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Performing the 'fiction-writer's reader': David Foster Wallace and the 'reader' of 'Octet'

Abstract:

This paper examines the function of the 'implied reader' in David Foster Wallace's metafictional works, examining the strategies by which the author anticipates and positions the response of his own contemporary 'audience'. I argue that Wallace's complex rhetoric of the 'reader' implicates the latter in a kind of transferential dialogue with the text itself, that is, a self-conscious negotiation with the kinds of 'reader' prefigured therein. The complex figure of the 'reader' is reproduced throughout Wallace's works, underpinning both the author's explicit rhetoric of fiction and readership and his hyperbolic, self-referential aesthetic. Adam Kelly argues that Wallace's metafictional narratives are 'ultimately structured and informed by this dialogic appeal to the reader's attestation and judgment' (2010). However, this appealed-to 'reader' remains an overdetermined figure within texts such as 'Octet' (1999), which highlight and leverage the transferential stakes of the relationship between the 'fiction writer', their own text and 'reader'.

Biographical note:

Mitch Cunningham is a higher degree by research candidate (PhD) with Deakin University, Melbourne. His research focuses on critical rhetoric in the 21st century, with a particular focus on metafiction, psychoanalysis and the works of David Foster Wallace. Elements of this research were presented as part of the 'Infinite Wallace' international conference in Paris 2014. Earlier research, concerning irony, the uncanny and the works of David Lynch (2012), can be discovered by searching online: 'david lynch irony'.

Keywords:

David Foster Wallace – criticism – psychoanalysis – hermeneutics – transference

Introduction

“Texts are always implicitly or even explicitly addressed to someone. The “I” that speaks in lyric ever postulates a “thou”” (Brooks, 1986: 11).

“There are right and fruitful ways to try to “empathize” with the reader, but having to imagine yourself *as* the reader is not one of them” (Wallace, 1999: 129).

The legacy of American author David Foster Wallace is in many ways defined by the author’s relationship to readership and ‘audience’, particularly the contemporary ‘postmodern’ audiences to whom so much of his work is overtly addressed. In ‘E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction, the author famously diagnosed the attitudes, expectations and T.V.-consumption habits of an entire generation, articulating the plight of contemporary ‘fiction writers’ (1997: 21) within ‘a world of lurkers and starers who fear gaze and ridicule above imprisonment without law’ (81-82). Wallace’s critique of ironic detachment and disavowal in fiction, and his concomitant advocacy for the idea of writing as a literal ‘act of communication between one human being and another’ (1997: 144), is uniquely pitched towards this contemporary postmodern ‘audience’, the contours of which are canvassed throughout the author’s fiction, essays and interviews. As my research demonstrates, Wallace’s metafictional texts re-present the literary exchange as a matter of narrative, thematic and meta-literary significance; this approach drives the author’s self-referential aesthetic, and the sophisticated rhetorical appeals to the ‘reader’ canvassed therein. To wit, the following paper explores the extent to which Wallace’s fictions repeat and re-inscribe the figure of the ‘reader’ at the level of text, and the extent to which Wallace’s sense of ‘audience’ shapes our own sense of the author and his texts. I argue that Wallace’s texts effect a complex performance of their own reader, through sophisticated re-imaginings of the literary dialogue *qua* dialogue.

This dynamic is writ large in contemporary Wallace scholarship, which typically conceives the author’s literary legacy as a form of empathetic dialogue with the reader, a surprisingly literal ‘conversation’ or ‘act of communication between one human being and another’ (Wallace 1997:144). In his influential monograph *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, Marshall Boswell examines the game-like nature of Wallace’s fictions, arguing that these literary games effect ‘a surprisingly intimate zone of communication’, that is, a space of actual ‘subjective interaction’ with and within the text (2003:19). For Boswell, this effect is shaped by the author’s commitment to ‘gooey sentiment’ and ‘sentimentality’, a corrective or cure for the kinds of ‘sophisticated self-reflexive irony’ diagnosed in Wallace’s works (17). Adam Kelly takes this a step further, exploring the kinds of literary ‘trust’, ‘Sincerity’ and ‘Blind Faith’ at stake in Wallace’s texts, writing:

In the spiraling search for the truth of intentions, in an era when advertising, self-promotion and irony are endemic, the endpoint to the infinite jest of consciousness can only be the reader’s choice whether or not place trust and Blind Faith (2012: 145).

