

in a MANNER *of* SPEAKING

BY FRANK GUAN

“At once the idea was voiced of having a look at the suicide. The idea met with support: our ladies had never seen a suicide. I remember one of them saying aloud right then that ‘everything has become so boring that there’s no need to be punctilious about entertainment, as long as it’s diverting.’ Only a few stood and waited by the porch; the rest went trooping down the dirty corridor...”

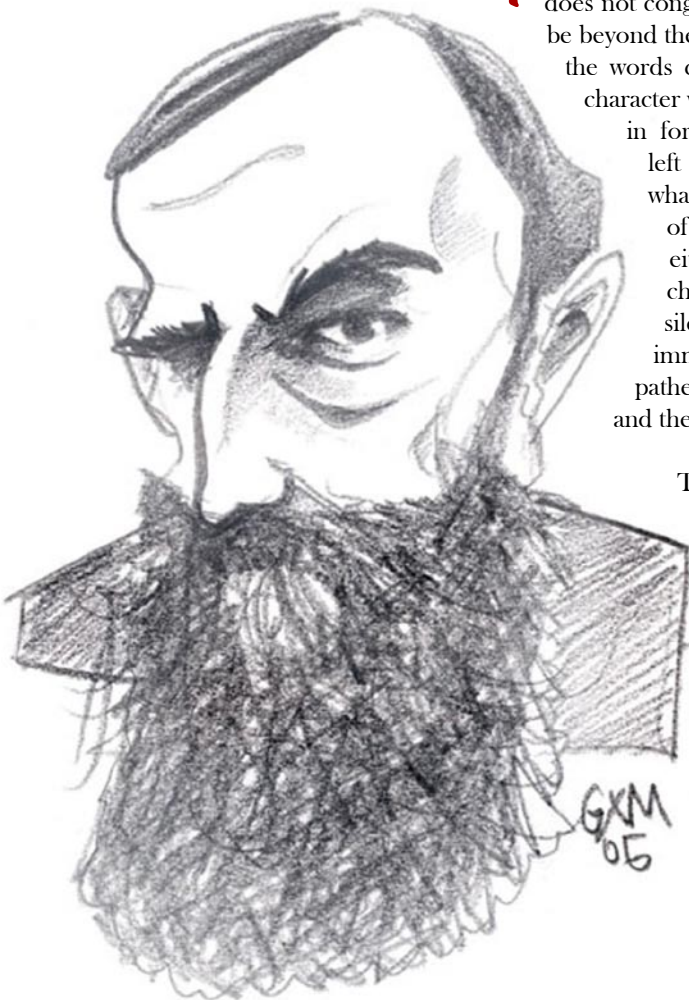
—Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Demons*

1 The quote above eschews dry theory. It does not congratulate itself or pretend to be beyond the phenomenon it describes: the words come from an anonymous character who certainly is not a stand-in for the author. And what is left out means just as much as what is said. For not a word of condemnation rises from either Dostoevsky or his characters. We recognize our silence in theirs and become immediately, pathetically, empathetically, complicit: the guilt and the relevance are one.

And all this by the way. The events that enframe the little quote seem far from the high point of *Demons*: it seems to be mentioned as a sort of afterthought, and style and craft explain only part of its magic. Dostoevsky is never content to sift through the symptoms of a sick society, and the easy cynicism embedded in the quote is just that.

Dostoevsky wants the disease, the demons. And he knows where to dive. However far he carries his explorations of ideology and society, he never loses sight of the human lives these concepts surround, pervade, and oscillate between. The degradation is always human degradation, the grace always human grace.

It is common to imagine the artist as somewhat removed from the web of little humiliations that comprise the social life of humanity. The odd, slightly filthy pleasure of reading biographies of great writers lies in the pull between this impulse to deification and the surfeit of evidence indicting the master as just another petty, indolent human being. The biographer experiences this tension most acutely: one doesn’t choose to narrate the lives of authors that one hates. The task would be unbearable. Demagogue, compulsive gambler, revolutionary, atheist, reactionary, racist, inveterate moocher: Dostoevsky’s life was politically incorrect even to himself. But while during the 19th century most, maybe all Russians felt at some level a gap between their lives and their ideologies, only a handful of them succeeded in dramatizing the dissonance. If Dostoevsky was the Rush Limbaugh of Saint Petersburg, he was also



THE DOGPATCH BURLESQUE

This is one of your tricks: lying between two nail-studded boards underneath piled up sandbags. Many magicians rely on illusions; you count on yourself to tolerate pain. Safe from the mirrors and their troubling effects inside of your scourging, immovable shell, you wait for the salve of a pleased crowd – and Saturday nights in a waterfront warehouse, snake charmers and fire-eaters surround you and cheer.

Now you have plans to jazz up your act with an eye-catching, spine-tingling, spellbinding treat: you've been looking for someone to tap dance on top of you, you and your coffin of nails. I've never had those Cyd Charisse feet, but I'll work on your terms if you'll work

on mine: I can do a shimmy, a slow, seductive grind, tossing off clothing with winks and one-liners one piece at a time. You'll feel the weight of my body pressed in delicate points on your eyelids, the backs of your ankles, the top of your spine. I'll get closer to you with your each gasp and tremble, while the crowd stomps and whistles and cries out for more. This will be how we make love from now on.

– BONNIE JOHNSON

its Shakespeare. His art depended on the draining task of empathizing with men and ideologies that he opposed, indeed even despised; the enduring, palpable presences of Ivan Karamazov, Stavrogin, and Shigaylov are proof of the incredible dedication that the man displayed in the pursuit of his art. It takes immense bravery to interrogate one's own beliefs with the same ruthlessness with which one attacks those of one's enemies.

