

# A Genuine Cynic

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## 1. David Foster Wallace is smarter than I am

**D**avid Foster Wallace is a ludicrously overeducated postmodernist fiction writer with an enormous vocabulary. His collection of seven essays, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, punctured a certain student's I-have-a-big-vocabulary ego balloon and let out all the air. The English language itself is not big enough to contain the scope of Wallace's thought, necessitating the invention or evolution of entirely new words.<sup>1</sup> He also knows much more than I do about math, literature, tennis, deconstructionism, history, film, philosophy, and a whole lot of cultural miscellany, like what the Peter Principle<sup>2</sup> is and what Emerson thought about the gaze of millions<sup>3</sup> and what Seurat's paintings look like.<sup>4</sup> He tosses around references to Voltaire and Coleridge and Plato so often that an encyclopedia becomes a requisite reading accessory. The pretension comes off as endearing rather than condescending, though; it's only natural that in the course of steering the massive barge of his intellect along the linear waterways of rhetorical argument and narrative, some pieces of his prodigious cognitive cargo might tumble off and litter his prose.

All this knowledge tends to make Wallace something of a psychological hypochondriac. Everything he experiences seems to remind him of something else; life becomes a self-referential film. In one of his darker moods, he decides that the line to board a cruise ship carries an "unwitting echo of the Auschwitz-embarkation scene in *Schindler's List*" ("Supposedly" 270). Though

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<sup>1</sup> His favorite, fittingly, seems to be "amphetaminic," which he uses about six times per essay.

<sup>2</sup> The principle that members of a hierarchy are promoted until they reach the level at which they are no longer competent (*OED*).

<sup>3</sup> Few men are fit to stand it, apparently ("E Unibus Pluram" 25).

<sup>4</sup> Lots of dots.

he acknowledges the parallel as “unwitting,” he seems resentful that he is “apparently alone” in seeing it, as though the other vacationers should be looking for morbid analogies too (270). Wallace analyzes every experience, everything he sees, with biting wit and impressive form. He has a talent for pointing out hypocrisy, including his own, and a keen sense of irony. He is in fact an ironist by trade: he considers himself a postmodernist, a “young, overeducated fiction writer,” in the “Brat Pack” generation of writers (“E Unibus Pluram” 65, 43). And he considers the postmodern era an “age when ironic self-consciousness is the one and only universally recognized badge of sophistication” (“David Lynch” 199).

Despite Wallace’s intellect, artful belletrism, and postmodern self-identification, his most unguarded moments reveal a desire to escape from irony and cynicism. He finds the self-consciousness and weary sophistication of his postmodern colleagues depressing and ultimately empty of real value. Yet he continues to be verbose and overly-intellectual, and never manages to appreciate fully anything genuine or sincere without undermining it.

## **2. He enjoys a good battle of wits**

Wallace wields his irony with finesse. He points out the hypocrisies and absurdities of everyday American life with pith and exactitude, exempting no one, not even himself. Most of Wallace’s essays criticize an aspect of American culture in this way, identifying a collective delusion that we hold and breaking it open. In “Tennis Player Michael Joyce’s Professional Artistry as a Paradigm of Certain Stuff About Choice, Freedom, Limitation, Joy, Grotesquerie, and Human Completeness,” Wallace asserts that professional athletes are modern holy men: “They give themselves over to a pursuit, endure great privation and pain . . . and enjoy a relationship to perfection that we admire and reward” (237). The essay is mostly a lighthearted and interesting account of the pre-TV qualifying rounds for the Canadian Open and some of the characters who inhabit the world of professional tennis. Somewhere in the middle of it Wallace veers into serious territory, almost before you notice he’s stopped talking about mistranslated French and the line to the men’s restroom. “We prefer not to countenance the kinds of sacrifices the professional-grade athlete has made to get so good at one particular thing,” he proclaims. “The actual facts of the sacrifices repel us when we see them: basketball geniuses who cannot read, sprinters who dope themselves, defensive tackles who shoot up bovine hormones until they collapse or explode” (237).