In this reading, the response of the reader is conceived as a kind of threshold act, providing both 'uncertainty' and 'futuraity' to Wallace's literary project as a whole. Kelly views this dialogue a kind of Derridean 'transaction', in which an impossible 'element of genius' slips in, 'a secret beyond representation, beyond theoretical definition, tied as it is to the very excess of writing itself' (146). In a similar vein, Boswell presents Wallace's conversations with the reader thus: 'ultimately, truly, deeply expressive of what is unknowable and unsayable' (2003: 209). The stakes of Wallace's literary legacy are thus conceived in dialogic terms, as expressions of an intimate, transactional and highly-uncertain conversation between the text and its reader – a literal 'act of communication'. This highly-visible act, and its bearing on the 'prismatic complexity' of Wallace's literary legacy (Burn 2012: 2), is the focus of the present paper. But how are we to focus in on this act, which appears dispersed throughout the generic and formal uncertainties of Wallace's works (and at times within Wallace scholarship)?

Reading the implied reader: transference and performance

To answer this question, we must consider the ambivalent nature of the term 'act' in Wallace's own fictions, and reconsider the kinds of performance and 'acting-out' at stake therein. In the short story 'Octet', collected in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999), Wallace distinguishes the activities of a so-called 'fiction writer' against the idea of performance, particularly within the texts we call metafiction – 'with the now-tired S.O.P. meta-stuff', writes Wallace,

it's more the dramatist himself coming onstage from the wings and reminding you that what's going on is artificial and that the artificier is him (the dramatist) and but that he's at least respectful enough of you as reader/audience to be honest about the fact that he's back there pulling the strings [...] viz. not interrogating you or having any sort of interchange or really even *talking* to you but rather just *performing** in some highly self-conscious and manipulative way (125 [FN2], emphasis original).

In contrast to the kinds of interrogation, interchange and 'talking' posed by Wallace's works, the theme of 'performance' is subterranean, a supposed relic of the author's postmodern inheritance. As a footnote to the term '*performing*', Wallace refers to the works of Milan Kundera, a 'belletrist whose intermural honesty is both formally unimpeachable and wholly self-serving: a classic postmodern rhetorician' (125). From this we can sketch a decided anxiety within Wallace's self-conscious texts, a disavowal of the performative contradictions inherent to metafictional practice. As actual fictions about fiction, Wallace's texts attempt to repeat and re-inscribe their own stakes as texts, whilst inevitably reproducing these stakes in negotiation with the present-day reader or critic. In the author's own discussions of Derrida and literary 'communication', Wallace makes light of the iterability of fiction, the abstractness of the literary exchange: '[writing] is a function not of presence but of absence: the reader's absent when the writer's writing, and the writer's absent when the reader's reading' (1997: 140).

As an attempt to bridge this absence, towards 'talking' to and with the reader, Wallace's texts inevitably repeat, re-inscribe and literalize the role of that 'reader' within the literary exchange. We see this dynamic at work in 'Octet', where the role of the 'fiction writer' is arguably performed by and through the reader. 'Pop Quiz 9' opens on the statement 'You are, unfortunately, a fiction writer' (123), detailing that fiction writer's relationship to a text named 'Octet', which is apparently structurally identical to Wallace's own. This account operates largely in the second person, with several notable exceptions towards the end of the text – as the fiction writer exhausts their literal 'performance anxieties' about the text, they are restaged as

fundamentally lost and confused and frightened and unsure [...] more like a *reader*, in other words, down here quivering in the mud of the trench with the rest of us, instead of a *Writer*, whom we imagine* to be clean and dry and radiant of command presence as he coordinates the whole campaign from back at some gleaming abstract Olympian HQ.

