful attention to Wallace's appearance. Bruni notices how Wallace seemed to be

projecting the perfect measure of aloofness, particularly in his appearance, which flouts conventional vanity in a manner that doth protest a bit too much. He often wears a bandanna wrapped tightly around his head, as if to avoid combing his shoulder-length hair and to coddle his febrile mind. His wire-rimmed glasses, stubble of beard and hole-ridden sweaters lend him the aspect of a doctoral candidate so deep in thought that he cannot afford the time or energy for grooming. (Bruni)

Notice how the reporter accuses Wallace of “projecting” an aura of “aloofness,” suggesting that his appearance is calculated, less than sincere. The piece insinuates that Wallace, whose shabby dress is the result of a mind “so deep in thought,” engineered his public persona in a manner that would purposefully invoke the clichéd image of the harried academic or doctoral candidate, or one who engages primarily in intellectual labor. But I think Bruni partially misses the mark in his reading of Wallace’s apparel. He accuses Wallace of trying too hard to embody the image of shabbily-clothed academic but neglects to mention how shoddy sweaters and bandannas are also items usually associated with the opposite of brainy, white-collared genius—the working class.

Frank Bruni wasn’t the only critic in the mainstream press to notice Wallace’s slovenly appearance during *Infinite Jest*’s media campaign. In his post-interview write up, Mark Caro writes, “The author, by the way, was wearing a yellow bandanna around his head and white T-shirt” (Caro 54) and Laura Miller from *Salon* was struck by Wallace’s “low-key, bookish appearance [that] flatly contradicts the unshaven, bandanna-capped image advanced by his publicity photos” (“The *Salon* Interview” 58). Elizabeth Wurtzel, author of the 1994 bestseller *Prozac Nation*, thought he looked “scruffy—jeans and the bandanna—and very smart” (qtd. in Lipsky 175). In Wurtzel’s reading of Wallace, we see the clichéd conflation of shabby dress and high intelligence—the harried, distracted genius. But Wurtzel’s observation, like Bruni’s, falls prey to interpretative misprision since they both fail to observe the real purpose of Wallace’s calculated slacker look: to project an image, constructed out of a meticulously engineered marketing strategy by Little, Brown, to exploit Wallace’s appearance and to appeal to the casual reader, or “everyman,” that resists any notion of elitist authorial genius. In other

words, in the historical context of the 1990s, Wallace's look is meant to convey an image of a working-class grunger. As Bruni's piece suggests and Laura Miller's article outright declares, Wallace's soon-to-be trademark look was "advanced by his publicity photos." As a way for Wallace to counter the charges of genius that were so frequently leveled at him in the press after *Infinite Jest*'s publication and toward which he expressed extreme discomfort, Wallace presented in photographs an image of himself that would effectively neutralize all accusations of cultural elitism or literary genius. In the wake of *Infinite Jest*'s publication, one would be hard pressed to resist the temptation to wonder: How could a guy who looks like that have written *this*?

In *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Thorstein Veblen writes, "It goes without saying that no apparel can be considered elegant, or even decent, if it shows the effect of manual labor on the part of the wearer, in the way of soil or wear" (120). The overt bias against working-class or blue-collar laborers sticks out like a sore thumb. Sweat-stained t-shirts or blown-out sneakers, for example, would not be considered "elegant, or even decent" in Veblen's account. Since they cannot afford the luxury of broadcasting wealth, the working-class is forced to make do with whatever they can afford. Thriftiness, ingenuity, and hard work are the means by which the working-class gets by, not opulence, excess, and leisure.

Fast -forwarding to the 1990s, our attention is immediately drawn to the unique cultural phenomenon known as Grunge. Wallace, who more or less came of age in the late 1980s/early 1990s, lived through grunge's ascendancy and decline (though the extent to which it has declined is certainly up for debate). Attending to Wallace's author photos, one is struck by the observation that his attire seems to consciously contradict Veblen's

theory. In a fascinating inversion of value, the marked signs of middle-classness and relative wealth in the 1990s were not the 1980s-styled excesses of material wealth, but were the accoutrements most associated with the working-class. For example, Wallace's work boots, bandanna, and shabby t-shirts—items not affiliated with the leisure class in Veblen's time—come to epitomize, in the historical context of the 1990s (and well into the 2000s),<sup>25</sup> the popular style known as grunge. The openness with which grunge culture embraces blue-collar cultural practices and items is due in large part to its attempt to distance itself from the excesses of 1980s yuppie culture; dressing down is a way of identifying with the poor. However, in this sense, one can afford to look poor simply because one can *afford* to.