Most authors stack the deck against those they despise. Even great talents like Dante or Tolstoy are prone to eviscerating their enemies with great gusto, and we read them and laugh: how fitting that the social climber Ivan Ilych is mortally wounded falling off a ladder as he decorates his new home! It makes sense, though life is not quite like that. But to bestow freedom upon your creations requires that you grant them the freedom to fail, to choose to fail, to hurt each other, to kill one another, to suffer alone. Like Shakespeare, even the lowest of Dostoevsky's characters is imbued with the freedom to choose. Their poverty but not their will consents. Broke people refusing money, starving people refusing food, pained people refusing pity, homeless people refusing shelter, sinners who will not be forgiven. People who will not give their selves up, even if it kills them. For Dostoevsky, one can never underestimate the morbid tenacity of the self, or the diabolical will that can animate it in the presence of despair. Having witnessed such anguish among the inmates and within himself in Siberia, he gave it unprecedented voice. So long as people wound themselves to prove they have free will, people will read Dostoevsky. Which is the same as saying that we will always read him.

2 Literary genealogy is a thankless and complex task. But Dostoevsky is clearly a spiritual ancestor to nearly all the great modern geniuses in Europe. The “novel of ideas” where ideas and characters promiscuously merge, divide, and dance between themselves did not exist in its current form until *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *Demons*, and *The Brothers Karamazov* laid its foundation. Hamsun, Kafka, Beckett, Freud, Nietzsche, and Camus all owe sizable debts to him, even Proust: in literature and psychology, in theology and ideology, he is the godfather of the past century: it begins again with him.

Yet paradoxically, Dostoevsky leaves very few footprints in a culture that thoroughly enacts his vision of the self as free agent or negator. Perhaps Dostoevsky has only a marginal appeal in America precisely because Americans are too busy pursuing their own aims to read. Reading is intrinsically opposed to hustling, and Americans hustle like nobody's business. But this is not news. For over a century American writers have bemoaned the lack of respect given the written word from sea to shining sea. They have whined eloquently of their marginal prestige relative to authors of the European (that is, civilized) continent. With anger and scorn they have wept of being distanced from the grossness of the reality they claimed to depict. Henry James, Philip Roth, Jonathan Franzen, whoever the next winner of the literary lottery will be: each feels that there is something paradoxical in being an *American author*. Supposedly, as the capacity for being one goes up, the capacity for being the other goes down. A writer writes about other people, the best writers evoke empathy, but how will one create empathy for characters so venal, so self-centered, so *tasteless* as to preclude its possibility? How to deploy the refined tools of style and structure, inevitably of foreign manufacture, upon a soft, viscous, and endlessly fluctuating manscape? And how to avoid misjudging one's characters, of subjugating them to the author's opinions and tastes? Americans feel very strongly that they're free to choose what's good and what's bad: whatever floats your boat, we say. Think of the philosophical underpinnings of the phrase *Who's better than me?* The novelist, in creating characters, implicitly engages in judgment: he wouldn't have taken up novel-writing if he didn't think he had something important to say, would he? But if he himself is an American, then he implicitly accepts that all men, all voices, all opinions, are created equal. The only way people will read literature after high school is because they choose to: if it doesn't speak to me, then why should I waste my precious leisure time?

One solution is for the author to reinforce what a large portion of potential readers already believe, or believe they believe. Usually, these are beliefs that the author shares just as unreflectingly as their readers. Please note that I'm not pointing

my finger only at the best-seller lists. Authors of considerable intellect are equally prone to unconsciously writing genre fiction for a target market. You don't have to sell a million copies to make a living, ten thousand and a teaching job will do quite comfortably. Actually, all writers write for a certain audience to some extent. The difference between them lies in whether they explore the implications. Does this conflict with some unspoken belief that one is writing for all people? How can the feedback loop between readers and writers (since one naturally chooses to speak to people who share your opinions and read your books) result in one's opinions slowly becoming indistinguishable from that of one's audience? Even, if one's not careful, becoming unknowingly trapped in a community bound by shared preconceptions, which, over time, leads to a solipsistic group mentality, as well as endless ideological wars with anyone outside the circle? To paraphrase a Karamazov, come and worship our gods, else death to you and your gods! Writing fails when it unconsciously and unconditionally espouses anything. Most of the works of literature that have been written are now unreadable because everything they refer to has been superseded many times over by equally perishable events, movements, fashions. Whether the life expectancy of a trend is 50 years or 15 minutes, it doesn't last: as the movement collapses, so do the fictions built upon it.

Thankfully, the set of sub-communities that compose the larger sub-community of American belles lettres are tribes notorious for largely restricting their arguments to pen and paper, with the occasional punch being the exception that proves the rule. Maybe the world of US belles lettres might be better off if the subsets "realists" and "anti-realists" would play a friendly game of dodge ball. Or had some sort of war with origami swords and sharpened ballpoints, a modernized version of Swift's battle of the books, but with the word made flesh. Ford versus Whitehead! Saunders versus Tyler! Franzen, slicing and stabbing himself! But probably there would just be more vendettas, paper cuts, blue or black rimmed stab wounds, and ill will. Still, it might be interesting to see if they can feel the root of open war within them.

3 In 1995, the fifth and final volume of Joseph Frank's titanic biography of Dostoevsky (*The Mantle of the Prophet: 1871-1880*) was finally released to the acclaim of the miniscule percentage of Americans who concerned themselves with Dostoevsky. Most of the reviews published were digested and, as reviews, and kind reviews especially, forgotten.

Somewhat incongruous amongst the gentle applause was a review in the *Village Voice*. The author was a white male in his early thirties who happened to enjoy writing; furthermore he was not unskilled amongst the statistically insignificant, but relatively vociferous, section of the population who not only wrote, but wrote "literary" or "serious" fiction, having been labeled as such by the organs of the literary world that liked to pronounce such judgments. He had published one novel and a collection of short stories, the relative success of which may not have been the same kind of blessing as one would have imagined from the outside. His output was self-nominated as postmodern. Indeed, he had published a rather long essay on the current (that is, early 1990s) state of American fiction, published not in Harpers, for which it had been originally commissioned, but in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, a publication with a rather smaller audience, an essay which displayed a keen sense of the anxieties of his literary heritage, which ran largely from a certain branch or movement in US literature known primarily for writing that went on and on about its metafictional or "made" quality, about the fact that one was not really engaging with human beings, but with like a text, composed of words and letters, a branch whose epistemological foundations the young writer, having been something of a prodigy in philosophy before burning out, as prodigies often do, and switching to fiction writing, which most prodigies don't do, found sound. Sound enough indeed to base his own fiction upon said foundations, or un- or anti-foundations as it were.