*(at least I sure do...)

(136 [FN18] emphasis original).

In a decidedly self-referential twist, Wallace's fiction writer (who already 'is' the reader in at least one sense), becomes even 'more like a *reader*', 'quivering in the mud of the trench *with the rest of us*' (emphasis added); meanwhile, Wallace's narrator breaks with impersonality to imagine an author 'radiant of command presence', coordinating a 'campaign' upon such readers from their 'Olympian HQ'. Wallace's parapractic inclusion of the narrator's own voice highlights the significance of the dichotomy 'writer/reader' within 'Octet'. This persistently self-referential dichotomy echoes the text's pre-eminent concern with literary performance, whilst also evoking the author's various forays into cultural commentary and criticism. Speaking to the unique role of the fiction writer within postmodernity, Wallace declares to interviewer Larry McCaffery 'You're trying somehow to affirm and deny that the writer is over here with his agenda while the reader's over there with her agenda, distinct' (2012: 32).

As a metafictional negotiation between the 'agendas' of writer and reader, Wallace's texts speak to their own performative contradictions, inviting yet pre-empting the response of the reader, whilst repeating the latter as a play of expectations, assumptions and agendas. In this sense, these texts recall the idea of an 'implied reader' in structuralist literary theory. As a heuristic and interpretive frame, the concept of the implied reader re-frames the text against its supposed or intended 'audience', which latter is ostensibly reconstructed through close readings of the text itself. Drawing on the psychoanalytic theme of *transference*, theorist Peter Brooks describes the text as a kind of 'mental apparatus', a 'dynamic organization of the psyche, a process of structuration' (1986: 4). For Brooks, this means that texts inevitably repeat and re-inscribe their own narrative situation, the stakes and structures of which are closely related to those of the analytic dialogue in Freudian metapsychology. Brooks highlights the following passage, from Freud's 'Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through', to detail the transferential stakes of such encounters:

The transference thus creates an intermediate region [*Zwischenreich*] between illness and real life through which the transition from one to the other is made. The new condition has taken over all the features of the illness; but it represents an artificial illness which is at every point susceptible to our intervention. It is at the same time a piece of real experience, but one which has been made possible by especially favorable conditions, and it is of a provisional nature (Freud, in Brooks 1986: 10).

Reading the literary text as one such 'intermediate region', Brooks re-raises the question of the implied reader in decidedly post-structural terms, as a play on the interdependence of the terms 'I' and 'thou', a situation 'frequently dramatized [...] in what we call 'framed tales', which stage the presence of a listener or narratee, whose reactions to what is told are often what is most important to the narrative' (11). In the actual analytic situation, meanwhile, the transference affords the opportunity to reconstruct the analysand's intended or supposed audience, as these materials are displaced onto the figure of the analyst – Freud describes the transference as a kind of 'acting-out' of the past 'as a present-day force', a force which displaces and disfigures the supposed authority of the analyst, in favor of the analysand's own unconscious delusion. In negotiating with this dynamic, in reality and in fiction, we thus contend with our own role as readers in the present day, a role which remains set in uneasy juxtaposition with the claims and demands of the contemporary literary text. Reviving the Structuralist 'implied reader', Brooks invites us to examine 'the play of personal pronouns and conjugation of verbs' as evidence of the text's unconscious situation of the reader: 'Texts are always implicitly or even explicitly addressed to someone. The 'I' that speaks in lyric ever postulates a 'Thou'' (11).

