

DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S ADOLESCENT DEPRESSION: RECURSIVITY, BIOGRAPHY AND POST-POSTMODERNISM

CHARLES NIXON

David Foster Wallace's first published story concerned an adolescent's struggle with depression and a suicide attempt. Throughout his career, similar themes reappeared multiple times, through to the incomplete writings that make up his final text, *The Pale King* (2011). This paper will explore how such material should be considered in light of the significance placed on Wallace's biography after his death. It will argue that Wallace's return to figures of depression provides a tool for producing a meaningful author-figure to emerge, reconstituting the relationship between reader and author. It also provides a correlative for Wallace's critique of broader American culture, and its effect on subjectivity. Thus, Wallace's approach to depression will be considered as part of the 'post-postmodern' critique that has been found in his work by the critics Stephen Burn and Nicoline Timmer. The paper is extracted from the first chapter of my thesis, entitled 'The Work of David Foster Wallace and Post-postmodernism'.

David Foster Wallace was an American writer who committed suicide in 2008. He was the author of three novels, three collections of short fiction, and two collections of essays. His most famous novel is *Infinite Jest* (1996), which is notorious not only for its quality, but also for its length and detail, consisting of a thousand closely-printed pages with several hundred endnotes in an even smaller font. In spite of this mass, it remains within the top 100 in the Amazon.com American fiction charts fifteen years after its publication, indicating a popularity that the denseness of the novel belies. Seeing Wallace's work as a marriage of complexity and popularity within a modern audience of literary fiction is one way of understanding his approach to the difficult themes he often addressed in his writing. His work on depression exemplifies this by presenting ideas that are abstract, multivalent, and likely to be deeply personal, and yet demonstrate thoughtfulness about the need for communication with his audience, and an ability to use biographical detail to convey more than a confessional significance.

The two pieces that I will discuss in this paper are short stories from both ends of Wallace's career. The first is the story 'The Planet Trillaphon as It Stands in Relation to the Bad Thing' (1984), which was published in a university magazine while Wallace was an undergraduate.

This story remains uncollected. I will compare this to ‘Good Old Neon’, which was included in the collection *Oblivion: Stories* (2004). Examination of Wallace’s archive of papers shows that Wallace produced this story during work on *The Pale King*, but removed references to the larger text when publishing it separately in *Conjunctions* (2001), a literary journal.¹ Extended quotes are provided in this article due to, in the former case, the potential difficulties involved in finding ‘The Planet Trillaphon’, and in the latter case, the style in which ‘Good Old Neon’ is written. With sentences, particularly at the story’s climax, often being paragraph-length, ‘Good Old Neon’ does not lend itself to brief quotation.

My larger project is to present Wallace as the central voice in post-postmodernism. While the term is awkward, its use to describe Wallace’s work emerged in the 1990s, and Wallace himself employed it, albeit in a different context (‘E Unibus Pluram’ 50). Both Burn and Timmer present post-postmodernism as a generational moment in American fiction, and have usefully outlined some of its key components in book-length form. Post-postmodernism should not be understood as ‘what comes after postmodernism’, especially given the stickiness and intangibility of that term. Rather, it describes a set of authors responding in parallel ways to the forms that have been called postmodernist, and the perceived failings of those forms. So, as postmodernism is accused of or defined as treating all culture, low or high, equally, post-postmodern authors say, ‘if that were the case, what would the experience be like?’ and ‘why would that be a negative thing?’. We can extend that conception to view post-postmodernism as a response to, for example, the perceived moral relativism of postmodernism, or the political apathy it creates, or the endemic lack of depth it envisions. Each of these have typically been considered to be primary reflections or conditions of ‘postmodernism’, and in the writing of Wallace and his contemporaries, we can find potential responses to them.²