The young writer believed that he recognized a tendency within his chosen branch of fiction. The aesthetic that he by and large subscribed to no longer seemed edgy; the forms his progenitors had pioneered were now anyone's to use, even hacks who didn't really have talent but could still be recognized as talented through

a kind of “This story isn’t working and these characters, which aren’t actually people, being a construct made up of LANGUAGE, and are badly written and irrelevant, but at least I’m being up front about it and privileging you, Dear Reader, etc.” exit strategy. Perhaps the forms even invited “getting away” or escaping; it was hard to say with certainty. The aesthetic that Barth and Barthelme and Gass had pioneered and that young writer David Foster Wallace championed was being used irresponsibly to parody American mass culture, a mass culture that the essay clearly demonstrated could take its own temperature: in fact, the culture powered itself through its own parody, it knew itself to be self-referential, and much of its seduction lay precisely in this kind of hip knowingness or cynicism about consumption, an awareness that however enticing, the writer felt to be sort of, so to speak, kind of, you know, toxic to the scare quoted soul, having undergone years of literally indescribable war with himself and having learned, in the only way modern prodigies learn, the hard way, that certain aspects of human life just did not jive with the light-hearted or let’s be honest plain insubstantial stuff that this Image Fiction in general seemed capable of now that its patent on keen self-reflexivity had expired and was available to just about any Joe Briefcase who watched TV. The young writer had been composing a second novel. Fiction about TV just was not bringing the news anymore, that coherent (okay, maybe now not so coherent) but larger picture of self and society that made up much of what was magical about literature, the remainder being devoted to a love of cold structural or conceptual stuff that Wallace had carried over from his logic days, stuff that by now made up a not insignificant portion of the writer’s psyche. If TV could do it, it wasn’t news anymore. He had been performing for a long time.

The second novel had many pages, a fact that its reviewers would later comment upon to no end. The writer’s review of the biography of the great novelist Dostoevsky was not without a share of self-promotion. The review contained stuff that was rather bracing and constructive. It threw down a gauntlet, which went unrecognized as such, the novel still being in the late stages of publication. Why, asked Wallace, was so much of U.S. fiction devoid of the

weighty moral seriousness that Dostoevsky was renowned for? What if it was possible (wink, nudge) that fiction could be written that was not only page-turning, but also piercingly personal, and also, yes, brought the deep news? For we all knew, said David Foster Wallace, that Dostoevsky still brings the news like nobody else.

4 When David Foster Wallace published *Infinite Jest* in 1996, it received, from what one can discern today, rapturous and somewhat confused applause. The page count, the ambition, the humor, the satire, the page count: book reviews are not meant to be incisive. Cleverer reviewers could discern a certain aura of sadness beneath the non-stop verbal hijinks. Years later, one dissenting reviewer, for unknown and personal reasons, ended his review with a heartfelt wish that Wallace be anally penetrated. Being famous is not a reversible process.

Since then, Wallace has published two collections of short stories and two collections of essays.

5 As sure as the day follows the night, so too does the hype around an object precede, and, all too often, preclude, the object itself. The preconceptions surrounding David Foster Wallace and his work are sufficiently distorting as to hamper a reader’s opinion of the man’s work even if distortion was not one of Wallace’s dominant themes, which it manifestly is. And since this phenomenon (as Wallace points out so often) is for our place and time what fluoridated water was for the 50’s, a little theorem would save us much critical vertigo. Let the sensational fallacy be defined as judging a work of art by either the hype or the fans that it (the work of art) attracts. Like other rhetorical fallacies, it’s a necessary and natural short-cut, it’s a natural coping mechanism in a world flooded by art (of whatever quality or lack thereof), but it’s misguiding, and pernicious, and a literary critic would do well to steer wide of it.

6 Metafiction is an oppressive form, and the oppression of form is its subject. Kierkegaard, discussing boredom, notes that pantheism and atheism are twins: if everything matters, then nothing matters on its own, which is to say that nothing matters. The stories of Borges

enact this metaphysical paradox: over and over his characters find their individuality challenged and dissolved in the greater whole of human experience, which in its turn is an element of the greater whole of the universe. All is wholly holy. Art is holy; all is art. Art is form; all is form. Content is all; all is form; all is content, all is form, all is art, all is God, one is all, one is God...one is nothing. Nothing is God, all is God, all is all ... et cetera. Kierkegaard’s point being that it gets boring.

Such philosophical gymnastics neatly sideline certain unpleasant aspects of the world. Sadness, pain, and death: what are these compared to the wholeness of infinity? This is the crucial difference between Borges and Beckett, the other metafictionist *avant la lettre*. Both Borges and Beckett bear the mark of Schopenhauer, but Borges only absorbs Schopenhauer’s abstract aspect, the mathematics of the finite and infinite. John Barth, currently the professor of creative writing at Johns Hopkins University and a founding father of American metafiction, deeply admires the work of Borges. David Foster Wallace deeply admires the work of Borges. He both respects and resents John Barth, to the point of writing a short story of novella length (“Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way,” from his first collection *Girl With Curious Hair*) built around (literally around, as the draft was written in the margins of a copy of Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse*) Barth’s fictional aesthetics, featuring one Professor Ambrose, who teaches creative writing at a Maryland college and has published a book titled *Lost in the Funhouse*, as well as other characters, none of whom are particularly sympathetic, as the narrator of the story points out. Nor is the story metafiction, the narrator also notes, though this reader would note in passing that he, the reader, certainly felt curiously hollow, a specific and peculiar feeling that only lavish praise, pornography and metafiction can create, by the story’s (much-delayed) end.