In *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* (1994) Angela McRobbie seeks to explain the popularity of “ragmarkets” or thrift-stores. She observes that “those who possess ‘cultural capital’ can risk looking poor and unkempt while their black and working-class counterparts dress up to counter the assumption of low status” (133). Here I urge you to take pause for a moment and conjure a mental image of one of grunge culture's icons and take note of the attire he or she is wearing. Let me ask: is it possible to picture Kurt Cobain *not* wearing flannel and hole-ridden blue jeans? For that matter, can you imagine David Foster Wallace without a bandanna wrapped around his shaggy-haired head? The accoutrements associated with each respective person—items usually bought second-hand and/or associated with the lower-classes—were the markers of leisure and relative material wealth in the 1990s. The popularity of blue-collar, second-hand style is best understood as a holdover from punk culture. The ragmarket's

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<sup>25</sup> For a detailed account of pop culture's enduring stagnancy, see Simon Reynolds's *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past*. New York: Faber & Faber, 2011.



importance to 1970s punk style has been well documented, and since grunge is considered to have stemmed out of punk, it's easy to see how the popularity of second-hand style persisted, especially in light of the excess of the 1980s' "greed is good" mentality. However, just because one wore second-hand, blue-collar clothes did not mean that one performed manual labor. Indeed, the best way to demonstrate wealth was not through work but to *slack off*.



Image 2

Founded in the late 1970s by Ivan Stang, and popular through the 1980s and 1990s, The Church of the SubGenius is a satiric religion founded upon the basic principle that the structures of society are conspiring to prevent you from attaining pure *slack*. "Everyone is born with Original Slack," according to *The Book of the SubGenius*, "but the Conspiracy has most of it now." J.R. "Bob" Dobbs, the church's mythical "founder"

and “deity,” is reputed to be the only person who has attained total slack. Even though “the slack that can be described is not the true slack” (*The Book of the SubGenius* 63), it is best understood as “absolute ‘free’ time, devoid of all stress, to do *whatever you damn well please* for ‘eternity’....TRUE SLACK IS SOMETHING FOR NOTHING” (64, emphasis in original). As an entire generation of over-educated and under-employed young adults weathered the Reagan years and Bush I’s first term, an overarching cultural sense of apathy set in, and thus, the slacker was born. Here, we see the leisure-work dialectic reemerging in the slacker. “To many SubGenii, Slack is simply being allowed to do the kind of work they love. False Work, done only for money, without fun, is a SIN,” *The Book of the SubGenius* tells us, since “The idea is to make PLAY into a *paying profession* or Life Scam....But do not feel guilty if you find yourself having fun *even* on the job....The key is to work by instinct, not effort: don’t ‘do the job, let the job ‘do you’” (67). Drawing a connection between second-hand style and (immaterial) labor practices, McRobbie writes:

The renunciation by some young people of the grey repertoire of jobs offered in the traditional fields of youth opportunities, and their preferences for more self-expressive ‘artistic’ choices [such as] part-time or self-employed work...offers the possibility of creativity, control, job satisfaction and perhaps even the promise of fame and fortune in the multi-media world of the image or the written word. (141)

Indeed, clear disdain for traditional structures of labor and class became part and parcel of grunge culture. It is no coincidence that Wallace—the slacker-genius writer—attained fame for being a mostly self-employed author and not, say, a renowned tennis player.

Because of the 1990's idealization of self-employment and leisure, we can better understand Wallace's signature grunge look as part of the explosion of artistic production. This artistic boom was so culturally pervasive that even the *New York Times* was forced to take notice.

In late 1992 the New York Times ran a piece by Rick Marin with the celebratory title "Grunge: A Success Story." Originating out of Seattle's underground music scene and recorded in the Emerald City, Nirvana's *Nevermind* and Pearl Jam's *Ten*, both considered foundational albums in grunge's development, raced to the top of the charts. MTV and other pop culture media outlets seemed to display an inexhaustible obsession with front-men Kurt Cobain and Eddie Vedder, who, to Cobain's particular chagrin, were touted as the figureheads for the movement. With their existential despondency of being helplessly over-educated and under-employed, apathy and cultural alienation plagued the early-90s grungers. It comes as no surprise, then, that a key component of the grunge style was a kind of performed apathy, an excessive display of not-caring. Rick Marin writes, "This generation of greasy Caucasian youths in ripped jeans, untucked flannel and stomping boots spent their formative years watching television, inhaling beer or pot, listening to old Black Sabbath albums and dreaming of the day they would trade in their air guitars for the real thing, so that they, too, could become famous rock-and-roll heroes" (Marin). If we refer back to Figure One, we can see how Wallace's attire embodies in toto the grunge aesthetic.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> One discerns from Marin's description an overarching sense of puerility inherent in grunge culture. "Inhaling beer or pot" and watching television are not activities associated with productive, career-oriented adults. To this extent, I refer back to the childish posture Wallace affects in Image One. Part of grunge culture, put simply, is the refusal of adulthood—*slacking off*.