Wallace's disgust with the grotesque limitations and sacrifices in an athlete's life comes through here in his violent and uncharacteristically basic language: "shoot up" and "collapse or explode." This tone of revulsion is common when Wallace gets into topics like this one, ranging from the behavior of American tourists at Caribbean ports to oversexed pre-teen girls at a baton-twirling competition. So is Wallace's failure to warn us about where he's going. Wallace's essay-behemoths contain very little foreshadowing or predictable structure, and he tends to wander freely from topic to topic. When he stumbles upon something serious, it's discomfiting because we have had no warning. Suddenly, Wallace is pointing a rhetorical finger right in our faces, and we didn't have time to brace ourselves against his accusation. Not that Wallace directs all of his criticism outward; a good deal of it is directed at himself. In fact he himself admits to a quasi-religious appreciation of Michael Joyce, especially since Wallace himself played competitive junior tennis and was very successful regionally. He speaks of tennis reverentially, calling Joyce a "transcendent practitioner of an art" even after he has just expressed revulsion at the way Joyce's life has been so restricted that it has really nothing besides tennis (family, education, and friends excluded) (254).

Wallace knows his subject and his weapon so well that he can use it against even his own species. In the book's only critical review, "Greatly Exaggerated," Wallace summarizes and refutes or dismisses most of the arguments in H. L. Hix's book *Morte d'Author: An Autopsy*. Hix chronicles the history of the "Death of the Author" debate in deconstructionist literary theory, and then provides his own analysis, which claims to resolve the debate. According to Wallace, Hix's final argument is basically that neither side really knows what it's talking about and therefore the "entire post-1968 squabble has been pointless" ("Greatly Exaggerated" 142). After noting that Hix "uses the deconstructionists' own instruments against them," Wallace then uses Hix's own instruments against *him*, dismissing Hix's entire argument about The Author as "arcane" and essentially contending that Hix doesn't know what he's talking about either, that he's gotten so caught up in constructing an argument and thoroughly defining all his terms and leaving nothing to chance that he's lost sight of the essence of the question (143).

### **3. But it feels somehow empty**

"Greatly Exaggerated" is a very neat piece of work, but it gives one the sensation of a dog-chasing-its-own-tail cycle of irony, and it wallows in the nihilistic dismissal of previously held self-evident assumptions. Wallace feels

this too. In “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U. S. Fiction,” he criticizes “media futurologist” George Gilder’s quasi-utopian vision of an age of “democratic” television, in which something resembling the Internet solves all of American culture’s issues with mass media by making television more democratic, using something resembling YouTube<sup>5</sup> (70). But then he pulls up short. In an earlier part of this same essay, he argues that irony “tyrannizes us”—that it is a good way to “illuminate and explode hypocrisy,” but useless for “constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks” (65, 67). And in the middle of elegantly dispatching the rabidly eager Gilder, Wallace halts. “Oh God, I’ve just reread my criticisms of Gilder. That he is naive. . . . My attitude, reading Gilder, has been sardonic, aloof, depressed. . . . I am in the aura” (76).

Wallace’s existence “in the aura” of ironic modern culture worries him. He is haunted by “irony and ridicule,” which he believes are “agents of a great despair and stasis in U.S. culture” (“E Unibus Pluram” 49). While originally weapons of the avant-garde, to Wallace, “irony, irreverence and rebellion have come to be not liberating but enfeebling in the culture today’s avant-garde tries to write about” (67). As a member of the intelligentsia, Wallace seems to consider himself a cultural guardian of sorts, responsible to future generations for the quality of contemporary American culture, which he takes to be “enfeebled.” But the irony problem isn’t just cultural, it’s personal too, and Wallace can’t take it. “Sitting through a 300-page novel full of nothing but trendy sardonic exhaustion, one ends up feeling not only empty but somehow . . . oppressed,” he writes—on page 67 of his 350-page essay collection full of nothing but trendy ironic weariness.