Lavish praise devalues real praise. Pornography devalues real film. And metafiction devalues “real” fiction. Each overwhelms a natural hunger by satisfying it beyond excess: for flattery, for stimulation, for a human presence that is not one’s own. As a prodigy, Wallace is all too accustomed to glowing and empty compliments, which so often serve as a form of veiled envy. As an

American, he is familiar with pornography. For Wallace, pornography is the genre that negates all other genres, the genre of genres: fundamentally, the purpose for which one goes to see Seagal break jaws or Meg Ryan grin is the same as the motives with which one subscribes to Cinemax or orders “Barely Legal Bitches 5” in the comfort and isolation of a Tampa-area Holiday Inn while on a business trip selling Budweiser advertisements for the sides of the local NASCAR track. If you know precisely what you’re getting before it even starts, it’s porn.

And what does it mean, for Wallace, to be a writer? “Oglers ... born watchers ... viewers ... watch other humans sort of the way gapers slow down for car wrecks: they covet a vision of themselves as witnesses ... terribly self-conscious.” What concerns him is that in an age of images, reading and watching begin to blur into one another: to Wallace, the postmodern reader feels distanced from the characters in a written story because they’ve spent so much time engaging with hammy stories and cheesy dialogue in television. Subverting this false sense of dissociation, which manifests itself in daily untelevised life as a hypertrophied self-consciousness (all that watching is going to affect how you “see” yourself) as well as a atrophied sense of other-consciousness (the more time spent watching TV, the less time spent actually talking with and becoming aware of flesh-and-blood humans, and the less ease around others, the less desire to be around others, rinse and repeat), has been Wallace’s project from the flailing, abstract work of his youth through the breakthrough *Infinite Jest* to the lapidary and exceptionally involving tales published since then.

Infinite Jest: on pages 945-46 of the paperback version, a film titled “Accomplice!” features an aging pederast anally penetrating, without protection, a young male prostitute infected with HIV, in spite (literally: the pederast thinks the prostitute suspects him, the pederast, of having the Virus) of the prostitute’s demand that the pederast wear a condom. The prostitute, upon discovering what has happened (the pederast had removed the condom he had originally worn—don’t ask how), shrieks to the pederast that he (the pederast) has made him (the prostitute) a murderer, and goes on screaming the word “Murderer!” at the camera for 500 seconds. The film operates as a sort of attack on

ARS POETICA

The hiss of a bottle opening, and the groan
of the couch giving way. I flip on the basketball
game, and my daughter bounces to the floor at my feet.
Watch my beer, kiddo, I tell her. She doesn’t really

get basketball yet, but she understands
when the best time to be around
her father is. Kathy comes out
of the bedroom with her hair

pinned up and her flannel shirt rolled
past her elbows. She slaps my legs off
the coffee table, kisses our child on
the forehead, settles down in the rocking chair.

There’s half a poem on the computer
in the den, and a bag of weed
in a drawer in the kitchen, but other than that,
you’d have never guessed I’m a poet at all.

My doctors tell me I’m too normal
to ever be a poet. Can’t you act a bit
more insane, they ask, or at least attempt
a suicide from time to time? You don’t have

to go through with it, Tom, just give us something
to work with—domestic abuse could help, they think.
I enjoy my booze a great deal, I offer. That’s a start,

they say. But then I admit I prefer
beer and cheap cigarettes to wine
and expensive cigarettes. What about
sexually-transmitted diseases, they want
to know, do you have any potential there?

I prefer the love of one woman to the sex
of many, I explain. They shake their heads.
A white, middle-class, heterosexual male,

not oppressed, depressed, no incest
a modest and loving family—two parents,
three siblings, churchgoers, they accuse.

I played little league, even. I frown.
I want a faithful wife, loyal children,
a playful dog, fucking white picket fence.

You’re just not a poet, they say,
we’re very sorry, but there’s simply
nothing we can do for you.

