David Foster Wallace is different. His narratives aren’t as pleasing as Hemingway’s. His essays aren’t bone-dry like Derrida’s. Actually, they sometimes are—Wallace can be beautiful and boring, simultaneously formal and colloquial, sometimes within the same work, sometimes the same page, sometimes (actually quite frequently) the same sentence. Wallace exercises his craft independently, unbound by the conventional rules of writing, apparently unconcerned with the readability of his prose, yet critical of others for their minor language errors. To him, easy-to-read is shallow, unreflective of the breadth of life’s meaning.

But what makes him think he can do this? What makes him think he can refer to someone as “C.V.” yet point out that there is a missing “predicative preposition” on a warning sign in his bathroom, include two-and-a-half–page footnotes yet blame “poststructuralist metacritics” for “making the whole business of interpreting texts way more complicated,” and use words that aren’t in the Oxford Unabridged, let alone average reader’s, dictionary? Let’s ask a simpler question, perhaps the most important of all. Let’s look at the text and ask, why does David Foster Wallace see things so differently?

In his 1997 essay collection *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again*, Wallace talks a lot about a lot of stuff. In “Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley,” a short vignette of his early-teenage years, we learn that Wallace grew up in Philo, Illinois, a “tiny collection of corn silos . . . whose native residents did little but sell crop insurance and nitrogen fertilizer and herbicide and collect . . .”

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1 i.e. Captain Video, a passenger on the same Caribbean cruise as Wallace who was always carrying a video camera.

2 I’ve noticed that using footnotes to fit in things that don’t really belong in the text makes writing much easier. It becomes much less of a selection process and allows for almost unrestricted thought dumping.

3 “C.V.” is mentioned in “Supposedly” 308; “predicative” is mentioned in “Supposedly” 304; and “poststructuralist metacritics” are mentioned in “Greatly” 138.
property taxes” (3). Pretty unremarkable. He amused himself by thinking of the scenery, the set of “broad curving lines of geographic force,” as if it were drawn on graph paper (3). The “area behind and below these broad curves” he could “plot by eye way before [he] came to know infinitesimals as easements, an integral as schema” (3). But we know that the lines aren’t really there, that the horizon isn’t a line, just the illusion of a line. And so does Wallace. But what else is there to do when the space looks the same, and the time feels the same, every place and moment? In “Getting Away from Already Pretty Much Being Away from It All,” which documents his return to Illinois for the State Fair, Wallace ponders why “Midwesterners lack a certain cunning” and why “under stress they look like lost children” (108). He notes that “Megalopolitan East-Coasters’ summer vacations are literally getaways, flights-from—from crowds, noise, heat, dirt, the neural wear of too many stimuli,” yet in the Midwest, “you’re pretty much Away all the time. The land . . . is big. Pool-table flat” (108). There’s a reason he didn’t stay, made obvious in the title. He had to get away from being away, and not temporarily. “Horizons in every direction” couldn’t possibly satisfy his active mind, in which tennis wasn’t just a game of hit-the-ball but a game of hyperbolic trig functions, in which wind wasn’t just a moving air mass but a transformation of the sport into “3-space,” and “calculus was, quite literally, child’s play.”

Wallace was so different even then. He was good at tennis, not in the I-can-run-faster-than-you sense, but because he demonstrated “an almost Zen-like acceptance of things as they actually were, on-court” (“Derivative” 10). He held an “In My Element” mindset and became immersed within asphalt and baselines and service lines (14), acknowledging and processing through his mind every imperfection on a particular court, every gust of wind and the angle of the sun, and while his opponents “[buckled] under the obvious injustice of losing to a shallow-chested ‘pusher’ because of the shitty rural courts and rotten wind” (10), Wallace was rewarded with tournament wins and opponents’ balls sinking into red territory.

So it’s no surprise that, with his mental bandwidth and vast short-term memory, Wallace writes with such superfluity, that he jumps between barely-related topics without warning and includes several-page footnotes that make his essays look like a part of the Harvard Law Review. His mind can process such large quantities of information at once, and he has become so accustomed to such a breadth of intelligence from thinking so much and from

4 “Horizons” are mentioned in “Getting” 108; “3-space” is mentioned in “Derivative” 3; and “Calculus” is mentioned in “Derivative” 9.
thinking alone, that he expects others to think as broadly and deeply as he thinks. Comments such as “Oh God she doesn’t know whether it’s 0°C or 0°F; that wasn’t in the DIPPIN DOTS training video” become less pretentious attempts to show off than the products of an overactive brain whose neurons fire way more than their share of neurotransmitters (“Getting” 104).

