

Looking for a Garde of Which to be Avant: An Interview with David Foster Wallace

by

Hugh Kennedy and Geoffrey Polk

(originally published in Whiskey Island Magazine
by Cleveland State University in Spring 1993)

At thirty, David Foster Wallace has been called the best of his generation of American writers. His novel, *The Broom of the System*, and his collection of short stories and novella, *Girl With Curious Hair*, have earned him wide critical acclaim, a prestigious Whiting Writers Award, and an intensely devoted readership. Wallace, a mathematics and philosophy major at Amherst College, did not begin writing creatively until the age of twenty-one. His first novel was published while he was still an M.F.A. student at the University of Arizona at Tucson. His writing benefits from a mathematical and philosophical grasp of symbolic systems and large, overarching concepts, drawing out every implication to its fullest and often most hilarious extent. He is inventive in a way that recalls Pynchon, and culturally omnivorous in a way that recalls everyone from Don DeLillo to David Letterman, who is the subject of one of his stories. At Cleveland State University, Wallace read from his second novel to a large, appreciative audience. He hopes to complete this novel within a year of moving to his new home in Syracuse, New York.

We met with David Wallace in his hotel suite in downtown Cleveland, the day after his reading. He wore a striped mock turtleneck, gray chinos and tan work boots. During the first half of the interview, Wallace spat Kodiak tobacco juice into a small white bucket, with one leg up on the gold and violet couch, then smoked and drank diet cola for the second half. He wore his brown hair parted in the center, which often necessitated brushing it out of his eyes, and had a habit of lightly striking the back of his head with an open palm, a habit which, Wallace noted, descends in a direct line from his father, a philosopher at the University of Illinois Champagne/Urbana; through his father's teacher, Norman Malcolm, Wittgenstein's last student; back to Wittgenstein himself. Wallace spoke in a smooth, subdued Midwestern voice. His natural shyness in combination with his striking intelligence can make him appear off-putting, and he confessed that his family communicates primarily via jokes and wisecracks. He also noted that "two years ago, there was no way I would have done this. I would not have sat with two people I did not know well and talk. I couldn't have done it. I would have sat in the bathroom and called out answers to you." Once relaxed, however, he became generous, honest and articulate - even passionate - in his judgments and ideas about fiction. - H.K.

HK: I was interested in the way you made philosophy an element of your first novel, *Broom of the System*, and I wondered if you had to make a decision at any point whether you were going to write about philosophy the way philosophers do, and maybe if you then saw fiction as a way, culturally, to bracket concepts like philosophy, God, America and so on.

WALLACE: I don't know about you guys, but I didn't start writing fiction until I was twenty-one, and at the beginning we all have to write our requisite amounts of shit, and my shit was basically disguised essays. They were like really bad Ayn Rand or something. I was a math and

philosophy major at college. I wasn't a writer, so a lot of it had to do with the fact that *The Broom of the System* the first draft of that, was one of my honors theses as an undergraduate. The other one was a really hardcore math and semantics thing that used a lot of Wittgenstein. And the two kept bleeding into each other; for instance, the math thesis was written in conversational voice, which you're not supposed to do. So the two went back and forth.

The other thing is that my father is a professional philosopher; he was a student of Wittgenstein's last student, Norman Malcolm, who wrote his biography. A lot of *The Broom of the System* is weirdly autobiographical in ways that no one else knows. Like the title comes from my mother's pet name for roughage. She calls roughage and fiber "the broom of the system." I think there's a throwaway reference to that in the book.

HK: I wondered if your family, like Lenore Beadsman's [*The Broom of the System's* protagonist], is "very verbal" and sees life as "more or less a verbal phenomenon."

WALLACE: The first draft of *Broom* had a lot of stuff about the family, and a lot of that stuff got cut because it wasn't very effective. But, yeah, my family works that way a lot. My family communicates almost entirely in terms of jokes. Basically all we do is tell jokes, which gets kind of weird. I think it's a lot of fun when you're growing up, but when you're a grownup and you try to talk about something serious, you realize it's a kind of slimy way to approach things.