But things were not always so sanguine for the grungers. Marin quotes James Poneman of Sub Pop records—the label famous for releasing classic grunge records like Nirvana’s *Nevermind*—who muses “All things grunge are treated with the utmost cynicism and amusement [...] [b]ecause the whole thing is a fabricated movement and always has been” (qtd. in Marin). Thus, invoking Dick Hebdige’s oft-cited *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, “It is therefore difficult in this case to maintain any absolute distinction between commercial exploitation on the one hand and creativity/originality on the other” (95). “Indeed, the creation and diffusion of new styles is inextricably bound up with the diffusion of the subculture’s subversive power” (ibid.).<sup>27</sup> With their listless attitudes, trenchant eye for thrift store clothing, and blatant disregard for personal hygiene, the 1990s grungers represented the theoretical inversion of Veblen’s economic formulation.<sup>28</sup> Wallace’s attire, as part and parcel of the grunge style, came to index an image of a blue-collar laborer *and* the sign of privilege and apathy afforded the leisurely, writerly class. Just as Poneman cynically notes, the 1990s cultural phenomenon known as grunge, of which Wallace was surely a part, is not limited to one particular site of cultural production and dissemination. McRobbie observes of the fashion industry, “The parasitism of the major fashion labels on the post-punk subcultures...re-works the already recycled goods found in street markets...and attempts to sell these styles, on an unprecedented scale, to a wider section of the population than those who wander around the ragmarkets” (141). Despite Loren Glass’s assertion that “the rise of

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<sup>27</sup> For a sociological challenge to Hebdige’s thesis, see David Muggleton’s *Inside Subculture: The Postmodern Meaning of Style*. Oxford: Berg, 2000..

<sup>28</sup> Of course, there’s no way for Veblen to have predicted how, culturally speaking, it would become fashionable for one to dress as if one came from a lower economic class. In other words, apathy and listlessness, in the 1990s, became signs of economic privilege. For an excellent example, see the seemingly “plotless” film, *Slacker*. Dir. Richard Linklater. Orion Pictures, 1991. DVD.

postmodernity...has witnessed a greatly diminished interest in the personal lives and styles of literary figures (198), the fact remains that market forces always pick up on subcultural trends and in turn coopt them as a means to sell more goods, much as that Little, Brown used Wallace's grunge style as a marketing strategy to sell *Infinite Jest* to casual readers. And in order to successfully market a consistent product over an extended period of time, the product's image cannot change. Since the product's aesthetic or style must remain static, repetition of its defining features is crucial to its promotion. A key feature of the David Foster Wallace image with which many are familiar is his trademark bandanna. If we sort through the many photographs of him, we rarely find him without a bandanna wrapped around his head. To this end, I suggest that the bandanna became a trademark—through author photographs—of the DFW slacker-genius brand.

Wallace was rarely photographed without his trademark bandanna. He claims to have started wearing it while completing his MFA at the University of Arizona (1985-1987) because "it was a hundred degrees all the time, and I would perspire so much I would drip on the page" (qtd. in Lipsky 167). Years before *Infinite Jest* was published, Wallace's style conjures the image of the hard-working ascetic toiling away at his craft to such a degree that his labor induces a case of hyperhidrosis. The bandana isn't for style, Wallace seems to say; it's a utilitarian accessory that also happens to conjure the image of an "everyman." We can sympathize with Wallace's excessive perspiration—here the bandanna certainly makes sense—but other than manual laborers, in what other occupation would one need to keep sweat out of his/her eyes? In this sense, Wallace harbors the bandanna's cultural symbolic value as an object associated most-closely with

the working class and deploys that value as a means to defuse the declarations of “genius” that were so prominent in the press.<sup>29</sup>