But “different” or not, it still feels like he’s giving us much more detail and commentary than we need. In “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again,” Wallace narrates his experience of a seven-day Caribbean cruise, and it’s just about as David Foster Wallace as you can get—longest footnotes you’ve ever read,7 extreme use of acronyms, descriptions of other people that sound like descriptions of animals in a Discovery Channel documentary, extreme epistemological tangents, etc. What compels him to tell us that his “[shower]head’s MASSAGE setting makes your eyes roll up and your sphincter just about give” but fail to explain exactly what “w/r/t” and “p.&d.” stand for?6 Strunk and White would not be pleased. Much of his writing shows little concern for readability and is disproportionately self-centered, even accounting for his overactive mind. There’s always the possibility that he’s just showing off. Or maybe he just can’t agree with the world, can’t approve of people who leave out “predicative prepositions” and put up signs that say “BIG AS YOU’RE HEAD” without caring, can’t exhibit the same “greedy placidity” that wealthy American tourists exhibit at impoverished vacation ports, can’t just come to terms with the “Professional Smile,” the grocery-store-checkout-line smile, the mere appearance of emotion engineered to flatter customers.7 Maybe the one thing that Wallace wants is for people to care, to not dismiss things as irrelevant, to acknowledge and respect each other as people, because he believes that the world, or at least our nation, has become too self-centered and dispassionate.

Which brings us to Wallace’s essay on how television transformed American culture to one of sensory overstimulation: Wallace lets us see just what it is he’s rejecting. In “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” Wallace observes that spending “six hours a day” watching colored patterns of light behind a framed glass pane tends to affect “people’s values and self-perception in deep ways” (22, 53). Television, Wallace notes, is a medium that

5 That is, unless you’ve read some of Wallace’s other stuff. Note #110 in his novel Infinite Jest spans nearly nineteen pages, and it’s a big book, like 9 x 6 inches I mean, and printed in a tiny typeface.

6 For “[shower]head,” see 303; for “w/r/t,” see 307; for “p.&d.,” see 330. W/r/t stands for “with regard to” or “respect to,” by the way. P.&d. I still haven’t figured out.

7 Quotations in order of appearance: “Supposedly” 304; “Away” 102; “Supposedly” 310; “Supposedly” 209.
tells the masses, ironically, that “it’s better . . . to fly solo” (56). It was “practically made for irony,” not because it is ironic, but because it’s “a bisensuous medium” in which what the viewer sees “undercuts what’s said” (35). Indeed, to the average viewer, “Joe Briefcase,” “being one part of the biggest crowd in human history watching images that suggest that life’s meaning consists in standing visibly apart from the crowd” is quite disconcerting (58). Yet television, drawing heavily from the “cynical, irreverent, ironic, absurdist post-WWII literature,” teaches Joe that he should be cynical, irreverent, and ironic, and because Joe now confronts it with “boredom and distrust,” because he refuses to consider it a “serious” medium, watching television flatters him, satisfies his desire to be above the crowd, and makes him want, in order to be flattered again, to watch more (59).

Now multiply television by six hours a day. Decades of it, one fourth of the “well-conditioned viewer’s” life. The viewer’s “most frightening prospect . . . becomes leaving [himself] open to others’ ridicule by betraying passé expressions of value, emotion, or vulnerability” (“E Unibus Pluram” 63).

Is this obsession with sensory stimulation what has caused us to eschew textbooks, care little about correct English grammar on state fair signs, look at impoverished inhabitants of mid-cruise vacation stops with little more than a “greedy placidity?” To feel compelled to wear “blank, bored-looking” faces on the subway and think of “real live personal up-close stuff the same way we [think of] the distant and exotic, as if separated from us by physics and glass, extant only as performance, awaiting our cool review”?

Maybe the idiosyncrasies of Wallace’s writing are his attempt to get as far from television and its detail-diluting properties as possible. Compare brief images to nineteen-page footnotes, minute details, weird acronyms, not-in-dictionary words—Wallace tries to convey the breadth not only of experience, but also of thought. His own thoughts, his tendency to see the philosophical meanings behind mundane events, his insistence on casting a net wide enough and with fine enough mesh to capture all the detail of the material and metaphysical worlds—why does Wallace insist on getting all the substance, all the details of experience, the substance behind the appearance?

It has something to do with ontology, the individual’s identity—and, of course, tennis. In “Tennis Player Michael Joyce’s Professional Artistry as a Paradigm of Certain Stuff about Choice, Freedom, Discipline, Joy, Grotesquerie, and Human Completeness,” in which Wallace follows tennis play-

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8 For the state fair sign, see “Away” 102; for “greedy placidity,” see “Supposedly” 310; for “blank,” see “E Unibus Pluram” 63; for “real live,” see “E Unibus Pluram” 64.
er Michael Joyce for several days and documents the intricacies of the professional tennis world, Wallace frequently interjects into the narration his own interpretations of events and his own childhood vignettes. At one point, when pondering what it takes to become a top tennis player, Wallace notes that players of different skill levels play so differently that they might not even be playing the same game. Wallace tells us, “I could not meaningfully exist on the same court with these obscure, hungry players. Nor could you. And it’s not just a matter of talent or practice. There’s something else” (245). Whenever Wallace mentions tennis, there is a faint, wistful trace of his junior career. He keeps a safe distance from the professionals, always referring to them carefully as “they,” sometimes as if he had never played tennis seriously at all. Did he really find his “identity shifting from jock to math-wienie anyway” (“Derivative” 14), or did he always hold a vehement desire to play in national tournaments, collect prizes, perhaps play professionally? Did excelling at junior tennis comprise Wallace’s teenaged vision of what success was, of what it meant to distinguish himself from the masses, what it meant to be an individual, to exist? Wallace understands that “Tennis is what Michael Joyce loves and lives for and is” (“Tennis” 227-8). When Wallace was fourteen and the other boys “became abruptly mannish and tall” (“Derivative” 12), when the “1976 Chicago Junior Invitational” surrounded the courts with “green plastic tarps” to dampen the wind that he was so adept at harnessing (14)—when Wallace lost his opportunity to become an exceptionally good tennis player—did he also lose his raison d’être, his only guiding principle? Tennis, his single strongest connection to the physical, to the muscles and bones he commanded, to the wind and the sun and the laws of friction and gravity—when Wallace lost tennis, it seems that he himself became lost, not just unsure of what to do next, but disconnected from the material world, from other people, from his own body, unsure of what really existed.