'Intranarrative acknowledgement' as performance

Wallace's metafictional works are a peculiar threshold test for this understanding of the reader, to the extent that they repeat, re-inscribe and often make literal their own stakes as texts. These tensions are writ large in 'Octet', as the complex figure of the 'fiction writer' goes on to detail their apprehensions of and about the reader, staging several pre-emptive encounters between that reader and the text 'Octet' itself. 'You are, unfortunately, a fiction writer', the relevant section begins. 'You are attempting a cycle of very short belletristic pieces [...] Maybe say they're supposed to compose a certain sort of *'interrogation'* of the person reading them, somehow' (1999:123). Recalling the text's earlier, abortive 'Pop Quiz' format, the text 'Octet' is described as a 'total fiasco', peppered with 'intranarrative acknowledgements' of the fiction writer's own pretenses. These acknowledgements, however, '[have] the disadvantage of flirting with metafictional self-reference', which for the fiction writer 'runs the risk of compromising the queer *urgency* about whatever you feel you want the pieces to interrogate in whoever's reading them' (124). This anxiety fuels the text's footnoted accounts of Performance and 'the dramatist himself' canvassed above, whilst also inspiring the fiction writer's decision to 'construct an additional Pop Quiz' – namely the self-referential 'Pop Quiz 9' –

In which you try your naked best to describe the conundrum and potential fiasco of the semi-octet and your own feeling that the surviving semiworkable pieces all seem to be trying to demonstrate* some sort of weird ambient *sameness* in different kinds of human relationships*, some nameless yet inescapable 'price' that all human beings are forced with having to pay at some point if they ever want truly 'to be with'* another person, instead of just using that person somehow (132).

The three footnotes triggered by this passage belie 'Octet's' – and indeed 'Octet's' – decidedly self-referential and circumspect take on the literary dialogue *as such*, detailing the fiction writer's anxiety about the term 'demonstrate' (preferring the verbs '*palpate*' or '*limn*'), the term 'relationship' ('treacalized by the same sorts of people who use *parent* as a verb and say *share* to mean talk'), and the term 'to be with', the latter an ultimate proxy for the kinds of sincerity demanded by their '100%-honest-naked-interrogation-of-the-reader tactic' (131-132, [FN7-9]). This textual anxiety frames the idea of sincere performance as a kind of sacrifice, to the extent that 'Octet' goes on to explore 'a weird and nameless and apparently unavoidable price that can actually sometimes equal death itself' (132).

All of this is contained within the text's negotiations of identity between reader, fiction writer and text, to the extent that the fiction writer, paying the supposed 'price' of their fourth-wall transgression, is relegated to the 'mud of the trench with the rest of us' – thus succeeding, however perversely, in their overtures towards 'sameness' and 'urgency' on the part of that reader. This anxious price is arguably at stake in Adam Kelly's own formulations of Wallace's legacy, when he conceives the author's act of communication as a 'passive decision to relinquish the self to the judgment of the other' (2012: 145). But before turning our attention to Kelly, we need to review the ubiquity of this 'other' throughout 'Octet' – that is, the sheer volume of 'readers' repeated and re-inscribed throughout the text itself. The fiction writer's 'audience' is writ large in 'Octet', described in intimate detail by the text's pre-emptory accounts of its own reception. In one instance, the fiction writer imagines:

That you – the unfortunate fiction writer – will have to come onstage naked (except for your hand's hat) and say all this stuff right to a person who doesn't know you or particularly give a shit about you one way or the other and who probably wanted simply to come home and put her feet up at the end of a long day and unwind in one of the very few safe and innocuous ways of unwinding left anymore*.

With the ominous repetition of the word 'come', Wallace goes on to imagine the fiction writer 'Coming up to innocent human beings' at parties, repeating the reader's desire to 'come to a party and unwind a little and maybe meet some new people in a totally low-key and unthreatening setting' (134). To these 'innocent human beings', Wallace imagines the fiction writer 'stepping directly into their visual field and breaking all sorts of basic unspoken rules of party- and first-encounter-between-strangers etiquette' – that is, 'explicitly interrogating them' (134).

In this vivid and ambivalent account of the literary encounter, the fiction writer is at once exposed and predatory. Meanwhile, 'Octet' performs exactly these maneuvers in

relation to the reader, 'stepping into their visual field' to recount the second-person narrative of the fiction writer. At the threshold of this strategy, we see again Wallace's flair for 'intranarrative acknowledgement' or parapractic interjections – in the footnote referred to above, Wallace's narrator breaks to note:

*Yes, things have come to pass that belletristic fiction is now considered safe and innocuous (the former predicate probably entailed or comprised by the latter predicate, if you think about it) but I'd opt to keep cultural politics out of it if I were you (133 [FN14]).