And even if the bandanna were for style, Wallace would never publicly admit to indulging any kind of vanity—he was much too self-conscious for that. Yet the bandanna-clad headshot is what we usually associate with Wallace, as if it’s the defining Wallacian trademark. But Wallace was deeply skeptical toward all the attention the press paid to his appearance, which isn’t to say he loathed it completely. Commenting on the bandanna, he claimed “It makes me feel kind of creepy that people view it as a trademark or something—it’s more of a recognition of a weakness, which is that I’m just kind of worried that my head’s gonna explode” (ibid.). The self-reflexivity in Wallace’s statement jumps out. He is fully aware of the item’s trademark status and claims it makes him “feel kind of creepy,” but it doesn’t really make him feel creepy at all. The idea of “genius” is not outwardly raised in this quotation, but again, we can see a similar strategy of deflection or neutralization of all things related to genius/celebrity. In this instance, it is the connection between trademark item and fame. Wallace’s rocky relationship with fame was well-documented, as he once claimed that he didn’t want fame as much as he wanted respect, yet in the passage cited above, Wallace’s strategy of ironic self-deprecation—the bandanna’s purpose is to keep his head from exploding—discredits his statement’s affective content. Recognizing the bandanna as a trademark does *not* make Wallace feel creepy; in fact, steeped in the aura of irony, he seems to revel in the attention.

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<sup>29</sup> However I do recognize that the bandanna appears throughout popular culture as an item associated with a disparate array of archetypal figures—namely, the cowboy, the bandit, the rapper, etc.

As part of their ongoing series of remembrances, McSweeney's ran a few dozen anecdotes written by those who knew Wallace well and those who only knew him only in passing in an online feature titled "Memories of David Foster Wallace." Many of the stories are funny; many more are heartfelt and sincere. One particular story (with photos!) that stands out is Marco Cassini's, Italian translator and publisher of many of Wallace's books. He recounts the road trip he took with a friend in 2000 as they drove from California to Bloomington, Illinois, where Wallace was teaching at the time. The three met Wallace for lunch at a local greasy spoon, and Cassini remembers registering a feeling of shock when he realized Wallace's hair had been cut short and he wasn't wearing his bandanna. After they ate, Cassini asked Wallace for directions to the interstate, which prompted the three to migrate toward Wallace's old car. In the car's back seat he noticed a red bandanna and asked Wallace if he could take it with him. Wallace agreed, but only under the condition that Cassini give him his Lucky Charms t-shirt. So the two traded items: Cassini got Wallace's trademark bandanna, and Wallace got a t-shirt that reminded him of his youth. Cassini ends his piece, "Those were the subjects of our talks: my T-shirt, his bandanna. Not books. Not writers. Not fiction. Just silly clothing. Lucky Charms" (Cassini).



*Image 3*

If we take seriously Wallace's admission that the bandanna's trademark status makes him feel "creepy," we must also observe that he doesn't appear to be visibly "creeped out" when trading his bandanna for Cassini's t-shirt, an episode documented in the photo above. In a way, the overarching sense of irony surrounding the exchange—Wallace concedes ironically the bandanna's "trademark" status and in return receives an "ironic" t-shirt depicting his favorite childhood cereal—frames the situation. Wallace gets to perform as the DFW slacker-genius persona while also attempting to distance himself from celebrity at the same time. The triangular relationship among literary celebrity, personality, and trademark item becomes clear in this instance, although it is merely an extension of an ongoing marketing campaign. Glass observes that for modernist authors, and I'd extend the argument to postmodern ones, too, "[T]hrough live readings, interviews, and promotional appearances, authors were increasingly expected to offer up their personalities as a promotional component of their work in the literary marketplace" (16-7). Or rather, in this instance, Wallace's very public exchange of clothing items, notably captured on film, illuminates two key points: first, it is a



concession that the bandanna is in fact considered a trademarked item that is part and parcel of the DFW celebrity; and second, the bandanna constitutes a self-fashioned cultural imprimatur that is meant for circulation in the literary economy. In other words, Wallace puts forth in photographs an extension of his literary personality, the DFW slacker-genius, as a way to ensure the propagation and maintenance of his reflexive self-fashioning. Put simply, it's a PR move for the Wallace brand.

### CHAPTER 3

“TO BE HONEST WITH A MOTIVE, THERE’S A CERTAIN PERSONA CREATED  
THAT’S A LITTLE STUPIDER AND SCHMUCKIER THAN I AM”

In 1993 *Harper’s* commissioned David Foster Wallace to embark on his very first journalistic enterprise. The occasion? The Illinois State Fair. It might seem risky having the author of *The Broom of the System* and the collection of stories *Girl with Curious Hair* write about a Midwestern state fair. What could a young, talented writer possibly have to say about funnel cakes and the Zipper? Surprisingly, a lot.