—TOM FEULNER

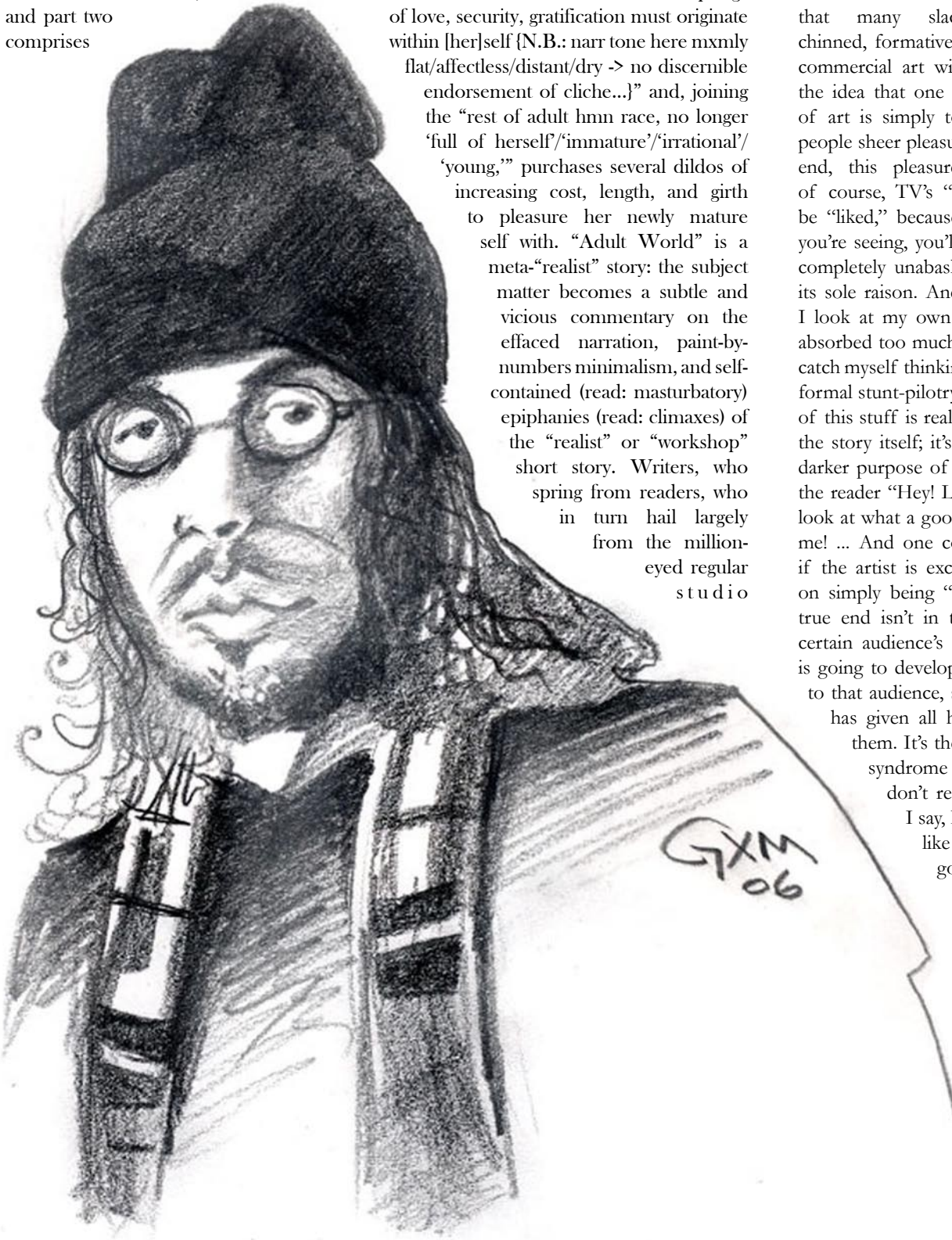


its viewers. It accuses them of being, well, accomplices, implying that the onscreen misery would not even exist if viewers didn't want to watch it. "Adult World," a story in Wallace's "Brief Interviews With Hideous Men," is divided into two parts: part one is delivered in a straight-on "realist" narration, and part two comprises

a synopsis of the remainder of the story written in authorial shorthand. The story concerns a young wife who fears that she is not pleasing her husband during intercourse, but eventually understands (in the second part's summary), in an epiphany, that her husband is a secret compulsive masturbator, after which she "realizes that true wellsprings of love, security, gratification must originate within [her]self {N.B.: narr tone here mxmly flat/affectless/distant/dry -> no discernible endorsement of cliché...}" and, joining the "rest of adult hmn race, no longer 'full of herself'/'immature'/'irrational'/'young,'" purchases several dildos of increasing cost, length, and girth to pleasure her newly mature self with. "Adult World" is a meta-"realist" story: the subject matter becomes a subtle and vicious commentary on the effaced narration, paint-by-numbers minimalism, and self-contained (read: masturbatory) epiphanies (read: climaxes) of the "realist" or "workshop" short story. Writers, who spring from readers, who in turn hail largely from the million-eyed regular studio

audience, are taught to distance themselves (first through TV, and then through adolescence and maybe drugs) from what they experience well before they begin to write. Television triggers a mutation in the reader, and thus also in the writer:

And I think it's impossible to spend that many slack-jawed, spittle-chinned, formative hours in front of commercial art without internalizing the idea that one of the main goals of art is simply to "entertain," give people sheer pleasure. Except to what end, this pleasure-giving? Because, of course, TV's "real" agenda is to be "liked," because if you like what you're seeing, you'll stay tuned. TV is completely unabashed about this; it's its sole raison. And sometimes when I look at my own stuff I feel like I absorbed too much of this raison. I'll catch myself thinking up gags or trying formal stunt-piloting and see that none of this stuff is really in the service of the story itself; it's serving the rather darker purpose of communicating to the reader "Hey! Look at me! Have a look at what a good writer I am! Like me! ... And one consequence is that if the artist is excessively dependent on simply being "liked," so that her true end isn't in the work but in a certain audience's good opinion, she is going to develop a terrific hostility to that audience, simply because she has given all her power away to them. It's the familiar love-hate syndrome of seduction: "I don't really care what it is I say, I care only that you like it. But since your good opinion is the sole arbitrator of my success and worth, you have tremendous power over me, and I fear you and hate you for it." This dynamic isn't exclusive to art. But I often think I can see it in myself and



in other young writers, this desperate desire to please coupled with a kind of hostility to the reader. (interview with L. McCaffery, "Review of Contemporary Fiction," summer 1993)

The writer (person) who stakes his art (the part of himself that he makes public to the world) on the entertaining of an audience potentially traps himself in a self-recursive, hellacious, and comic bind between the logic behind his public actions (that value and identity are created by others) and the logic of the private self (that one creates one's own value and identity). What Wallace seems to do better than anyone else is to uncover, with terrifying exactitude and an ever-increasing subtlety, the sources and ramifications of this logic. Both microcosmically and macrocosmically, one not only can't live within this logic, one can't even locate one's self: Neal, the amateur logician, posthumous narrator, and protagonist of 2004's *Oblivion's* "Good Old Neon," can only admit to himself while he's writing his suicide note that

I'd somehow chosen to cast my lot with my life's drama's supposed audience instead of with the drama itself, and that I even now was watching and gauging my supposed performance's [his suicide note's] quality and probable effects, and thus was in the final analysis the very same manipulative fraud writing the note to Fern that I had been throughout the life that had brought me to this climactic scene of writing and signing it and addressing the envelope and affixing postage and putting the envelope in my shirt pocket (totally conscious of the resonance of its resting there, next to my heart, in the scene), planning to drop it into a mailbox on the way out to Lily Cache Rd. and the bridge abutment into which I planned to drive my car at speeds sufficient to displace the whole front end and impale me on the steering wheel and instantly kill me. Self-loathing is not the same thing as being into pain or a lingering death, if I was going to do it I wanted it quick. (*Oblivion*, 176)