To what extent did Wallace choose to become lost? To what extent did Wallace choose to grow slower than his peers, to play handicapped by wind-blocking tarps and unblemished courts, to become forced into a world with which he was unfamiliar? His surroundings were engulfing him, and when he realized how much he was blending in, losing track of himself in comfortable competence, he needed to push back in an effort to define himself against the world. He began a journey without a clear destination, an Odyssean search for meaning in an unfamiliar world, a pursuit to prove his existence as an individual, which explains why he describes the material world so exhaustively. By describing the “fawn-colored enamelish polymer” in his cruise ship cabin, its approximate dimensions, “thirteen size-11 Keds long by twelve Keds wide,”
all its shelves and cubbyholes and “Personal Fireproof Safe” (300), Wallace assures himself and proves to his readers that he was there, that he existed in that place at that time, not unlike how each of the hundreds of diagrams of the ship provide “some weird kind of reassurance” with “a red dot and a YOU ARE HERE” (“Supposedly” 264). The same holds true for his subjective narration. His wanderings onto unrelated tangents, long paragraphs in which each sentence starts with “I,” dogmatic expressions of opinion, stories from childhood, use of perplexing acronyms— all are vestiges of thinking, of consciousness, all indicate that Wallace was there, and all tell us something about who Wallace was and how his mind worked.

But there's still something wrong. If Wallace wants so strongly to be acknowledged as a mind, why does he often fail to recognize the minds of others? Why does he describe the ship’s towel guy as “a spectral Czech with eyes so inset they’re black from brow-shadow,” or say that the press credential manager at the state fair is “bland and pale and has a mustache and a short-sleeve knit shirt”? How could he reasonably conclude irony to be “critical and destructive,” its function “almost exclusively negative” (“E Unibus Pluram” 67), yet comment that, in his cruise line’s pre-boarding room, “Every infant within earshot has a promising future in professional opera” (“Supposedly” 275)? It seems unlikely that he deliberately engineered these contradictions to form a metacritique in which the subject of his critique is himself. Maybe these contradictions are nothing but products of Wallace's brutal honesty, intentionally or unintentionally affirming his presence even further through the premise that it's our flaws that make us human.

Wallace's belief that he exists in his texts, whether he acknowledges it or not, is so strong that he exposes himself in defending it. In “Greatly Exaggerated,” a critique of H. L. Hix's Morte d'Author: An Autopsy, Wallace exhibits perhaps the most disdainful and incisive language found in Supposedly. Hix’s defense of Roland Barthes's “Death of the Author” idea, the idea that the author is irrelevant when determining what a text means, and Hix's examination of critical discourse and its many interpretations of the role of the author seem to personally offend Wallace to the point that he begins to personally attack Hix. Wallace comments that “judging by [Hix’s] author photo, [he is] about twelve” (138), that Hix’s analysis contains “gestures that seem directed at thesis committees rather than paying customers” (141-42), and that it's “hard for me [Wallace] to predict just whom . . . 226 dense pages
on whether the author lives is really going to interest” (144). To Wallace, “critics can try to erase or over-define the author into anonymity for all sorts of . . . reasons, . . . ‘but one thing which it cannot mean is that no one did it’11” (144-5). Perhaps a fitting summary of Wallace's response to Hix and to the whole “the author is dead” topic is the essay's title: “Greatly Exaggerated.”

Is this hostility justified? Is Wallace so troubled by what critical discourse says about his relevance that he's compelled to lash out at Hix and Barthes, to prove that he is, in fact, there? It appears that what most troubles him are the outside forces that endanger his identity, his ability to discern himself, the proof of his existence. Junior tennis organizations threatened him in the same way when they installed windscreens around the courts, precluding him from expressing a skill that was essentially his and that proved his value. Critical theorists did too when they declared the author dead, when they published works with titles like Morte d'Author: An Autopsy. And the average person did when he began to watch television and became too accustomed to image, eschewing substance, giving Wallace only blankness and boredom when he had a story to tell. So Wallace turned his stories into abstract symbols, words, ink outlines on white pages, and cast them away, out into the unfamiliar world, risking ridicule and misinterpretation, hoping that, in his pages and to his readers, he would exist.

WORKS CITED

“Getting Away from Already Pretty Much Being Away from it All.” 83-137.
“A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again.” 256-353.

11 Quoted from William Gass’s Habitations of the World.