“Ticket to the Fair”—its initial 1994 title in *Harper’s*, later retitled “Getting Away From Already Pretty Much Being Away From It All in 1997’s post-*Infinite Jest* collection of essays *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again*”—opens with an honest, and childishly giddy, profession:

08/05/93/0800h. Press Day is a week or so before the Fair opens. I’m supposed to be at the grounds’ Illinois Building by like 0900 to get Press Credentials. I imagine Credentials to be a small white card in the band of a fedora. I’ve never been considered Press before. My main interest in Credentials is getting into rides and stuff for free. (83)

We discern from the essay’s opening paragraph, as a sign of what’s to come, that this reporter, sent on an a work assignment for a major magazine, accepted said assignment because, let’s be honest, going to a state fair isn’t really work at all.

I lead with this example because it seems to me to be an outstanding instance of the leisure-work dialectic playing out in Wallace's nonfiction. No detail of the fair is ignored in the essay, no observation undocumented. Speckled throughout the essay are words like "erumpent," "epithetic," and "gamboling," not terribly unusual words, but words that seem out of place in an essay about a state fair nonetheless, and that's just after flipping to a random page. Wallace's large and often eccentric vocabulary was part of his persona and, in this essay, like many of his nonfiction essays, his unique blend of formality and colloquialism threatens to take center stage. For an example of informality, take the last sentence of the opening paragraph: "My main interest in Credentials is getting into rides *and stuff* for free" (ibid., emphasis mine). "And stuff" isn't exactly formal. Flipping to another random page, another example: "Again, the Official wears a simply bitching white cowboy hat and stands at ease, legs well apart" (114).

His use of "Simply bitching" and his "and stuff" in the essay reveals the slacker component of the slacker-genius persona. The irony at play here—the slacker-genius knows he is getting paid to *not* work and so he eschews certain expectations of formality—is rampant throughout Wallace's nonfiction. As I've been arguing, the slacker-genius persona is a product of Wallace's self-fashioning through medially distributed authorship which is constructed through written texts (the genius) and photographs (the slacker). In keeping with that formulation, I'm suggesting that the DFW slacker-genius persona is pronounced most emphatically in Wallace's nonfiction. According to David Lipsky, "the essays were endlessly charming, they were the best friends you'd ever have, spotting everything, whispering jokes, sweeping you past what was irritating or boring in a humane style....The nonfiction writer was an impervious

sun” (173). The trademark features of his literary “genius”—endnotes, footnotes, extremely long and complex sentences—are manifest in the essays, as are the trademark features of his slackerdom—slacking off, or getting paid to not work, informality, and a disregard for social conventions. Moreover, the DFW persona’s popularity is due in part to its ability to “get away” with functioning as a studied marker of the dialectic between leisure and work—his work *is* his leisure, he *is* the slacker-genius. Confirming this point, Wallace once remarked in an interview with David Lipsky:

The *Harper’s* pieces were me peeling back my skull. You know, welcome to my mind for twenty pages, see through my eyes, here’s pretty much all the French curls and crazy circles. The trick was to have it be honest but also interesting—because most of our thoughts aren’t all that interesting. To be honest with a motive, there’s a certain persona created, that’s a little stupider and schmuckier than I am. (qtd. in Lipsky173)

Indeed, a persona that’s a little stupider and schmuckier is the way of the slacker-genius.

“Big Red Son” is Wallace’s essay about the 1997 *Adult Video News* Awards, better referred to as The Porn Awards. This essay, like “Getting Away,” was first published in *Harper’s* and this one was later included in 2006’s *Consider the Lobster*, and is a raucous romp through the depraved world of pornography, held that year in Las Vegas. Wallace wanders around the city and its hotels talking to industry insiders and *Adult Video News* journalists. Among the characters he encounters are: Harold Hecuba, Max Hardcore, John “Buttman” Stagliano, and Dick Filth, and that’s just for starters. I won’t even attempt to describe the scene Wallace encounters in Max Hardcore’s suite. Some things are best left unsaid.

As with most of Wallace's nonfiction pieces, the slacker-genius persona nearly dominates every page. Footnotes overpower the main body of the text, some running on for pages at a time.