In other words, Wallace's exposures of 'sameness' and 'urgency' inevitably hinge on the wit and agency of the reader, in a manner which ostensibly sidesteps so-called 'cultural politics' altogether. The negation or 'opting-out' of cultural politics appears curious in a text such as *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, otherwise famed for its diagnoses of male narcissism and postmodern misogyny. Indeed, as an 'acting-out' of these diagnoses with and for the reader, *Brief Interviews* presents a decisive performance of the angst-ridden dialogues possible within postmodern love and culture. As Mary K Holland suggests, Wallace's texts succeed in 'creating personae that shock and disgust us with admissions of bad behavior, then add offense by demanding our identification and understanding' (2014: 107). In this sense, *Brief Interviews* provides 'an unflinching critique of male narcissism as an impediment to empathy and sincerity', which hinges on the text's performances of its so-called 'Hideous Men' (107). And yet, Wallace's 'intranarrative acknowledgements' in 'Octet' – of artifice, of cultural politics, of the abstractness of the entire literary exchange – add a peculiarly self-referential layer to our negotiations with Wallace's 'fiction writer', particularly as the latter imagines the reader '[putting] her feet up at the end of a long day' and looking to 'unwind' in 'safe and innocuous ways'.

Performing the 'fiction-writer's reader'

Flirting with the dangers of self-reference, and overtly exclaiming the difficulties of the literary exchange as such, 'Octet' is anything but an 'unwinding' sort of text. Rather, the text winds its own sense of the 'reader' into unsafe territory, pitting 'innocent human beings' against the decidedly transferential overtures of the literary dialogue as such. This metafictional strategy, and its transferential and self-referential logics, are revealed more fully in Wallace's marginal essay on filmmaker David Lynch, titled 'David Lynch Keeps his Head' (1997). Wallace is fascinated by Lynch's refusal of the narrative contract, that is, the apparent absence of authorial agenda in the director's strange filmic output; for Wallace, this marks Lynch as a kind of 'Expressionist', whose 'true and only agenda' is 'just to get inside [the audience's] head' (171). For Wallace, this strategy remains a vehicle for a uniquely personal encounter with the mind of David Lynch, described as having 'unusual access to their own unconscious', or less flatteringly as 'expressions of certain anxious, obsessive, fetishistic, Oedipally-arrested, borderlinish parts of the director's psyche' (166). This peculiar form of 'Expressionism', and the broader semiotic tensions canvassed by Mary K Holland and others, reveal the author's fascination with expression and expressionistic performance – in 'Octet', the entirety of 'Pop Quiz 9' is posed as

psychologically-vivid substitute for the 'fiasco' of the text itself. And yet, this substitute narrative is itself imputed to the *reader* of 'Octet', through its second-person stagings of the 'fiction writer' (as 'more like a reader', no less). This performance confirms the expressionistic ambit of Wallace's own fiction – the author's anxious, obsessive, fetishistic, Oedipally-arrested and borderlinish performances of the 'reader' thus give us access to bold re-imaginings of the literary dialogue as such, whilst getting inside the agendas of fiction writer and reader alike.

This shifting transference of literary responsibility between text and reader, and the ambivalent narratives repeated and re-inscribed thereby, confirm the essential strangeness of 'Octet' as a work of metafiction. Pursuant to the idea of 'sameness', the text ironically rejects attempts by the fiction writer to anticipate the reader's response: 'There are right and fruitful ways to try to 'empathize' with the reader, but having to imagine yourself as the reader is not one of them' (129). Nevertheless, this is exactly what 'Octet' does, leveraging the fiction writer's conspiracies of reception to the ideas and intentions animating the text. At the height of this strategy, the text pitches directly at the reader's sense of 'whether she feels it too, this queer nameless ambient urgent interhuman sameness' (133); this question is central to the fiction writer's own existential dilemma, and the attendant sense of risk and 'price' attached to their literary sincerity. In a final hallucination of reception, Wallace writes:

At any rate it's not going to make you look wise or secure or any of the things readers usually want to pretend they believe the literary artist who wrote what they're reading is when they sit down to try to escape the insoluble flux of themselves and enter a world of prearranged meaning (135-136).