The stuff that I'm working on now has a lot to do with the family, and...it's hard, it's hard to try to capture anything that's real, it's hard to try to figure out which family experiences are universal and which are idiosyncratic.

HK: I love the character of Lenore Beadsman, and I think she's quite memorable, particularly the way you convey her voice. How did you arrive at it?

WALLACE: I had a lot of trouble with her because I fell in love with her by the time the book was done. That's one reason why I haven't done anything along those lines since then. I was really upset when it was over. She's sort of a pastiche of a lot of people I know. She's probably got more of the way my brain works in her, and the way I speak, than anyone else. I think at the beginning I had two voices I could do well; one was hers and the other was this hypersensitive, really intellectual voice. One of the weaknesses in the book is that a lot of the characters seem to have the same voice: Rick Vigorous sort of sounds like David Bloemker who sort of sounds like Norman Bombardini and even Lenore's father. A lot of that is a parody of intellectual prose.

HK: I had the same reaction to Lenore. I was so sad that I had to leave her.

WALLACE: She was a real sweetheart.

HK: A question about Rick Vigorous. I've been thinking a lot about that scene where he goes back to Amherst after twenty years and he walks around the campus, still dividing insiders from outsiders. I wondered if you thought that all writers were somehow societal outsiders.

WALLACE: I don't know. I was very lonely in college. The stuff in the book that I like and that rings true is that stuff, which was true to me. It was how I felt. The writers I know, there's a certain self-consciousness about them, and a critical awareness of themselves and other people

that helps their work. But that sort of sensibility makes it very hard to be with people, and not sort of be hovering near the ceiling, watching what's going on. One of the things you two will discover, in the years after you get out of school, is that managing to really be an alive human being, and also to do good work and be as obsessive as you have to be, is really tricky. It's not an accident when you see writers either become obsessed with the whole pop stardom thing or get into drugs and alcohol, or have terrible marriages. Or they simply disappear from the whole scene in their thirties or forties. It's very tricky.

GP: I think you have to sacrifice a lot.

WALLACE: I don't know if it's that voluntary or a conscious decision. In most of the writers I know, there's a self-centeredness, not in terms of preening in front of the mirror, but a tendency not only toward introspection but toward a terrible self-consciousness. Writing, you're having to worry about your effect on an audience all the time. Are you being too subtle or not subtle enough? You're always trying to communicate in a unique way, and so it makes it very hard, at least for me, to communicate in a way that I see ordinary, apple-cheeked Clevelanders communicating with each other in street corners.

My answer for myself would be no; it's not a sacrifice; it's simply the way that I am, and I don't think I'd be happy doing anything else. I think people who are congenitally drawn to this sort of profession are savants in certain ways and sort of retarded in certain other ways. Go to a writers' conference sometime and you'll see. People go to meet people who on paper are just gorgeous, and they're absolute geeks in person. They have no idea what to say or what to do. Everything they say is edited and undercut by some sort of editor in themselves. That's been true of my experience. I've spent a lot more of my energy in teaching the last two years, really sort of working on how to be a human being.

HK: We read an article for our fiction workshop by Ben Satterfeld, and it contains the by-now routine group of potshots at M.F.A. programs and how they create a cycle of mediocrity. Satterfeld goes through this piece lambasting insiders, people who've done graduate programs in writing, and argues that you've got to get out in the world and find your way on your own, not with all of these editors buzzing around you and all of these insiders in publishing getting you into print. Yet one of the only writers Satterfeld mentions specifically as doing really excellent, creative things right now is you, and yet you're a product of a B.A. and an M.F.A. I not only want to get your reaction to Satterfeld, but to the usual argument; what was the efficacy of an M.F.A. for you?

WALLACE: I wish I'd seen the article. (Laughs) Well, I didn't have a very happy experience in graduate school, but it seems there are different ways to learn from it. You can either learn by aligning yourself with the sort of company line at a program or you can play James Dean and align yourself against it. Sometimes it's not until you have professors- you know, authority figures - kicking your ass, and you still find yourself resisting what they're saying that you find out what you believe. It was interesting being here [at CSU]. I had a long talk with Neal Chandler about your program, and I decided that you guys are really lucky.