Caught between his public image of a charming, successful young man and his

private image of being a manipulative and selfish fraud, Neal is so dizzy from spinning his mind in circles that he can't tell which is real. And he can't express his private feelings of fraudulence to others without making himself look charming and successful, confirming the very fraudulence he would have expressed and driving him back to where he began over and over until the only way out appears as death. Analysis won't help: his therapist's thesis that American society fosters a competitive environment in which being recognized as a winner is paramount to securing an identity, however true, is null and void to him because Neal, having cataloged the behaviors of Dr. Gustafson, has deduced that Dr. Gustafson is a closeted homosexual and thus is projecting his masculine insecurities onto his patients with the above thesis: the notion that a statement can be subjectively motivated and objectively true is invalid within the systems Wallace's protagonists set up. Deconstruction becomes anesthetic, and anesthetics become addictive. The narrator of the second "The Devil is a Busy Man" in *Brief Interviews* assists a family in need anonymously to prove to himself that he can be a generous person. When the parents of the family call, he denies that he has anything to do with it, but adds, without knowing why at the time, that he could imagine that the person who did help them would "be enthusiastic to know how the needed money, which they had received, was going to be utilized," thus proving (to him) that

I showed an unconscious and, seeming, natural, automatic ability to both deceive myself and other people, which, on the "motivational level," not only completely emptied the generous thing I tried to do of any true value, and caused me to fail, again, in my attempts to sincerely be what someone would classify as truly a "nice" or "good" person, but, despairingly, cast me in a light to myself which could only be classified as "dark," "evil," or "beyond hope of ever sincerely becoming good. (*Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, 193)

The narrator is incapable of comprehending that his act might be genuine because in his mind, genuine acts are done with zero

thought to one's own benefit; the idea that his unconscious impulse to be known as the giver might be at once natural, selfish, and "good" is for him unfathomable, out of bounds. Selfishness is strongly associated with being known and recognized and selflessness and anonymity are conversely linked. The devil in "The Devil is a Busy Man" is a cousin of Dostoevsky's demons: think of Ivan Karamazov's devil, whom Ivan cannot disentangle from himself, or the ghost in the corner that shakes her finger at Stavrogin. They too have painted themselves into a psychic corner. Wallace and his more introspective characters (Neal, the depressed person of "The Depressed Person," the "author" of "Octet") are intimately familiar with these psychic inward spirals, but only Wallace is wise enough to use narcissism as a conduit into other humans' minds. For him, it's precisely this conviction of universal selfishness that binds Americans together, makes them known: the generically atomized individual that television has nurtured, the part that watches and wonders who's watching: the voyeur, the one who locates significance in the screen, in being seen, who feels desperately inadequate being on the wrong side of the glass. Think of the depressed person curled up on the floor of her workstation, or the giant, unaging feral infants in *Infinite Jest* ravaging what was once Quebec. Metaphysically, the only thing an infant does is believe unconditionally in what it perceives. Over time, he learns, through pain, to believe conditionally. What, asks, Wallace, happens when humans are educated more by television than by real people?

Television, for very solid economic reasons, seeks only to pleasure and stimulate the viewer. Like all modern media, its true product is people, whom it delivers to its market, advertisers, who then proceed, through extremely devious and intensive rhetoric, to embed the product which they have been hired to sell into the minds of viewers by whatever means necessary. And statistically, psychologically, economically, logically (by simple reason of the proximity between TV show and TV ad [and also meta-logically: viewers, being averse to ads, generally zip away during the commercial break, meaning that in the course of channel flipping, they'll come across other ads, other shows, which, because any viewer, based on personal preferences, have certain set

interests and channel-preferences, which, statistically, are most predictable, for cultural, historical and metahistorical reasons, as demographic, which means that vendors, which of course know well how viewers like to dodge ads, salt their advertisements over a set of networks over which demographically, statistically...this is tiresome, but you see the kind of sordid, autistic and complex statisticopsychosociohistoricoeconomic logic that enframes all of Wallace's work, logic that's becoming even more involuted and absurd with Google's ability to sell extremely precise micro-markets to advertisers based on search terms and makes their whole Don't Be Evil slogan seem on their part {the people who comprise Google's brain trust} either heartbreakingly naive or insanely diabolical {which, as Wallace is fond of reminding his readers, are actually not mutually exclusive categories (indeed, they're almost mutually *inclusive* for reasons which are just as insanely self-referential and sad and, when one bothers to sift through it all human, for buyers and sellers and novelists and alike, as the reasons nested beyond this parenthesis)}}), the best way to sell people things is to stimulate them pleurably in precisely the same way programs stimulate viewers, which, over time, as young viewers become tomorrow's cynical comedians, that TV will in fact be precisely about the logic underpinning TV, which, over the next generation of young viewers and cynical comedians, that is, people born during Reagan-Bush and Bush-Quayle, will lead to time will tell what kind of terrifying and blackly humorous entertainment, the kind of self-centered entertainment logic which Dostoevsky had diagnosed long, long ago in *Demons* as leading to suicide and murder, as it generates a weary general conviction that people care only about tricking me out of my money. To quote a seduced and abandoned Dubliner:

The men that is now is only all palaver and what they can get out of you.

7 Joyce was himself something of a burnt-out prodigy, having parted ways with the theology of the Jesuits before taking up literature: "The Dead," from which the above quote derives, was completed in 1907, when Joyce was only 25.

Exiting a system never implies exiting

the forms of the system. Joyce, being Irish and not American, was well aware of this. *Dubliners* is studded with Catholic symbology (not to mention being written in the native language of the people who ruled Ireland as a colony), and the ever-more ambitious work that follows it is no different: in its scope and complexity, Joyce's oeuvre can truly be described as Catholic, even though in content it remains defiantly earthly. Or remember Proust and his beloved cathedrals: the form persists, but the content, the object that is venerated, is changed. Or in the present, read the stern and excellent criticism of James Wood, with its constant hectoring, grudging approvals, and humorless demands, its vast, inhuman, compelling, and ultimately mysterious authority from on high that practically

demands to be resented.

Recall that Wallace was something of a genius in the philosophy of logic before making the jump to literature. Logic isn't just any form, it's the form *of* form. Or the philosophy that language can refer only to language. Metafiction isn't just any fiction, it's the fiction *of* fiction. American media since the 1960s has been all about American media since the 1960s. And Americans aren't just any selfish people, they're the people who believe that there are no people but selfish people. Assume that Wallace wants to escape the nets and snares of all these self-enclosed systems: for all the obvious reasons. But assume that Wallace, being intelligent, has discovered that you can't escape solipsism by yourself. Now what?