There is a second part to the definition of post-postmodernism. In questioning postmodernism, post-postmodernist authors tend to reflect the forms of postmodernism themselves — such as the encyclopaedic novel, the emphasis on textuality, the overwhelming quality of pop-culture — and they often push these formal ideas to their conceptual limits. Post-postmodernists provide a response to, enquiry into and reflection on postmodernism as it has come to be perceived, rather than an outright rejection of postmodernism as a set of forms and ideas. And Wallace, I will argue, from his first piece in the early 1980s, is really at the forefront of post-postmodernism. The youth that he describes in the stories I discuss here, which is always at least partially his own, informs

these ideas. Just as youth itself is always filled with a necessary sense of change or revolution based quite simply on the changing of a generation and on an idea of rebellion, so Wallace's emotional experiences during his young life caused him to question the aesthetic and ethical values that defined the postmodernism of the culture, literary and otherwise, that he saw around him. His first story is the beginning of his response to that, and thus, in a neat way, the beginning of his post-postmodernism.

Both 'The Planet Trillaphon' and 'Good Old Neon' deal with the experience of depression, and feature suicidal protagonists. The details of Wallace's life and death would seem to impel a biographical reading of this material. It is necessary, therefore, to defend this paper against charges of prurience in taking these fictions as primary material. Many critics have stated that Wallace's death, and particularly its circumstances, should not come to overshadow his work.³ I am not sure if this should be taken to be wholly true, although there is an obvious necessity for restraint in such readings. Wallace's most popular writing was his non-fiction. His longest novel concerned student tennis players and recovering drug addicts. He was a reasonably good tennis player as a student, and later recovered from a serious drug addiction. His first novel he called 'weirdly autobiographical' (Kennedy and Polk 50) and for his last, about tax collectors, he studied for a year, took the tax collectors' exams, and then spent a summer working in an IRS office. Wallace's own life is constantly referenced in his fiction. As I will show, he described depressed people as seeming to exist almost purely as a representation of their depression. Because of this, should a responsible reader not see how and why depression functions in his writing, particularly as he returns to it again and again? In what follows, I will acknowledge the significance of the biographical readings of Wallace that have become so prominent since his death. However, I will suggest that such material was always employed not to produce personal revelation, nor as embedded confessions to his audience, but instead to produce a form of writing that dealt with his anxieties about millennial US life and youth in a form that overcame postmodernist detachment through conscious self-reflection. It is important, therefore, to understand Wallace's flirtations with the autobiographical not as a means of understanding his character, but as a demonstration of the workings of his 'metafiction of consciousness', the form through which his post-postmodernism was best expressed.

'The Planet Trillaphon as It Stands in Relation to the Bad Thing' is a story about a student, probably in his late teens or early twenties, who is recovering from depression — which he calls 'the Bad Thing' — by taking anti-depressants. He describes this experience as sending him to

the Planet Trillaphon. The story considers the state of depression, recounts a suicide attempt, and charts the protagonist's recovery through the use of prescription drugs. Wallace's focus throughout is primarily on describing the phenomenological aspects of depression and recovery. Indeed, it is the paradox that internally observable experiences are divorced from conscious control, so that consciousness becomes separate from the idea of selfhood that becomes Wallace's main concern in returning to depression as a correlative for postmodernism. The following extract demonstrates this point:

The way to fight against or get away from the Bad Thing is clearly just to think differently, to reason and argue with yourself, just to change the way you're perceiving and sensing and processing stuff. But you need your mind to do this, your brain cells with their atoms and your mental powers and all that, your self, and that's exactly what the Bad Thing has made too sick to work right. That's exactly what it has made sick. It's made you sick in just such a way that you can't get better.... the Bad Thing is able to do this to you because you're the Bad Thing yourself! The Bad Thing is you.... It is what 'defines' you, especially after a little while has gone by. You realize all this, here. And that, I guess, is when if you're all glib you realize that there is no surface to the water.... That's when the Bad Thing just absolutely eats you up, or rather when you just eat yourself up. When you kill yourself.... Because all these people have, you see, by this time already killed themselves, where it really counts.... When they 'commit suicide', they're just being orderly. (PT 29)