It seems to me that there are two kinds of graduate writing programs.

There's a kind that it seems Cleveland State has and that for instance Syracuse University has, a Master's with a concentration in creative writing, where there are actual academic requirements. You are required to learn to be a writer as part of a broader education in the humanities. About those programs, I know that I wasn't in one, but from the outside it looks wonderful to me. One of my big complaints about Arizona was that though I liked a lot of the students, and I liked a lot of the regular faculty, I didn't much like the creative writing faculty. They really disparaged the idea of learning how to write as part of learning how to take part in the tradition of Western letters. At Arizona I took a lot of outside classes - I took a lot of theory, I took some math, I took some foreign languages, I took some history of the language - and people in the M.F.A. program thought I was nuts. Places like Arizona or Iowa or Stanford, it seems to me, only pretend to be schools. I'm not about to blast them, but I think you've got to distinguish between them and schools like Cleveland State and Syracuse, which are grad schools, where you end up with a Master's. The M.F.A. factories are really covert forms of patronage. For the faculty, they afford the comfort and security, usually, of lifetime employment. Teaching workshops, while it has its demands, is nothing like having to prepare lectures on the history of mathematics three times a week. It's nothing like it. And since writers are congenitally lazy about most things other than their writing, that's conducive, too.

But these programs are also forms of patronage for students, because it used to be that you got out of college and worked a shit job and lived in a loft in Soho and tried to be a writer. And 'Mr. Satterfeld may attach a certain romance to that. I know some people who've gone that route, and it's absolutely crushing, it's horrible. For instance, I've flirted with that kind of life since I've gotten out of an M.F.A. program, and I've been lucky because I've had a couple of books out. I get stuff taken easier than somebody who's going through slush piles, and it's still awful. It's no fun. But if you go to these programs, you can answer to your parents and to people who ask "What are you doing?" "Well, I'm in graduate school." People are off your back. Very often you get forms of financial aid. You can either get outright fellowships, like the one I had at Arizona, or you can get opportunities to teach, and support yourself that way. Sure, graduate teaching assistants get exploited a bit, but it's a lot better than asking people whether they want fries with that. It's a hell of a lot better.

HK: What would you like your writing to do?

WALLACE: You want an honest answer, right?

HK: Reasonably.

WALLACE: It's very hard to separate what you want the writing to do from your own desires about how you will be regarded because of the work. At three o'clock in the morning, when it's just me, I have the fantasies of ticker tape parades and Poet Laureate of the Western World and MacArthur Grants and Nobel Prizes, readings like the one last night except with 15,000 people, you know, that type of stuff. So no feelings about desired effect are pure, free of selfish ends.

But there are a few books I have read that I've never been the same after, and I think all good writing somehow addresses the concern of and acts as an anodyne against loneliness. We're all terribly, terribly lonely. And there's away, at least in prose fiction, that can allow you to be intimate with the world and with a mind and with characters that you just can't be in the real

world. I don't know what you're thinking. I don't know that much about you as I don't know that much about my parents or my lover or my sister, but a piece of fiction that's really true allows you to be intimate with ... I don't want to say people, but it allows you to be intimate with a world that resembles our own in enough emotional particulars so that the way different things must feel is carried out with us into the real world. I think what I would like my stuff to do is make people less lonely. Or really to affect people. I think sometimes what I'm doing, if I try to be particularly offensive or outrageous or whatever, is just being really hungry for some kind of effect. I think you can see Bret Ellis doing that in *American Psycho*. You can't make sure that everybody's going to like you, but damn it, if you've got some skill you can make sure that people don't ignore you. A lot of writers hunger to have their work out there more and to have good book sales, which I used to think was crass materialism, that they wanted the money, but it turns out that what you want is to have some sort of effect. Maybe you've snapped to this already. It took me years to figure that out.