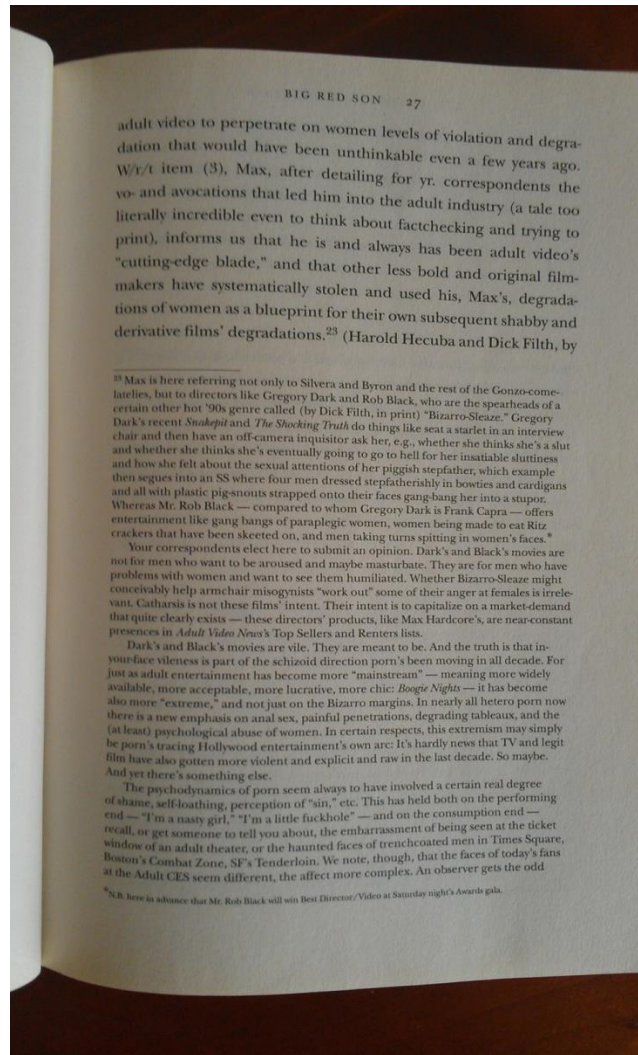


Image 4

Taken from "Big Red Sun," *Image 4* shows how the primary text only takes up about a quarter of the page, while the footnote consumes the remainder. The note runs on for another half page, and contains two footnotes of its own. I find this a remarkable example of the slacker-genius again playing out in Wallace's nonfiction. Assessing the context—

*Harper's* commissioning Wallace to attend and slack off at the porn awards (one must indeed possess ample time in order to *slack off* and then write about it in his characteristic, stylized way)—we can begin to understand how the DFW slacker-persona not only became so popular but became a kind of product; when you wanted slacker-genius style, you got David Foster Wallace.

In these essays, I contend, Wallace deploys the “stupider and schmuckier” persona—residing at the point where slacker and genius meet—as an attempt to exert control over his literary reception and promotion. In other words, the DFW slacker-genius persona is the main promotional vehicle for the David Foster Wallace brand. In the attempt to control his literary reception and promotion through the DFW persona, Wallace essentially lures readers further into his texts, becoming their “best friend,” as David Lipsky reminds us. By doing so, Wallace is able to guarantee effectively the continued promotion and interest in his literary career, seemingly, one might argue, from beyond the grave.