#### 4. And yet he cannot handle sincerity

In “David Lynch Keeps His Head,” Wallace profiles a surrealist filmmaker who is as close to a personal hero of Wallace’s as anyone can really be. Lynch’s style of filmmaking is emphatically *not* postmodern: un-self-conscious, unironic, heavy-handed but sincere in its symbolism and “Freudian riffs” (198). Lynch, Wallace argues convincingly, is an Expressionist through and through. Wallace gets very excited about this topic, and is more genuinely admiring here than anywhere else in all of *A Supposedly Fun Thing*. “He

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<sup>5</sup> This article was published in 1990. It’s interesting to read about what pre-Internet people thought the Internet was going to be. It’s somewhat disturbing to realize that many of these futuristic visions are far more accurate than what current members of the United States Senate believe the Internet to be.

does pretty much what he wants and appears not to give much of a shit whether you like it or even get it. His loyalties are fierce and passionate and almost entirely himself,” he says of Lynch (192). In his next breath, however, Wallace preemptively defends himself against potential accusations of excessive rhapsodizing: “I don’t mean to make it sound like this kind of thing is wholly good or that Lynch is a paragon of integrity” (192). Beginning with some periphrastic mumbling—“I don’t mean to make it sound like this kind of thing”—and then finishing off with the sarcastic flourish of two supercilious vocabulary words, Wallace backpedals quickly. He continues, and things turn rather nasty: “His passionate inwardness is refreshingly childlike, but I notice that very few of us choose to make small children our friends” (192). Infantilization is a familiar tactic for Wallace; he does it in nearly all of his essays. He uses it to devalue a person or group of people, especially after he has just expressed respect or admiration for them. He has none of the usual tired-adult’s admiration for a child’s artistry or simplicity or sincerity. But he does seem to value the perspective of a child, often reminiscing about his own childhood as a means of explaining his patterns of thought, yet he cannot truly respect a childlike adult, and always delivers the comparison in a condescending or pitying manner.

“David Lynch Keeps His Head” contains by far the most sustained, non-condescendingly respectful material in *A Supposedly Fun Thing*, but it is undercut by rhetorical defense mechanisms. We only get brief flashes of respect elsewhere, and these, too, are subverted by Wallace’s utter inability to avoid making everything into a joke for the extremely jaded. At the Illinois State Fair, Wallace listens to a speech given by Governor Jim Edgar on the subject of the ’93 floods that had just devastated the southwestern part of the state. He begins his account with an unusual amount of reverence—especially considering that he is talking about an Illinois politician. According to Wallace, Edgar “radiates sincerity . . . speaks plainly and sanely and I think well—of both the terrible pain of the ’93 flood and the redemptive joy of seeing the whole state pull together to help one another” (“Getting Away” 90-91). Wallace summarizes the speech and concludes by observing that “the Press seem unmoved. I thought his remarks were kind of powerful, though” (91). An appreciation of true sincerity! No comparisons to children whatsoever! A real moment of genuine respect!

But something still doesn’t feel right. It takes a minute to figure out what, but consider this implacably problematic set of phrases:

Governor Edgar acknowledges that the state's really taken it on the chin in the last couple months, but that it's a state that's resilient and alive and most of all, he's reminded looking around himself here today, united, *together*, both in tough times and in happy times, happy times like for instance this very Fair. ("Getting Away" 91)

The parade of commas. The contractions. The repetition of "happy times." The general singsongy feeling of the whole thing. It's almost . . . childlike. It's not a direct transcript of the speech; it's a third-person paraphrase. Wallace can *say* he thought the remarks were powerful, but we *know* that something in him was whispering "cheeeesy!" That's how it comes across to us, watching, listening.

As a psychological hypochondriac, Wallace diagnoses himself: "I've noticed that, while I can't help but respect and sort of envy the moral nerve of people who truly do not care what others think of them, people like this also make me nervous" ("David Lynch" 192). Self-confident people make Wallace nervous—too nervous to accept any outpouring of sincerity from others, too nervous to express much genuine appreciation of his own.

## **5. And so the closet Expressionist grasps for the genuine and often misses**

So Wallace is basically a master ironist who finds irony depressing, enfeebling, worrying, empty, and oppressive. Yet he can't get away from it, can't bring himself to make any unqualified statements of sincere emotion, and can't process sincerity in others without mixing in a little of his own doubt, his own scorn or complication. He performs feats of ironic evisceration that only leave him feeling lonely, unable to communicate on a level with anyone. He is trapped in an irony bubble, isolated by education, intellect, and his chosen career from the "childlike" people that he writes about in his narratives: the Michael Joyces of the world who are willing to take everything at face value ("David Lynch" 192). He isolates himself from the other overeducated fiction writers because he finds them tiresome. Deep down, he truly desires to find or make something genuine, but is too nervous, too self-conscious, too afraid of ridicule.

