



Burn, S. J. (2015) Introduction to the David Foster Wallace special section of the *Lettera Matematica International Edition*. *Lettera Matematica International*, 3(4), pp. 241-243.

There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/114255/>

Deposited on: 19 April 2016

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow
<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk>

Stephen J. Burn
University of Glasgow

Introduction to DFW Special Issue of *Lettera Matematica Pristem*

Each writer's career has its own timeline, and these calendars don't always permit easy comparisons. For every Joyce Carol Oates or William T. Vollmann, with their tidal wave of productivity, there's a Ralph Ellison or Leslie Marmon Silko, whose significance depends upon just one or two key novels. Different value hierarchies map different equations between literary output and the elusive integer of literary achievement, so it's hard to decide how you set a career total of more than forty novels next to *Ceremony* or *Invisible Man*. For readers schooled in the predominantly modernist ethos of the career-culminating singular masterwork, the answer is Ellison or Silko. For those who favour a culture spanning anatomy, whose diagnosis requires multiple frames, books, and styles, the answer the equation yields is Oates, Vollmann, and a large, sturdy bookcase.

David Foster Wallace's timeline is tragically short. His life lasted less than half a century, though its geography spanned the country: born on the east coast, in upstate New York in 1962; committing suicide on the west coast, at his Californian home in 2008. With the exception of juvenilia, he published for only the last twenty or so years of that allotment. Viewing his career in retrospect, many surveys make this short career look like Ellison or Silko's, with all Wallace's other work serving as mere satellites in the cosmos of *Infinite Jest* (1996), a novel that has the scale and complexity of the encyclopedic classics of High Modernism. The bulk of scholarship on Wallace more or less subscribes to this model, remorselessly annotating the vast masterpiece, with some of the best work revealing the book's richly layered intellectual investments in fields as varied as Many Worlds theory (Marshall Boswell), institutionalization (Mark McGurl), topological mathematics (Roberto Natalini), or cultures of narcissism (Mary Holland). *Infinite Jest*'s intrinsic qualities—its breadth of thought, stylistic virtuosity, and acuity of observation—would have made it a

noteworthy achievement in any decade, but its position at the heart of Wallace's work, and arguably its high critical standing, owes much to its birth in the middle of a decade when American literary expectations were exceptionally low. Although the nineties saw a range of outstanding fiction from emerging young novelists (the decade is bracketed by Richard Powers's *The Gold Bug Variations* [1991] and Jhumpa Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies* [1999]), and late works by major authors (1994 saw both William Gaddis's *A Frolic of His Own*, and John Barth's *Once Upon a Time* appear), at the time the prevailing conception was that the period was dominated by the mediocre and formulaic output of Creative Writing programs. In 1992, John Aldridge complained that the decade marked the end of the:

great tradition of technical innovation and experiment that, from Joyce and Eliot to Pynchon, Gaddis, and DeLillo, produced the imperial and apocalyptic poem and novel of rich intellectual complexity . . . that embodied the ambitious view that literary works can and should become artistic microcosms of a whole society or the modern world. (33)

The work of younger writers—Aldridge points to Raymond Carver, Lorrie Moore, T.

Coraghessan Boyle, Jay McInerney, and Brett Easton Ellis—offers instead a “limited realism . . . that looks soothingly pretty on the page, can be read without effort, would indeed not nourish, offend, or excite anyone, and is fashionably uniform and without point” (35). In somewhat grander terms, Sven Birkerts's influential *Gutenberg Elegies* lamented the decline of novelistic hope amid proliferating electronic entertainments, complaining that “no one thinks any longer about writing the Great American Novel” (207).

Although it was forged out of deeply personal experiences—especially his struggles with addiction and depression—Wallace's novel almost seems to have been designed to refute these two criticisms. As D.T. Max's biography has shown, Wallace's experiences during his MFA seem to have helped formulate his expansive aesthetic in an opposition to the limited program realism that Aldridge laments. More specifically, in resuscitating the “great tradition of technical innovation” that Aldridge sees beginning in Joyce, Wallace seems to deliberately rewrite Joyce's epic in his book. As the title of *Infinite Jest* indicates, Wallace's

novel shares with *Ulysses* a desire to rework the outlines of *Hamlet*, and it also uses its scalar shifts to suggest larger mythical resonances to its action. Like Joyce's punning "met him pike hoses," Wallace's character "Madame Psychosis" provides one of the hints that *Infinite Jest* should be read in terms of the mythic parallels it establishes, as characters unwittingly recast Greek myths or re-enact the festivals of the dead recorded by Sir James Frazer in *The Golden Bough* (1890-1922). The movement between characters also suggests the Joycean example. For all its "Wandering Rocks"-style dispersion, *Infinite Jest* is essentially organized around two overarching narratives that balance a youthful prodigy who has problematic relations with his father, opposite an older man who is less educated but more humane. In both books, the author begins by showcasing the prodigy but ultimately moves toward the older figure, leaving at book's end the young man isolated in the loneliness of his own talent.