Alongside the idea of a 'queer nameless ambient urgent interhuman sameness', this passage contains a prime candidate for Wallace's most compact and claustal writings. The nominal object of the above sentence is, simply, 'any of the things readers usually want to pretend they believe the literary artist who wrote what they're reading is'. Reproducing this 'insoluble flux' of expectations, alongside another image of the reader '[entering] a world of prearranged meaning', 'Octet' again leverages its own performance of the 'reader' as a vehicle for dialogic meaning. In its pursuit of 'ambient and univocal urgency', Wallace's text writes the fiction writer into 'the lethal belletristic corner of trying to anticipate the workings of a reader's mind and heart' (130). This strategy literally 'kills urgency': 'there is no quicker way to tie yourself up in knots and kill any human urgency in the thing you're working on than trying to calculate ahead of time whether a thing will be *'liked'*. It's just lethal' (129).

Wallace's game here is recursive, imagining the reader inside the head of the 'fiction writer', in turn inside the head of their own 'reader's mind and heart'; meanwhile, the narrated cost of being 'like a reader', the same as a reader, collapses the distinctions between each within the literary dialogue as such. In the fiction writer's overwrought imagination, this is again equated with 'death itself',

Or at least equals your giving up something (either a thing or a person or a precious and long-held 'feeling'* or some certain idea of yourself and your own virtue/worth/identity) whose loss will feel, in a true and urgent way, like a kind of death (132-133).

The subterranean fear of castration at stake here – that of the loss of a ‘thing’, ‘person’, ‘precious and long-held ‘feeling’’, resulting in ‘a kind of death’ for the fiction writer – again underscores the relative absence of ‘sameness’ between fiction writer and reader, and the former’s anxieties around ‘whether or not other people deep down experience things in anything like the same way you do’ (136). This recursive strategy, buoyed by the fiction writer’s now-overt castration anxieties, help us to situate ‘Octet’ as a Brooks-ian ‘framed tale’, again predicated on ‘the presence of a listener or narratee, whose reactions to what is told are often what is most important to the narrative’ (1986: 11). Going a step further, we can read ‘Octet’ as an example of a *metaseducative* text, artfully described by Brooks as ‘a story instead of a simple night of love (ended by a beheading), a story to keep desire alive, to prolong and renew the intersubjective and interlocutory relation’ (1984: 216). Hence the vague lethality of the fiction writer’s game – in re-exposing themselves to the reader, the fiction writer risks a very specific kind of loss, a ‘beheading’, which motivates their obsessive repetition and re-inscriptions of the literary act itself.

Finally, the text’s collapsing of roles and responsibilities into literal ‘sameness’ raises specific questions for the text itself – as a narrative of a text named ‘Octet’, does ‘Octet’ purport to be both ‘meta’ and ‘fiction’, that is, to repeat and yet perform its own activities as text? Despite the text’s anxieties around metafictional performance, and the kinds of artificial ‘readers’ generated thereby, the answer would appear to be yes – in multiple instances, the ironic return of Wallace’s narrative voice signals an attempt at avoiding erasure, of re-negotiating the text’s meaning with and from the reader. In a final, vigorous summation of his approach (footnote to the above passage) Wallace’s narrator engages the reader thus:

**Ibid* footnotes 8 and 9 on *feeling/feelings* too – look, nobody said this was going to be painless, or free. It’s a desperate last-ditch salvage operation. It’s not unriskey. Having to use words like *feeling* or *relationship* might simply make things worse. There are no guarantees. All I can do is be honest and lay out some of the more ghastly prices and risks for you and urge you to consider them very carefully before you decide. I honestly don’t see what else I can do (133 [FN11]).