THIS IS HOW IT SHOULD BE DONE

This is how it should be done
with twenty-seven minute phone calls,
words and meaning completely.
With forty-two minutes on the asphalt
and with it being enough.

But what good is can't when want
strings together words, which should
never be spelled out for anyone else,
to anyone who matters. When routine
gives way to agitation. To selfish
giving and taking what's yours.

This is how it should be done
with words to some other nape,
shifting focus and no remorse.
With lies and with lying
down. With things being mutual.

- TYLER GUTIERREZ

Most writers choose sides in the real/experimental divide in American fiction rather early. Either you choose to efface yourself and ignore the big picture and sketch tiny characters with no significance beyond their own tiny epiphanies or you dive headlong into the glass, kicking the carcass of convention, sowing sterile pop references and self-references and in general fucking with the reader's trust, all the while deploying copious quantities of black humor to evade charges of sentimentality and naïveté. Wallace's solution is at once classically postmodern and absurdly simple. Expose both sides (sub-communities?) as solipsistic, systematically ignoring the aspects of reality they can't handle (for the former, any society beyond the family unit, for the latter, principles and emotions other than disgust), of enslaving content to form, and ask, deviously and plaintively, "Why not let the *content* determine the form?"

Granted, that's what any lasting artist does, whether he's aware in this way or not: great writers like Pynchon, DeLillo, Carver, and Wolff tend to get shoehorned into categories that deny certain aspects of their talent. Pynchon and DeLillo are actually acutely concerned with people: I'm thinking of Mother Oswald's monologue near the conclusion of *Libra* and the complex anguish fused into the narration of *Gravity's Rainbow*, and Carver and Wolff actually have a concern with not only with society beyond Mom, Dad, and Sis but with the text as something written by a person: read Wolff's *Old School* or Carver's story in epistle form, "Please, Tell Me." Wallace's particular genius lies in the creation of his language, a powerful and marvelously adaptable instrument that mimics the wrestlings of self with society in its very syntax: he's more Joycean than Dostoevskian. Since at least *Infinite Jest*, Wallace's writing has been approaching the linguistic analog of a Seurat painting, commenting on its illusions quietly and unobtrusively while at the same time referring to the world beyond itself. For all the commentary on Wallace's loquaciousness, precious little has been said about his abrupt and calculated perspectival shifts, his skill at hiding symbols in plain sight, or, maybe most importantly, his dead silences: just as there's a lot of blank space between Seurat's pinpoints, there's a lot of white space in Wallace's words, spaces void of meaning that a reader has to fill

in on his own. Like *Who is telling the story?* or *Why is this story worth the time spent reading it?* or *What is this story even about?* and *What makes the answers to these questions true: are they just given to me as True, or are they true because I believe them to be true?* Wallace is deeply concerned (meaning honestly confused) with how meaning is transmitted, and all of his narratives do their best to induce the same sort of epistemological moorlessness in their readers.

8 Reader beware: section 9 of this essay gives away most of what makes David Foster Wallace's story "Mister Squishy" tragic and human. There's no other way to prove that the above seven sections aren't just an intricate array of academic smoke and mirrors. Sensational fallacy aside, the reputation of Wallace's work as intimidating is true. It's dense, it's difficult, it's sticky, and it demands a high degree of trust on the reader's part. Hopefully, the summary and analysis in section 9 will serve the function of training wheels with regards to riding a bicycle.

9 What does it mean to be called a piece of shit? Discarded? Worthless? Waste? Unneeded? Repellent? Insignificant? Stinky? Terry Schmidt, the protagonist of "Mister Squishy," is in a room with fourteen other men on the nineteenth floor of an unnamed office building in a major American metropolis. He has been explaining for some twenty minutes the statistical procedures involved behind the group product evaluation survey that the other fourteen men will collectively fill once he leaves the room. The said product is a newly developed chocolate snack cake marketed as *Felonies!*, produced by the Mister Squishy Corporation. The year is 1995. Schmidt works for an auxiliary marketing research firm, Team Delta-Y, which generally services the needs of the advertising firm of Reesemeyer Shannon Belt, which is engaged in servicing the needs of Mister Squishy. Team Delta-Y is run by Alan S. Britton, though Schmidt's immediate overseer is Robert Awad, whose subordinate, protégé and probable successor A. Ronald Mounce regularly condenses water cooler chitchat onto on #302 *Field Concerns and Morale* forms. Schmidt is secretly obsessed and/or in love with his big and tall colleague Darlene Lilley. He masturbates himself to sleep every night

over fantasies of "moist slapping intercourse" with Lilley.

These fantasies disturb Schmidt because in the fantasy he can't stop telling her *thank you* over and over again while Lilley's face wears an annoyed expression throughout the fantasy. This is dismaying to Schmidt, "his apparent inability to enforce his preferences even in fantasy." It makes him wonder if he even had what convention called a Free Will at all, deep down. Lilley is married and has a son. Her phone number is on Schmidt's phone's speed-dial, which phone Schmidt watches every evening, trying to summon up the courage to call her. Schmidt's job is statistics, and statistics is largely about sorting significant data from insignificant data, of determining what "makes a difference." He lives alone in a condominium. In his spare time he collects rare and uncirculated United States metal currency. Such as say a 1916 Flowing Liberty Quarter, the volume of which is roughly equivalent to the volume of the bitter pocket of castor-bean distillate and chocolate sludge that would result from injecting a *Felony!* with a hypodermic needle full of ricin, or castor bean distillate, which can be prepared, given proper attention to laboratory procedures, very easily and cost-effectively. Hypothetically speaking.