Early in the first story Wallace published, an important and complex aspect of his thought is mapped out. It seems unavoidably autobiographical, as Wallace was treated for depression at a similar stage of his life, just prior to the writing of this story, and in the wake of a suicide attempt. But this section performs more than confession. Stylistically, Wallace is aware that presenting insights about this condition through literary devices is 'glib', as this is a key lesson of postmodernist thought's engagement with textuality. One of Wallace's interventions from this point onwards is to rehabilitate language from glib abstraction, a crucial aspect in defining post-postmodernism that Timmer has discussed (359—60). Wallace's presentation of suicidal

thoughts themselves might be considered part of this rejection. If life and text are all surface, following the connected deaths of both author and subject, the logic that constructs subjectivity in this way equally produces an ‘orderly suicide’. If surface equals the ‘Bad Thing’, and there is nothing beyond or below this state, there is really no choice. Wallace makes clear that his depiction of self and language are related here. Thought processes are the most basic unit in representing the self, the ‘brain cells with your atoms and your mental powers and all that’, they fundamentally cannot refer to anything but each other for meaning, like a language. The incorporation of what we can assume is a simulacrum of Wallace’s own experience at a similar time in his life adds an emotional resonance to this writing that marks an attempt to pre-empt the sliding of signifiers postmodernism takes from the poststructuralist theory of Jacques Derrida. The process of writing for an audience, with the ‘exformation’⁴ of personal experience and emotional engagement this assumes, provides the story with a way beyond textuality to, as Wallace would later put it, ‘what it means to be a fucking human being’ (McCaffery 131).

The autobiographical elements of this story, and of all Wallace’s writing on depression or addiction, should not be read as plainly confessional, but neither should the significance of their details be ignored. Because we know Wallace suffered from depression, and because he shows us through his writing that it is impossible for him to write traditional ‘realism’, the moral and ethical dimension of his writing becomes that much more important. It is useful to make a comparison with Raymond Carver’s writing, where depictions of characters struggling with alcoholism are lent poignancy by the knowledge of Carver’s own alcoholism-related death. Carver’s fiction exploits personal themes to add a meaningful tension to his minimalist style, reverse-engineering the textual exuberance of his near-contemporaries, such as Robert Coover and John Barth (Carver 167–68). The depth Wallace’s biography lends to his writing works in paradoxical relationship with the metafictional or postmodernist aspects of his writing itself. Wallace’s use of such material echoes Carver’s without committing to his predecessor’s formal abstemiousness.⁵ But the echo of Carver’s response to postmodernism that is found in Wallace’s autobiographical concerns establishes a tension between conceptions of surface and depth that mark his work as post-postmodern. Carver’s different, more partisan approach defines his writing as a precursor to, rather than pre-emptor of, post-postmodernism.

Given Wallace’s age when ‘The Planet Trillaphon’ was produced, the autobiographical issues raised also connect his ideas there to notions

of youth and adolescence. The teenage years are generally considered to be the period in our lives during which our conceptions of selfhood and personal authenticity are formed. But if we see from the beginning, and are told throughout this period, that there is nothing to anchor this authenticity but the recursive spirals of our own thoughts about our selves, it is impossible for identity to become fully formed. Thus, postmodern youth is supposed to be shallow, to be depoliticised, to suffer from ADHD, to be obsessed with branding.⁶ All these characteristics are ways to express the idea of a disconnection from an authentic sense of self. But Wallace, in the passage above and throughout ‘The Planet Trillaphon’, explores how this function of postmodernism works to present a sense of the inauthentic on the level of self– or auto–consciousness, so that what begins as an awareness of how selfhood develops is inevitably connected with the idea of depression as a lack of self. Consciousness develops in a recursive form, as self–identity and awareness of it undermine each other thanks to the self–consciousness instigated by postmodernist forms. In demonstrating these aspects of the postmodernist experience through his own apparent experience of depression, Wallace presents a space in which the fundamental powerlessness of the more general situation instituted by postmodernist methods of understanding the self can be explored. The natural sympathy and sense of human fragility invoked by dealing with deeply personal experiences helps to void the recursive relation he demonstrates. In ‘Good Old Neon’, the story to be discussed in the remainder of this article, Wallace returned to this theme, and presented such thoughts much more directly.