## EPILOGUE

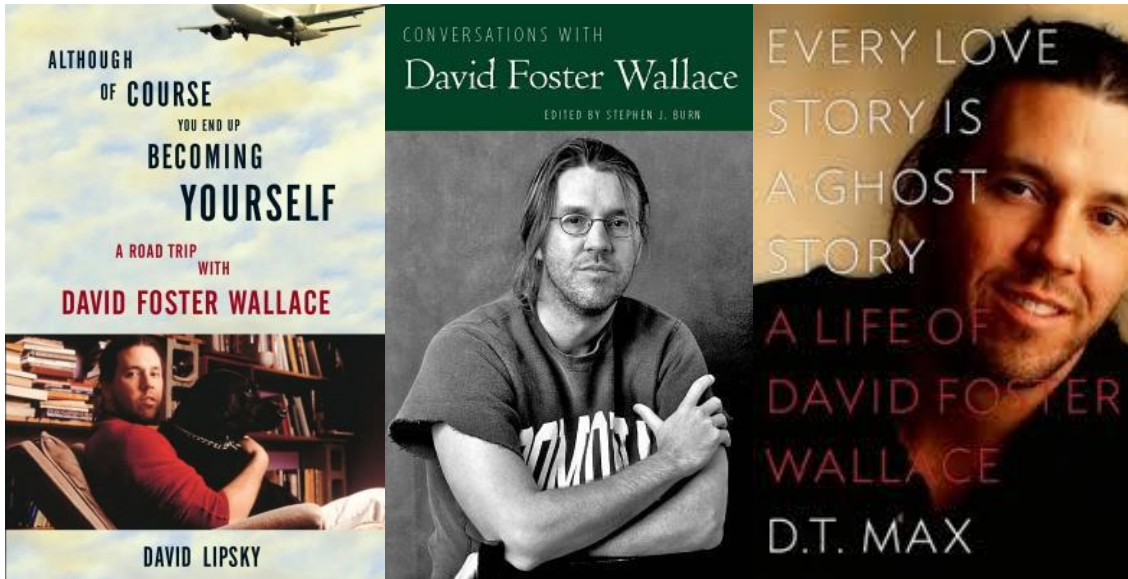


Image 5

Since David Foster Wallace committed suicide in 2008, popular and critical interest in his life—perhaps indicative of the inevitable search for a biographical master text—has ceased to wane. To date, three non-scholarly, personal-interest books have been published. David Lipsky’s week-long account with Wallace during his *Infinite Jest* media campaign: *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace* (2010); Stephen J. Burn’s edited collection of interviews: *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*; and D.T. Max’s *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* all seek to provide interested readers with a snapshot into Wallace’s personal life. But what interests us here is a snapshot of a different kind: the photographs shown on the covers of each of the three books. In light of the previous section’s discussion of Wallace’s style in the context of the grunge aesthetic, the notable

absence of the bandanna in each of the three photographs is noteworthy. Even more, Wallace's face is the focal point of each photograph and has the immediate effect of capturing our attention, especially in Max's book's case. In short, the three cover photos of Wallace attempt to entice readers into purchasing the respective books by offering within their pages an intimate glimpse of Wallace "unbound." With each photo's unique composition, and by paying careful attention to Wallace's face, they appeal to the familiar notions of genius and literary personality we've been exploring thus far and contribute to the image-based brand of David Foster Wallace. Susan Sontag once wrote that "there is something predatory in the act of taking a picture [because] it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed" (10). Just as one purchased a commodified style or personality in *Infinite Jest*, one can also possess a piece of stylized Wallace by purchasing one of the three books or owning one of his bandannas.

The cover of Lipsky's book is particularly rich in the way it represents Wallace as a 90s grunger everyman. Notice how Wallace is photographed with one of his shelter dogs snuggled in his lap as the two pose on a grungy, seemingly second-hand recliner. In the background one finds immense stacks of books piled frightfully high on plywood shelves laid casually atop cinder blocks. Wallace's expression is aloof; he is not outwardly concerned with his appearance. However, Wallace's forehead is bare. The "trademark" bandanna is absent, but it doesn't detract from the DFW persona. The strikingly relevant features of the photograph—the dog with a chain collar, the thrift-store recliner, the makeshift bookshelves—help to reinforce the image of Wallace as a 1990s slacker.



But what do we make of the rest of the book's cover, the remaining space above the photograph? In the upper right hand corner one finds an airplane soaring through a blanket of clouds. For our purposes, it's useful to note the composition of the book's cover. If the photo on the cover is meant to communicate the idea that Wallace is a common man, then the clouds and plane prove problematic, if not contradictory. Since Wallace was commonly portrayed as a genius (geniuses and airplanes only operate "in the clouds," right?), and since we know that such a crucial aspect of Little, Brown's marketing campaign for *Infinite Jest* (resulting in the image of Wallace that persisted thereafter) was making sure that casual readers would purchase the book and not be intimidated by its sheer bulk and "genius" of the author, the cover of Lipsky's book, with its conflicting imagery offers its readers a chance to get to know Wallace the genius in the context of an unpretentious setting. The photograph's background setting and Wallace's unaffected pose work to diffuse the common trope of the genius whose head is perpetually "in the clouds."

The cover of Burn's *Conversations with David Foster Wallace* depicts in simple black and white a posing Wallace with a noticeably loose strand of hair dangling in his face. He's wearing a sweatshirt with cutoff sleeves and the words "Pomona" written across the chest—he taught creative writing at Pomona College from 2002 all the way up to his death. His face is visibly stubbly and his lips slightly pursed. His hair is clearly disheveled; again, the image is meant to convey the idea that Wallace is a typical 90s slacker. In no way would one get the idea from this photo that this man is a literary genius.