GP: In *Girl With Curious Hair*, a lot of the stories go beyond personal stories and into generational issues. For example, in "Lyndon," a lot of it seems to be looking at the differences between generations; for example, Lyndon Johnson's ideas about responsibility and what it means, versus the Sixties generation. In "Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way," there's the same kind of conflict between J.D. Steelritter and the kids about the idea of honor, which Mark Nechtr finally cops to, yet it's really an old-fashioned virtue. In "Girl with Curious Hair," I saw it as a take not only on conservative Reaganism, and the effects of his policies, which is a kind of sadism, but also on the Eighties punk generation, which has no politics at all. I keep getting to these generational issues in your stories. Do you agree with that?

WALLACE: It's getting kind of hard to remember. I finished that book in '88, and then there was a year of legal battles when it wasn't published, so it seems like a long time ago. I might have touched on this last night, but I went to grad school with a lot of people, a lot of poets especially, who were older, real Sixties worshipers, who thought that our problem was that we lost a lot of the rebellious, earnest integrity of the Sixties. I see our generation as inheritors of the Sixties. I'm talking particularly about the art of the Sixties, which abandoned a lot of conventional techniques in favor of black humor and a new emphasis on irony. You hadn't seen irony like that, really, since the pre-Romantics. It performs a really useful function by getting rid of a lot of platitudes and myths in America which were no longer serviceable, but it also hasn't left anything to rebuild with besides this ethos of jaded irony and self-aware nihilism and acquisitivism. One of the reasons this book was so much about TV is that we see so much of the rebellious Sixties ethos in television art now: stuff that used to be the art gesture, the self-consciousness, the meta-technique of that period. Now you've got season episodes of *Moonlighting* ending with the set breaking down. The original urge toward irony and self-consciousness that in the Sixties was young people's way of insulating themselves against the sort of ravaging hypocrisy of institutions like the government or advertising has become insinuated in popular culture, and as it's been insinuated in popular culture, popular culture itself has become vastly more efficient and pervasive in American life. I mean, TV is so good now. MTV is just hypnotic. So you've got us kids, 20-35, right on the edge, and all the kids coming after us really getting sucked into that stuff, but learning it in a way that doesn't allow any sort of incredulity at all. But anyway, one of the things I was doing in *Girl With Curious Hair* was to write a very traditionally moral book. This is a generation that has an inheritance of absolutely nothing as far as meaningful moral

values, and it's our job to make them up, and we're not doing it. And we're being told, by the very systems that the Sixties were so right to fear, that we needn't worry about making up moral systems: you know, that there isn't more to being alive than being pretty, having intercourse a lot and having a lot of possessions. But the darkly delicious thing is that these systems that are telling us this are using the techniques that the Sixties guys had used - by that I mean postmodern techniques like black irony, metafictional involutions, the whole sort of literature of self-consciousness. We are heirs to it.

I guess I still feel this way. I'm still writing about younger people trying to find themselves in the face not only of conform-or-die parents, but also this bright seductive electromagnetic system all around them that tells them that they don't have to. Does that make any sense?

GP: Do you buy John Gardner's answer, to be life-affirming? Last night (at your reading), you seemed to have a sympathy for your characters that takes you beyond being a satirist.

WALLACE: Well, Gardner isn't saying anything that Tolstoy didn't say, except Tolstoy said it in this wacko, fundamentalist Russian Orthodox Christian way. Tolstoy said that the purpose of art was to communicate the idea of Christian brotherhood from man to man and to pass along some sort of message. I think Gardner translates that into some sort of moral didacticism. I believe that Gardner underestimates what the possibilities of art are. But both of them are right: what fiction and poetry are doing is what they've been trying to do for 2,000 years: affect somebody, make somebody feel a certain way, allow them to enter into relationships with ideas and with characters that are not permitted within the cinctures of the ordinary verbal intercourse we're having here, you know: you don't see me, I don't see you. But every two or three generations the world gets vastly different, and the context in which you have to learn how to be a human being, or to have good relationships, or decide whether or not there is a God, or decide whether there's such a thing as love, and whether it's redemptive, become vastly different. And the structures with which you can communicate those dilemmas or have characters struggle with them seem to become appropriate and then inappropriate again and so on. Nothing that's changed right now seems to me to be fundamentally important, and yet a whole lot of stuff is very, very different. So yeah, I'd agree with Gardner to the extent that he has the sense to be parroting Tolstoy--if you edit out the heavenly Christian stuff. I'm the only "postmodernist" you'll ever meet who absolutely worships Leo Tolstoy.