‘Good Old Neon’ is another story about another depressed and suicidal person, but this time Wallace is explicit about its status as non–autobiography, as it was written about someone Wallace knew in school: the star baseball player, not a close friend, who Wallace learned had killed himself many years after he last saw him.⁷ It returns to the idea of adolescence, and to the initial coming to a comprehension of selfhood, as crucial to explaining the links between depression and postmodernism. It represents an attempt at understanding both the universality and particularity of depression, as Wallace tries to understand why someone whose surface seemed so perfect could be so unwell — again, surface and depth, and the unhealthiness of postmodernism are obvious and key themes:

The more time and effort you put into trying to appear impressive or attractive to other people, the less impressive or attractive you felt inside — you were a

fraud. And the more of a fraud you felt like, the harder you tried to convey an impressive or likable image of yourself so that other people wouldn't find out what a hollow, fraudulent person you really were. Logically, you would think that the moment a supposedly intelligent nineteen-year-old became aware of this paradox, he'd stop being a fraud and just settle for being himself (whatever that was) because he'd figured out that being a fraud was a vicious infinite regress that ultimately resulted in being frightened, lonely, alienated, etc. But here was the other, higher-order paradox, which didn't even have a form or name — I didn't, I couldn't. (GON 147)

Depression is again described as a kind of overriding logic upon which all thoughts are predicated, denying existence to an original 'self'. The logic of postmodernism replaces the action of maturation, destroying the potential for self-understanding or expression. Instead, depression is the definition of the self. More clearly described in this story is the link between this logic and the negative emotion. Depression is no longer simply 'the Bad Thing', but is demonstrated to be a direct result of the sense of fraudulence that postmodernist ideas have naturally induced. Like the endless play of surfaces observed by postmodernism, depression is here figured as 'wanting to be liked', another endless desire which becomes a double-bind or regressive loop. A postmodern youth who is compelled to reject the notion of an essential self must look outwards for positive affirmation, and so the notion of self-authentication is denied. But the more that one is liked, and the more that that desire is fulfilled, inevitably the less fulfilling this sense of 'liked-ness' is, and the more desire you have. It is a pattern that repeats across Wallace's writing on a wide variety of topics, both as a theme and a stylistic trait. So, Zadie Smith says that the stories of Wallace's second collection, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, are built out of 'recursive sentences', the futuristic power system of *Infinite Jest* is built upon the principle of recursion, so that it generates electricity from its own waste, and the act of reading that novel is physically recursive, as you flip between the 300 or so end-notes and the 929 pages of its main body (Smith 276). N. Katherine Hayles has written an enlightening article on the many ways this pattern functions in *Infinite Jest*. On this level, then, a key to the form of Wallace's writing is embedded in the mental processes that comprise the very experience of depression as he describes it.

'Good Old Neon' is a return to the subject matter of 'The Planet Trillaphon'. There are significant differences in this later version. Most obviously, the protagonist's suicide is consummated. Also, the autobiographical elements of the story are undermined both by the inclusion of material that marks it as biographical and by the inclusion of a figure called David Wallace 'writing' the story, an ironically metafictional gesture. Finally, Wallace's protagonist is presented as unsympathetic, with questionable motives, and formulated in a deliberately shallow way, which Wallace largely avoided in his depiction of the protagonist of 'The Planet Trillaphon'. Unlike the earlier story's protagonist, and unlike that of Wallace's most famous dissection of depression, a story called 'The Depressed Person', 'Good Old Neon' presents a central figure wanting to be disliked for his actions. However, like so much postmodernist fiction, this irony and distance is exactly what we expect from the story, and so Wallace ironises his own use of irony. Indeed, more than one critic has found a kind of 'meta-irony' in his fiction (Scott; Boswell). Through the determined honesty of the protagonist, Neal, Wallace is able to present a self-deception that underlies Neal's fundamental concerns about self-deception. While this character denigrates himself for his fundamental lack of honesty with others, the explication of his deceptions fills in the blanks of his character, enabling the reader to gain a far clearer understanding of his motivations than is provided by the more vague narratorial presence of 'The Planet Trillaphon'.