Wallace's attire in the photo should even raise some eyebrows. It's helpful to think of the sweatshirt, with his employer's name plastered across the front and its cutoff sleeves, as a kind of irreverent gesture toward academia, or the "literati." The alterations made to the sleeves show a playful jab at those occupations found in higher education or elsewhere where the exposition of one's arms would be inappropriate. Here Wallace self-reflexively toys with the idea of the intellectual as being both inside and outside the academy—social convention does not allow cutoff sweatshirts in the ivory tower—and thus plays with popular proclamations labeling him a genius. This playfulness is what woos readers into cracking the cover. The appeal to a working-class, or grunge, aesthetic, represented by the sweatshirt and disheveled hair, acts as a ploy to entice potential readers.

Lastly, the most recent book of the three, the cover of D.T. Max's *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story* shows a big, smiling Wallace. The wire-rimmed glasses and bandanna are absent from his face, while his hair is neatly tucked out of the way, revealing a massive forehead. Of the three cover photographs, this is the one in which Wallace looks the most mature.

In his examination of early copyright law, *Authors and Owners*, Mark Rose draws a parallel, channeling 18<sup>th</sup> century English poet Edward Young, between property, originality, and personality. He writes

The sign of personality was the distinctiveness of the human face, but this was only the material trace of the genius of the immaterial self [...] The attempt to anchor the notion of literary property in personality suggests the need to find a transcendent signifier, a category beyond the economic to

warrant and ground the circulation of literary commodities. Thus the mystification of original genius...(128)

The emphasis on the idea that personality manifests itself on the face, which is a sign of marked genius, bears direct relevance to our discussion of the cover photograph on Max's biography. More than half of the book's cover is dominated by Wallace's smiling face, and if we extend Rose's reasoning to our own, we can see how the cover photograph is meant to convey the very real image of commodified genius. Contained within the pages of Max's biography, the smiling Wallace seems to say, is "the trace of the genius of the immaterial self." In this way, the book's cover affords its readers a glimpse into the "unbound" mind of Wallace, whose absent bandanna's purpose, we might recall, is to make sure his head doesn't explode.

But it might be too late. Each of the three cover photographs performs very different semiotic work. The first two photos depict Wallace in a more plebeian manner that, as we've seen through the persistent emphasis on grunge style, is meant to appeal to casual readers who might or might not be intimidated by the physical size of Wallace's texts or by the press's pronouncements of literary genius. The third photograph, however, brings the analysis full circle by finally offering a peek inside the mind of a commodified, and thus undeniable, genius. Wallace once told Frank Bruni shortly after *Infinite Jest's* publication, "Whenever the picture comes out, it's absolutely appalling to me. I just wish that wasn't what I looked like. I've just figured it out: I'm not going to look at them anymore" (Bruni), and luckily, for his sake, he doesn't have to look at them anymore.

When Roland Barthes declared, "the Photograph (the one I *intend*) represents that very subtle moment when, to tell the truth, I am neither subject nor object but a subject

who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death. I am truly becoming a specter” (13-4), it’s almost as if he, endowed with the mystical gift of foresight, knew the fate David Foster Wallace would soon suffer at his own hands. Even though the biographical Wallace is no longer living, through scholarship, hagiography, and literary influence, his specter will continue to haunt the contemporary literary landscape.

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## CURRICULUM VITAE

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### EDUCATION

University of Louisville  
M.A., English

Louisville, KY  
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University of Kentucky  
B.A., English, Cum Laude

Lexington, KY  
2011

### GRANTS

University of Louisville Department of English Travel Grant, Fall 2012

### PRESENTATIONS

“Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Who They Say You Are,” paper delivered  
at the 2013 Louisville Conference on Literature and Culture Since 1900,  
University of Louisville

“Making Matter Matter: Tom McCarthy’s Assault on Literary Realism,” paper delivered  
at the 2012 Pacific Ancient Modern Language Association Conference, Seattle  
University

### ACADEMIC SERVICE

Executive Officer, University of Louisville English  
Graduate Organization

Fall 2012-Spring 2013

Assistant Treasurer, University of Louisville English  
Graduate Organization

Fall 2012-Spring 2013

Master's Representative in Departmental Meetings,  
University of Louisville

Fall 2012-Spring 2013

Founding Member, Theory Reading Group,  
University of Louisville

Fall 2012-Spring 2013

Volunteer, Professors vs. Zombies Conference,  
University of Louisville

April 2012

## **LANGUAGES**

Spanish (proficient reading and translation, functional speaking)

## **PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS**

Pacific Ancient Modern Language Association  
American Comparative Literature Association  
University of Louisville English Graduate Organization