On one level, Birkerts's sense that we were living through the twilight years of novelistic ambition is plainly contradicted by both the scale of Wallace's ambition—crudely indexed by the sheer number of pages that make up the book—and by the invention and energy that characterizes his unusually elastic prose on any given page. More substantial, is Birkerts's central argument that by the mid-nineties, the "printed word [was] part of a vestigial order that we are moving away from . . . [t]his shift is happening throughout our culture, away from the patterns and habits of the printed page and toward a new world distinguished by its reliance on electronic communications" (118). Perhaps it is simply coincidence that Wallace corresponded with Birkerts in the early 90s (indeed the two writers were members of the same panel discussion at the Arlington [MA] Center for Arts in 1993), but *Infinite Jest*'s account of a culture gradually being seduced to enter a world of solitary engagement with electronic devices (most essentially the lethal entertainment, "Infinite Jest" itself), and his deliberate use of literary techniques specific to "the patterns and habits of the

printed page” (most obviously the use of endnotes, often with their own accompanying footnotes), seems at least partly to engage with the same cultural demons that haunt Birkerts.

The challenge of breaking with critical orthodoxy, by trying to get past the view of Wallace’s career as comprising one vast masterpiece involves trying to find a unity in a spectacularly various body of work that Wallace seemed to craft in direct opposition to the idea of unity. If his books are laid out in chronological order the sheer restlessness of his inventive imagination is unavoidable. Even if we restrict our focus to fiction—setting aside his philosophy thesis on “fatalism,” his expansive journalism, and his popular science text—it’s clear that Wallace never worked in the same genre in consecutive books, since even his short fictions often seem radically dissimilar. Formally various, these works are also intellectually diverse—omnivorous, one might say. From a literary critic’s perspective, what’s particularly impressive about Wallace’s excursions beyond the literary, and specifically into scientific terrain, is precisely his engagement with mathematics. The easiest scientific territory for writers (and critics) to mine are fields that lend themselves to metaphor—the uncertainty principle, or the butterfly effect, are open to cultural transmission as concepts in ways that the axial language of mathematics is not. When the concept is separated from the mathematics such transmission is often faulty, but the metaphor allows readers to take the math on trust, or to ignore it altogether. Wallace was not averse to treating mathematics in overarching fashion—Michael Pemuilis’s grand announcement in *Infinite Jest* that “you can trust math . . . Whose truth is deductive. Independent of sense or emotionality” (*IJ* 1071n324) sets the field as an antidote to the postmodern scepticism about overarching truths, with little supporting evidence—yet he was also willing to include equations, graphs, and more complex discussion, too. Wallace’s mathematical fictions align him with a unique international tradition of writers—spanning, at least, Lewis Carroll, Georges Perec, and Don DeLillo—and while the full literary-critical implications of his contributions to this tradition

have yet to be fully registered, they do at least provoke speculation in reviewers that are sufficiently alert to sense the underlying intellectual investments. Thus, Tom LeClair's assessment of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* ends with the suspicion that the book "could have an intricate design, perhaps generated by a 'stochastic' mathematics."

At a smaller formal scale of analysis, however, a unity does begin to emerge, and it is, in fact, closely linked to his engagement with short fiction. Perhaps because critics have concentrated so heavily on *Infinite Jest*, the extent of Wallace's engagement with short fiction has been somewhat eclipsed, yet he dated his desire to become a writer from the day he read Donald Barthelme's short fiction, "The Balloon," and many of his other key influences—including (as Lucas Thompson has recently shown) Jorge Luis Borges—worked primarily with short fiction. From this perspective, even his longer works arguably have less in common with the narrowly defined novel form (which normally privileges a single protagonist and a unified time line, and relies on chapters that serially build suspense as the book progresses) than they do with the transitional form of the story cycle. Unlike a novel, suspense rarely builds from chapter to chapter in either a cycle or a longer Wallace work, but is rather diffused across a much larger narrative space. Similarly, it's notable that after his first novel, *The Broom of the System* (which unfolds in numbered and dated sections), Wallace never used chapters again. *The Pale King* is organized into "sections," while *Infinite Jest* is simply divided into narrative units. What distinguishes these units or sections from a novel's chapters—and what in fact brings them closer to short fictions—is that while they certainly take on an amplified resonance in the context of the entire work, the greater number of them are far more self-contained than novelistic chapters. Whether they tell the story of a professional conversationalist, a bricklayer's accident report, or an alcoholic father's attempt to give a tennis lesson—these are set-pieces that can be excised and read independently with far less loss of meaning than the chapters of most novels, and it's surely not coincidental that

Wallace published many segments of both *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King* as stories in magazines.

To fully map the degree to which Wallace's longer work exploits the possibilities of cyclic form—exploring how he uses geography rather than causality to draw narrative units together; explicating his allusions to Sherwood Anderson in *The Pale King*—requires more space than I have here. But in deference to the real mathematicians who discuss his work in this issue, I'd suggest that because cyclic form depends upon the additive process of combining units that are on one level already complete in themselves, what we might call Wallace's combinative aesthetic can be seen as a diluted legacy of his student years as “math weenie.” His work rarely has the condensed clarity of an equation, but whatever answers his books provide come as the result of this continual addition.