Yet despite his weird subversion of most of the compliments he pays to David Lynch, that essay still lays bare a lot of his firmly held non-ironic beliefs about art. Lynch's earlier movie *Blue Velvet* is the reason Wallace admires him so much. Graduate-student Wallace had an "epiphanic" moment watching *Blue Velvet* for the first time, during which he realized that:

The very most important artistic communications took place at a level that not only wasn't intellectual but wasn't even fully conscious, that the unconscious's true medium wasn't verbal but imagistic, and that whether the images were Realistic or Postmodern or Expressionistic or Surreal or what-the-hell-ever was less important than whether they *felt true*, whether they rang psychic cherries in the communicatee. (201)

We almost see Wallace's artistic ethos laid bare, but it immediately seems hypocritical because Wallace's entire persona as a writer, right down to the language of this very paragraph, is far more verbal than imagistic. Again, we have this apparent paradox between what Wallace wants out of art and what he does with his art.

Wallace is a writer, not a filmmaker. He cannot be an imagist in the way that Lynch is an imagist because his primary medium is words. Even if they describe images, the physical *things* on the page are not drawings or photographs, but little printed hieroglyphs made up of even smaller printed hieroglyphs that were established by the ancient Phoenicians or whoever first came up with this alphabet. And yet, his verbosity, however academic, does not derive completely from an inability to be imagistic in this way; it is not as though he must be the critic, and only others can be artists. The very language itself is Wallace's "image:" the sonority, the way his words feel and sound and *mean*. That's why he uses so many strange, obscure words; that's why he mixes his lexicons, using words that fall under the *OED* headings of PSYCHOANALYSIS and MATHEMATICS and ANATOMY in contexts utterly unrelated to psychoanalysis or mathematics or anatomy. He breaks familiar linguistic patterns by taking words that are always used in a specific context and turning them on their heads, so that we actually have to stop and consider what each individual word *means* instead of simply recognizing that it is there, in its rightful place in an idiom or figure of speech or whatever.

Wallace may struggle to present or accept anything as genuine, but he shows us that struggle in the earnestness of his prose. In "E Unibus Pluram," Wallace describes Don DeLillo's 1985 conceptual novel *White Noise* as a seminal work in postmodern image fiction. He focuses on a particular scene in which the narrator does not speak, "since to speak out loud in the scene would render the narrator a part of the farce . . . and so himself vulnerable to ridicule" ("E Unibus Pluram" 49). In contrast, Wallace always "speaks out loud" in his own writing, which is all about him even when it's about someone else. He offers his opinions and feelings and idle thoughts and generally sets himself up for ridicule—sometimes as a hypocrite, sometimes, as in his rare moments of sincerity, as a naïf.

## 6. Finding truth in the struggle of searching

The conflict between Wallace's intellectual brilliance and talent for irony and his desire for something more genuine is not entirely resolved by the Expressionism of his aesthetic. He still can't give a straight compliment or take anything at face value. His writing still echoes with the uncomfortable loneliness of someone who has a lot of fears and can't easily find much human connection and feels lost in American culture, trapped between the masses and the bourgeoisie. This struggle is played out in his writing, and he doesn't try to hide it from us. Along the way he stumbles upon some moments of striking beauty and authenticity, like an exuberantly joyful clog-dancing competition at the Illinois State Fair. The strange metaphysical connections he makes between calculus, tennis, and Midwestern weather in "Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley" are far more lyrical than logical. They represent Wallace's quest to get at the essence of things rather than prove any empirical point about anything—which he kind of regards as a waste of time, anyway. The desire for essence is what drives Wallace to knock down hypocrisy and search, often fruitlessly, for sincerity in himself and others. Lost, wandering over the vast intellectual range that his mind can encompass, he finds no solution, but finally some satisfaction, in the expression of all that churns inside him.

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