GP: In your stories, you often play with the boundaries between history and fiction. Does it feel odd appropriating historical figures?

WALLACE: It's got legal repercussions. The first draft of the Letterman story ("My Appearance") was due to come out in Playboy, and it was very different. It had actual transcripts of an interview between Letterman and Susan St. James. I fucked up and didn't tell the editors, and about two weeks before the story was due to come out they reran that interview and a couple of people from Playboy saw it, and I got a new asshole drilled. And all the other magazines that ran my stories, their lawyers were running around screaming, and the book almost didn't come out. So there are problems that way.

In terms of a lot of the pop culture stuff, one of the ways that things have changed is that fiction used to be a kind of travelogue. It used to be a way to take people to foreign lands and exotic

cultures, or to important people, and give readers access to worlds they didn't have access to. The world that we live in is very different. I can get up and watch satellite footage of a riot in Peking while I eat a Tex-Mex breakfast while I listen to Third World music on my CD player. Fiction's job used to be to make the strange familiar, to take you somewhere and let you feel that this was familiar to you. It seems that one of the things about living now is that everything presents itself as familiar, so one of the things the artist has to do now is take a lot of this familiarity and remind people that it's strange. So to take the most banal, low-art images from television and from politics and from advertising, and to transfigure them - OK, it's sort of a heavy art gesture - but I think it's got some validity. I think if you can estrange this stuff, and you can make people look at, say, "Jeopardy!" or an advertisement and view it not as a message from God, but as a piece of art, a product of human imagination and human effort with a human agenda, that there's a way in which you distance a reader from phenomena that I think he needs to be distanced from. It's not that all this stuff is in your mind as you're doing it. This is just one of the defenses I've made up for the questions that come up about it, and I think it's valid.

GP: Are there any writers now living that really knock you out?

WALLACE: I'm a huge Don DeLillo fan, although I think his latest book is one of his worst. The DeLillo of *Americana* and *End Zone* and *Great Jones Street*, *The Names*, and *Libra* I love. Maybe *Gravity's Rainbow* is a better book, but I can't think of anybody in this tradition since Nabokov who's put out a better corpus of work than DeLillo. I like Bellow, and I really like the early John Updike - *The Poorhouse Fair*, *Of The Farm*, *The Centaur*, just in terms of sheer fucking beautiful writing. There are a lot of the Latinists too: Julio Cortazar, Manuel Puig, both recently dead. There are young writers now I was telling you about, like Mark Leyner; William T. Vollman, who's got four books coming out this year; John Franzen, Susan Daitch, Amy Homes. The best book I've read recently is by Paul Auster's wife, who's named Siri Hustvedt. She's a Norwegian from Minnesota, who wrote this book called *The Blindfold*. It's not a lot of fun, but God is it smart. It's the best piece of feminist Postmodernism I've ever read. It makes Kathy Acker look sick because it's so well crafted. I'm not sure there are any really towering giants. I think some Pynchon, some Bellow, some Ozick will be read 100 years from now; I think DeLillo, maybe.

GP: Do you have any advice for young writers?

WALLACE: Send me at least 50% of everything that you make.

GP: That won't even cover the postage!

WALLACE: This is a long haul. Writing is a long haul. I'm hoping that none of the stuff that I've done so far is anywhere close to the best stuff I can do. Let's hope we're not fifty-five and doing the same thing. I'd say avoid burning out. You can burn out by struggling in privation and neglect for many years, but you can also bum out if you're given a little bit of attention. People come to your hotel room and think you have interesting things to say. You can allow that to make you start to think that you can't say anything unless it's interesting. For me, 50% of the stuff I do is bad, and that's just going to be the way it is, and if I can't accept that then I'm not cut out for this. The trick is to know what's bad and not let other people see it.