Wallace's fiction, even at its most traditional, is always a game, a puzzle for the reader to solve. This is made apparent when 'Good Old Neon' is presented at its end as a product of the imagination of David Wallace. However, the fourth wall is not shattered with his entry. Rather, it is pointed to, as the next, and last, section shows:

In other words David Wallace trying, if only in the second his lids are down, to somehow reconcile what this luminous guy had seemed like from the outside with whatever on the interior must have driven him to kill himself in such a dramatic and doubtlessly painful way — with David Wallace also fully aware that the cliché that you can't ever truly know what's going on inside somebody else is hoary and insipid and yet at the same time trying very consciously to prohibit that awareness from mocking the attempt or sending the whole line of thought into the sort of inbent spiral that keeps you from ever getting anywhere. (GON 181)

With this passage, Wallace demonstrates the distinction of his work from postmodernism. He has presented his story as a textual construction and made the reader aware of his position within it, but he has also demonstrated the reasoning behind it. It is not enough to say that there is a wizard behind the curtain, as weak and fragile as everyone else. Wallace is questioning why that wizard makes his illusions, and what impact revealing his status has on how we feel about those illusions. Wallace's story has been about how 'this luminous guy' he saw growing up apparently so successfully could have been so different on the inside, understanding the world differently to how he seemed to be understanding it. Understanding the world in a way, perhaps, he thinks unsuccessful people do, people like Wallace himself. In doing this, Wallace is showing us how we can understand the world differently from how we are shown it, that we can understand literature differently from how we are shown it. Wallace's story is a kind of working out, a writing which reflects upon its own reading process to demonstrate *not* that it is all an illusion, all the play of text — because obviously it is, that is self-evident — but to show that we can try to understand it anyway. In repeatedly returning to figures of depression, and to the failure of emerging selfhood in postmodernism, Wallace demonstrates that there is more than one way to understand the world, and writing, both from the inside of the text and from the outside. To understand only one is to realise there is no surface to the water, to start moving along the inbent spiral. He presents us with the challenge to reinvest youth with the ability to be a period of self-development, of increasing self-awareness, to allow the creation of a positive identity. And complex, post-postmodern literature gives us one way to aid that process.

I believe that the theme of depression provides a particularly interesting entry point into Wallace's work because of its location at the nexus of so many biographical, stylistic and thematic lines. In this paper, I have started to detail how Wallace's revelations about the connections between youth, depression, and postmodernism can inform a reading both of what it means to grow up in post-Millennial America, and what might be an appropriate fictional response to that growing up for a new generation of post-postmodernists.

NOTES

Abbreviations

- PT 'The Planet Trillaphon as It Stands in Relation to the Bad Thing'
 GON 'Good Old Neon'

¹ All references to earlier drafts of Wallace's work come as a result of the research I undertook in the Harry Ransom Center of the University of Texas at Austin during May and June 2011.

² For examples of the definition of postmodernism, see Jameson, and Natoli and Hutcheon. Both Burn and Timmer provide examples of the ways other authors of American fiction respond to these ideas, including Jonathan Franzen, Richard Powers, David Eggers and Mark Danielewski.

³ Although a recent article in the *New Yorker* by Jonathan Franzen imputed a cynical motivation on Wallace's part to deliberately associate the tragedy of the author with his work. Whether Franzen, a close friend of Wallace's for many years, intended this claim to be taken literally or not is debatable, but it does highlight the disjunction between critics who would take Wallace's work as separate from his biography, and the massive interest in the details of his life since his death. The former position is justified by the secretiveness with which Wallace dealt with personal details in public, denying, for example, his struggles with addiction and adopting a disinterested position towards *Alcoholics Anonymous* in print, when in fact he was heavily reliant on its programme. Supporting the latter approach to holding a biographical interest is the publishing industry that has flourished since his death. Articles in newspapers have discussed his childhood writing, his undergraduate dissertation has been published, a biography has been expensively commissioned, and an extensive interview has been published in book-length form.