As such, despite painful and overwrought arguments to the contrary, ‘Octet’ reveals its own ‘100% honest’ appeal to the reader’s judgment, predicated on the ‘not unriskey’ acceptance of sincere terms such as ‘*feeling* or *relationship*’. The exhaustive exclamation of the narrator – ‘I honestly don’t see what else I can do’ – signals a kind of alternate ending to the text, whilst ‘Octet’ continues to prepare its fiction writer to decide on the fate of ‘Pop Quiz 9’ itself. Of course, in our version of ‘Octet’, this question has already been decided – the section is included within the text – and yet the fiction writer is called upon to once more ‘construct an additional Pop Quiz’, and thus to re-imagine their reader and their reception. This perpetual re-inscription of the ‘fiction writer’s reader’ thus represents a threshold point in ‘Octet’ as text – as a tale of perpetual and recursive origins, the idea of the ‘fiction writer’s reader’ opens up a near-infinite array of possibilities as to the text and its eventual reception. Nevertheless, the imagined ‘Octet’ remains contained by its transferential fixations on

'urgent sameness', and the uncanny doublings of reader, fiction writer and text affected thereby.

Towards a new hyperbole

In the sections that remain, it is worthwhile to trace the significance of 'Octet' within established Wallace scholarship, in order to re-affirm the strange dynamics of readership and reception at stake in our conversations with the author and his legacy. Adam Kelly's influential essay, 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction' (2012) helps highlight these stakes, through an artful reconstruction of the term 'Sincerity' in relation to Wallace's works. For Kelly, Wallace's work responds to postmodern *anomie* by 'returning to literary narrative a concern with sincerity, not seen since modernism shifted the ground so fundamentally almost a century before' (133). However, the metafictional and post-critical nature of Wallace's texts complicate this approach:

If, according to Wallace, a writer must anticipate how his work will be received by readers in a complex culture, and thus about communicating what sounds true, rather than simply what is true, is he really being fully sincere? Is this a 'congruence of avowal and actual feeling,' or even an endorsement of 'single-entendre principles'? Is there not a schizophrenic and/or manipulative quality at work here that counteracts the good intentions of the artist as a communicator of truth? (135).

These concerns amplify and clarify the stakes of contemporary literary sincerity, whilst highlighting the historical connections between this concept and 'its theatrical connections to a notion of performance' (135). This latter notion is particularly significant in Kelly's own reading of 'Octet', in which Wallace ostensibly breaks with metafictional orthodoxy to perform a 'weak appeal to the reader to look beyond the text's self-conscious pre-empting of its own reception' (144). Of course, we have already seen that this 'self-conscious pre-empting' runs rampant in 'Octet', implicating the textual 'reader' in a range of dialogues and encounters, whilst disclosing and exposing the transferential dimensions of these exchanges.

But in attempting to 'look beyond' this effect, Kelly's work raises key questions about the 'good intentions of the artist as a communicator of truth', appearing to leverage the author's own rhetoric on fiction as 'an act of communication between one human being and another' (Wallace 1997: 144). In pursuit of this sincere hermeneutics, Kelly attacks Paul Ricoeur's so-called 'hermeneutics of suspicion', which he describes as a paradigm 'that emphasizes what it sees as the blindnesses caused by ideological investment, historical ignorance, and psychological repression' (138). In response, it is peculiar to see Kelly's own investments on display in his readings of Jacques Derrida and Wallace, particularly here:

For both Derrida and Wallace, a second problem with the hermeneutics of suspicion, in its exposure-centered theme emphasis on authenticity rather than sincerity, is that it falls damagingly short of accounting for the persistence of the truly valuable in human life – traits such as love, trust, faith and responsibility

[...] both writers find they can approach these traits only through the frame of paradox (139).