Castor beans are either scarlet colored or a lustrous brown. In the conference room of the office building whose exterior a mysterious figure equipped with an as yet unrevealed-to-the-public M16 automatic rifle among a complex and numerous array of other apparatus, most of which are for climbing, is climbing up in a competent and experienced manner, Schmidt continues to speak while rotating his cocoa-brown cordovan in a roughly 120-degree arc. I have an emetic prosthesis equipped upon my body containing the contents of six *Felonies!* and my own bile, which I harvested this morning using an over-the-counter emetic. The windows of the room, which are inoperable by city law, are tinted dark brown. Samples of *Felonies!* rotate slowly in the center of the conference table. Terry Schmidt favors beige, rust, and cocoa-brown in his professional wardrobe. He can find less and less within himself that makes him special or unique. Therapy has revealed to him that his younger dreams of making a difference in the advertising industry by forming his own company and

convincing corporate execs to Trust Me You Will Not Be Sorry to reveal certain facts about their products, such as the fact that antacids are useless after a few weeks because the digestive system of the human body begins to secrete more hydrochloric acid to compensate for the antacids, or that tobacco products are addictive, or that the instruction to *'Repeat'* written on shampoo bottles was hygienically unnecessary, et cetera, were, objectively, statistically, not that different from the beliefs of other young people in their twenties who are entering the job market, that they were delusions, mirages. Botulism exotoxin being therefore much more preferable, as it is tasteless and requires very small concentrations and is just as easy, if not easier, to create. So long as one ensures that no oxygen is trapped in the jar, ten days and darkness will make for

a small tan-to-brown colony of *Clostridium* awash in a green-to-tan penumbra of botulinus exotoxin, which is, to put it delicately, a byproduct of the mold's digestive process, and can be removed in very small amounts with the same hypodermic used for administration. Botulinus had also the advantage of directing attention to defects in manufacturing and/or packaging rather than product tampering, which would of course heighten the overall industry impact. (*Oblivion*, 58)

Hypothetically speaking, of course.

The other side of "Mister Squishy" describes the convoluted office politics between Britton and his treacherous mentee Scott Laleman, as well as between Britton and Awad/Mounce, who in fine individualistic tradition plan to set out on their own soon and start their own ad firm. Unbeknownst to Awad, Britton is maneuvering him in such a way so as to ease him out of his job in favor of Darlene Lilley, who, when Britton had ordered Awad to sexually harass her earlier, had been so diplomatic and cool-headed as to merit a promotion in Britton's eyes. This and more all conspire to place the Mister Squishy mascot one floor and a brown pane of most likely non-bulletproof glass from the 19th floor conference room and the emetic prosthesis under the arm of the first-person narrator of "Mister Squishy," another loaded gun of sorts. Not to mention the

little game of find-the-narrator using various wads of statistical data embedded in the narration that may well require more than one sheet of paper, or the reason for this seemingly pointless game, or the very subtle web of criminal-related imagery which never quite comes together in the events of the story, or the set of perfectly uneven details involved in saying that "the great grinding US marketing machine had somehow *colored* his whole being" [my italics].

Remember the colors that Schmidt prefers to dress in. Remember the rich color of the chocolate snack cakes. Remember the tint of the windows on the nineteenth floor, and the color of the castor beans, and the color of the botulinus mold. Remember Schmidt's last *name*, and its near homophone *shit*. These details are all just waiting to be put together, not just by the reader, but by Schmidt himself, in the aftermath of the hilarious and terrifying Mister Squishy mascot's shooting through the windows of the 19th floor as the "I" character activates the emetic prosthesis, spewing its wet brown contents all over the table, triggering perhaps other, real expulsions of *Felonies!* from the 12 real members of the ad-caucus. All so Alan S. Britton can fire Awad and have Scott Laleman indicted on felony-type charges for planning the whole stunt. Whether Schmidt is fired or not, it's virtually impossible that he won't realize the similarity between his own impulses to make a difference by poisoning the *Felonies!* when they reached the market and the seeming murderous intent in the action of a brown mascot firing an M-16 through the windows of the Chicago skyscraper. The *Felonies!* are not going to be released on the market after this stunt, safe to say. Schmidt cannot *not* come to the epiphany that even his dark dreams of individuation by murder are absolutely un-unique, and given the sheer brownness of the crucial event, it will be difficult indeed for him not to see himself, with his brown wardrobe, with his red or lustrous brown castor beans, with his tan-brown botulinus and his green-brown botulinus toxin, as a piece of shit, something processed and voided without a second thought, undifferentiated, commonplace, and repellent.

Analysis won't help him. It's how Schmidt discovered in the first place that

his positive dreams of making a difference were ubiquitous among his demographic. He has no close family. Darlene Lilley will have been promoted to Awad's supervisory position, putting her even further out of Schmidt's reach. With or without a job, he'll be alone and lonely, utterly convinced of his worthlessness. He may kill himself. Many do. He may kill others. A few do. Or he may do nothing, the likeliest option, statistically speaking. No matter what, from the only remaining point of view he has, his own, the chances of him living anything approaching a worthwhile life will approach zero. No matter what, he will be dead inside.

There's more, but that's the center of the story. There are plenty of peripheral connections to discover, both within the story and in relation to the other stories in *Oblivion*, should you be so inclined. In a 1993 interview, Wallace said he did 5 to 8 rewrites of everything he ever published. It wouldn't kill an affluent and overeducated reader to do 2 or 3 rereads of his stories or to do a bit of note-taking. What looks like haphazard and unnecessary writing is actually a very complex and tightly calibrated apparatus designed for one thing: empathy. Trust me, you will not be sorry. At the very least, you could save yourself some shampoo and Tums.

10 So: what now? The stories in *Oblivion* (with one exception, the limp "Another Pioneer") prove Wallace's talent goes well beyond the abstract or technical. So many American heavyweights have confused literary self-expression with ranting, but *Oblivion* is blissfully free of superfluous tirades. The thematic range of these wrenching, deadpan tragedies demonstrates the depth of Wallace's commitment: not just to art, but to other human beings. Like Pynchon, like Joyce, like Dostoevsky, there's an altruistic bent to his writing, a profound concern for the travails of the unfortunate that illuminates his most wretched characters. Call it grace.

Not that the future of US prose is going to be pandemic with polysyllables or syntactically unstable. Style is too personal a matter, and American humans too numerous and contrary, for that. But I do believe that Wallace's achievement proves that great literature can be written by someone from a generation raised by television, which, as far as I can tell, is unprecedented. *L*