⁴ 'Exformation' is a concept taken from Nørretranders, a text known and employed by Wallace.

⁵ Wallace's writing demonstrates that he found as many difficulties and paradoxes in the minimalist writing that followed Carver as he did with the postmodernist metafiction I find him addressing more often in his work. For example, as many stories in the collection *Girl with Curious Hair* present parodies of minimalist style as parody other forms of postmodernist writing. See in particular 'Little Expressionless Animals'.

⁶ See Charles Molesworth's reading of *White Noise* by Don DeLillo for a presentation of postmodernism's effect on the youth of DeLillo's characters (Molesworth, 143–56). Wallace both owned and annotated a copy of this collection.

⁷ The initial draft of this story in Wallace's papers leaves it unclear as to whether this story was always intended to be about this acquaintance. As it seemed to be initially written for inclusion in *The Pale King*, which features a character called David Wallace, it is possible that this element was involved in its original conception. However, the details that invoke

the subject of the biography were only included in later drafts and traces of autobiographical material can be found in early drafts, which were later redacted from the story. The passages that describe the protagonist's experience of depression, on which I will focus, and which largely make up the first draft of the text, are therefore ambiguous in their autobiographical status.

WORKS CITED

- Amazon.com Bestseller: The most popular items in American Literature*. Amazon.com, 13 July 2011. 13 July 2011 <http://www.amazon.com/gp/bestsellers/books/9822/ref=zg_bs_pg_5?ie=UTF8&pg=5>.
- Boswell, Marshall. *Understanding David Foster Wallace*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003.
- Burn, Stephen. *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism*. London: Continuum, 2008.
- Carver, Raymond. *No Heroics, Please: Uncollected Writings*. London: Harvill, 1991.
- Franzen, Jonathan. 'Farther Away'. *The New Yorker*. 18 April 2011.
- Hayles, N. Katherine. 'The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity: Virtual Ecologies, Entertainment, and *Infinite Jest*'. *New Literary History* 30 (1999): 675–97.
- Jameson, Frederic. *Postmodernism or, The Logic of Late Capitalism*. London: Verso, 1991.
- Kennedy, Hugh and Geoffrey Polk. 'Looking for a Garde of Which to be Avant: an Interview with David Foster Wallace'. *Whiskey Island Magazine* (Spring 1993): 49–57.
- McCaffery, Larry. 'Interview with David Foster Wallace'. *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13 (1993): 127–50.
- Molesworth, Charles. 'Don DeLillo's Perfect Starry Night'. *Introducing Don DeLillo*. Ed. Frank Lentricchia. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991. 143–56.
- Natoli, Joseph and Linda Hutcheon. 'Introduction'. *A Postmodern Reader*. Ed. Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991.
- Nørretranders, Tor. *The User Illusion: Cutting Consciousness Down to Size*. New York: Penguin Books, 1992.
- Scott, A.O. 'The Panic of Influence'. *The New York Review of Books* 47 (2000). 39–43.

- Smith, Zadie. 'Brief Interviews with Hideous Men: The Difficult Gifts of David Foster Wallace'. *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2009. 257–300.
- Timmer, Noline. *Do You Feel It Too? The Post-Postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010.
- Wallace, David Foster. 'The Depressed Person'. *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. New York: Back Bay Books, 2007. 37–69.
- . 'E Unibus Pluram'. *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments*. New York: Back Bay Books, 1998. 21–82.
- . 'Good Old Neon'. *Oblivion: Stories*. London: Abacus, 2004. 141–81.
- . *Infinite Jest*. London: Abacus, 1996.
- . 'Little Expressionless Animals'. *Girl with Curious Hair*. London: Abacus, 1997. 1–42.
- . *The Pale King*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2011.
- . 'The Planet Trillaphon as It Stands in Relation to the Bad Thing'. *The Amherst Review* 12 (1984): 26–33.