These recurrent and literal statements of 'love, trust, faith and responsibility' resonate throughout the field of 'Wallace Studies'. Elsewhere, Kelly himself has noted 'the implicit agreement among so many critics with Wallace's professed premise that fiction should act as both 'diagnosis and cure,' and – building once more on the idea of conversation – 'that [fiction] should be viewed not primarily in terms of aesthetic representation, but of ethical intervention' (2010). For Kelly, the ultimate 'guarantee of the writer's sincere intentions' is impossible, predicated as it is upon the futurity of the reader's response – 'sincerity is rather the kind of secret that must always break with representation' (143). As a surface-oriented 'secrecy hiding no knowledge that can be exposed' (143), Kelly's idea of sincerity is a testament to the author's own ideologically-invested approach to the literary conversation. And yet, this sincerity is also a mode of power, given its 'structural similarity to Fascism' (143) and what the author calls 'an almost classic sort of Blind Faith in the older guys' (Wallace in Kelly, 144).

Kelly's sincere hermeneutics, exploring 'the passive decision to relinquish the self to the judgment of the other' in Wallace's works (145), has allowed contemporary Wallace Studies into a particularly intimate and literal 'conversation' with those works. But the overtly transferential nature of this conversation, and the weight of its avowedly 'impossible' rhetorics, continue to obscure the kinds of possibilities at stake in Wallace's actual texts. We have seen that 'Octet' repeats and re-inscribes its own textual stakes, whilst populating itself with avowed 'readers' and 'fiction writers' alike. Through this properly metafictional performance, Wallace's texts both *invite and foreclose upon* the response of the actual reader. Noting my own concerns with dialogue and communication, I would stake the following point of difference with Kelly's work: whereas Kelly would see the Wallace text expose the impossibility of the 'reader', and thus advocate for an ongoing conversation 'beyond' the text, my work examines the very definite possibilities contained *within* Wallace's texts, achieved through their properly metafictional performance of the literary dialogue *as such*. As we have seen, the repetition and re-inscription of the 'reader' in texts such as 'Octet' creates a vital motive for the move beyond the text, into the vaunted realms of 'stuff that doesn't have a price' (2010, 139). But there *is* a price, articulated throughout 'Octet' – a continued reprisal and re-inscription of the text's own overtures towards 'urgent sameness', and the self-referential anxieties unleashed thereby. To this question, Kelly's approach is clear:

On this issue of the reader-writer relationship, so clearly central to Wallace's fiction – and fully aware that I am repeating the gesture I have most associated with Wallace Studies to date – I think it is worth giving Wallace himself the final words (2010b: Para 18).

Yet there can be no final say, because this is not the entire story. We are thus left with the figure of 'the dramatist himself', 'coming onstage from the wings' (FN2, p125); yet we have also discovered the 'fiction writer's reader', an equivalent yet ambivalent proxy for our negotiations with Wallace today.

This ambivalent narrative of the 'fiction writer's reader' remains a site of deep tensions and unanswered questions, a kind of hinge for the author's conversations with the contemporary reading audience. The anxieties unleashed by the literary transference – faithfully repeated, re-inscribed and quite often literalized within 'Octet' – are also at stake in the contemporary conversations of 'Wallace Studies', and the wealth of appreciations, commentary and re-imaginings of the author and his works today. We have seen that Wallace's works evoke an explicitly transference model of reading, in which the respective agendas of text and reader are brought into play for the sake of collaborative literary meaning – 'Octet's recursive and re-iterative sense of the 'reader' is evidence enough of this. Meanwhile, these overtures remain caught within the text's self-conscious and pre-emptory sense of its own performance, haunted by the ghost of 'the dramatist himself', reminding the so-called 'reader/audience' that this literary game is in fact a game, in the familiar vein of 'now-tired S.O.P. meta stuff'. The positioning of the reader as 'fiction writer', enabling imaginative access to the inner workings of 'Octet', is an overtly metafictional device, placing the self-referential operations of the text center-stage. And yet, this fiction writer's obsession with their own 'reader', and the obsessive repetitions and re-inscriptions of that 'reader' within the text, impose new layers of complexity to this metafictional and self-referential situation. As an exemplar of Wallace's broader metafictional output, 'Octet' thus helps us to account for the voluminous and hyperbolic nature of the author's literary project as a whole. For these reasons, Wallace's texts effect a complex 'performance' of their own reader, through sophisticated re-imaginings of the literary dialogue *qua* dialogue.

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