

A Review Essay

The Fine Print: Uncovering the True Story of David Foster Wallace and the “Reality Boundary”

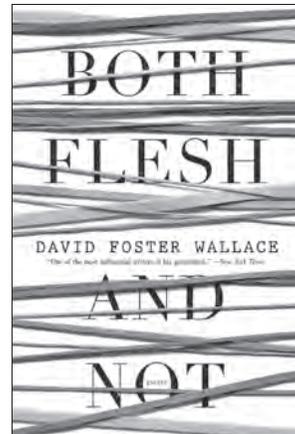
Both Flesh and Not: Essays

by David Foster Wallace. New York: Little, Brown, 2012. Hardcover, 327 pp., \$26.99.

Reviewed by Josh Roiland, University of Notre Dame, United States

Before he sat down with the best tennis player on the planet for a noontime interview in the middle of the 2006 Wimbledon fortnight, David Foster Wallace prepared a script. Atop a notebook page he wrote, “R. Federer Interview Qs.” and below he jotted in very fine print thirteen questions. After three innocuous ice breakers, Wallace turned his attention to perhaps the most prominent theme in all his writing: consciousness. Acknowledging the abnormal interview approach, Wallace prefaced these next nine inquires with a printed subhead: “Non-Journalist Questions.” Each interrogation is a paragraph long, filled with digressions, asides, and qualifications; several contain superscripted addendums. In short, they read like they’re written by David Foster Wallace. He asks Roger Federer if he’s aware of his own greatness, aware of the unceasing media microscope he operates under, aware of his uncommon elevation of athletics to the level of aesthetics, aware of how great his great shots really are. Wallace even wrote, “How aware are you of the ball-boys?” before crossing the question out.¹

Wallace choreographed social cues and professional reminders throughout the interview. The end of the Federer conversation comes with the caveat “Qs the Editors want me to ask [w/Apologies].” And a later discussion with Federer’s then-coach, Tony Roche, begins, “Honor to meet you,” with a reminder that Roche suffered from chronic tennis elbow and used Yonex rackets. Never comfortable in his role as a reporter, Wallace printed a preface to the Roche questions: “I’m not a journalist—I’m more like a novelist with a tennis background.” Wallace had a history of anti-credentialing himself both in person and in print, and while this reportorial and rhetorical maneuver may have disarmed sources, it also created a calculus for Wallace to write under.² He saw clear lines between journalists and novelists who write nonfiction, and he wrestled throughout his career with whether a different set of rules applied to the latter category.³



Initially, sources reported that Federer was flummoxed by the unconventional encounter, feeling that the “questions were inane, the dude weird, and the whole exercise a complete waste of his time.”⁴ But several years later when he was asked about the resultant story—“Roger Federer as Religious Experience,” which ran in *Play* magazine, a short-lived sports supplement to *New York Times Magazine*—Federer recalled the interaction more fondly, saying, “I had a funny feeling walking out of the interview. I wasn’t sure what was going to come out of it because I didn’t know exactly what direction he was going to go. The piece was obviously fantastic.”⁵

Recently during an Ask Me Anything session on the social media platform Reddit, he reiterated his admiration for the story: “The thing that struck me is that I only spent 20min with him in the ATP office at Wimbledon, and he was able to produce such a comprehensive piece.”⁶ Federer unknowingly hits on a significant aspect of Wallace’s literary journalism: his ability to imbue a story with larger significance beyond the ostensible subject. Several tangential topics emerge in the *Play* cover story beyond the standard profile of the Swiss phenom. Wallace addresses the physiology of the human body, the transcendence of athleticism to the sublime, the difference between live spectatorship and televised tennis, the engineering and effectiveness of modern tennis rackets, and the reconciliation of divine grace and mortality. When the story was published on August 20, 2006, “the acclaim that greeted the piece was nearly instantaneous. It was among the most discussed stories of the year in the journalism industry.”⁷

Last November, “Roger Federer as Religious Experience” was republished in *Both Flesh and Not*, a posthumous collection of Wallace nonfiction. The book’s fifteen pieces span nearly twenty years of his writing life, with the earliest essay, “Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young” published in 1988 (*Review of Contemporary Fiction*) and the latest ones written just a year before his suicide: “Deciderization 2007—A Special Report” (introduction to *Best American Essays 2007*) and “Just Asking” (*Atlantic*). Of the fifteen works of creative nonfiction, only two can rightfully be called literary journalism: the retitled “Federer: Both Flesh and Not” and “Democracy and Commerce at the US Open,” the longest piece in the book. Although it contains only two works of literary journalism—stories that have been reported and sourced and then told using a variety of literary devices—this book is useful for the ontological questions it raises about the nature of genre formation, literary categories, and “the reality boundary.”⁸ Moreover, the collection offers clues on Wallace’s thoughts about the genre and these attendant issues—a topic that has garnered modest attention since his death, with charges of embellishment and exaggeration made by his close friend Jonathan Franzen and repeated by his biographer D.T. Max.

Although there was a correction appended to the *Play* piece, it is hard to find any evidence of embellishment.⁹ Going through Wallace’s voluminous papers at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, it is unmistakable that he was meticulous to the point of compulsiveness about every aspect of this story, from pre-interview preparations to final layout. His research comprised printouts, including eBay listings, on the particulars of Ivan Lendl’s 1980s-era GTX Pro-T racket, including its dimensions, strung weight, balance, swing weight, and stiffness.¹⁰ Wallace also

collected several Federer features from publications across the globe, including “Spin Doctors,” by Tom Perotta, an account of how modern rackets have changed the game of tennis, which ran in the July/August 2006 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*. Wallace underlined and annotated much of Perotta’s piece, and used information from the article to augment his own aside on how the true revolution in racket engineering was not merely increased pace on of? the ball, but rather the degree and depth of topspin it engendered, especially during the service return. Other bits of research included a printout of the Wikipedia entry for “proprioception,” which he used for a riff on an athlete’s “kinesthetic sense,” and a Q&A transcript between Federer and a Wimbledon moderator after Federer’s straight set victory over Mario Ancic in the quarterfinals (the day before Wallace conducted his rare mid-tournament one-on-one with Federer).¹¹

Wallace begins the story with a brief anecdote about experiencing “Federer Moments” before reversing course and proclaiming there’s nothing newsworthy about his subject: “Journalistically speaking, there is no hot news to offer you about Roger Federer.”¹² Wallace proves this point by listing the blandest of biographical details—age, family, personality, achievements: the bedrock of every banal sports feature—and concluding the paragraph dismissively: “[I]t’s all just a Google search away. Knock yourself out.”¹³ Similar to his anti-credentialing, Wallace often approximated this type of journalistic indifference, and this particular example echoes a line from his story “Consider the Lobster” (*Gourmet*, 2004). Early in that piece Wallace acknowledges, “For practical purposes, everyone knows what a lobster is. As usual, though, there’s much more to know than most of us care about—it’s all a matter of what your interests are.”¹⁴ Wallace used that story, set amid the 2004 Maine Lobster Festival, to explore the murky relationship between consciousness and what it means to be a gourmet. Similarly, he uses the Federer piece, with Wimbledon as his backdrop, as a vehicle to raise questions about grace and the grotesque, and the reconciliation of the two in both mind and body.

He juxtaposes Roger Federer, “a creature whose body is both flesh and, somehow, light” with William Caines, a seven-year-old from Kent, stricken with liver cancer at age two and serving as the honorary coin-tosser for the 2006 Wimbledon final.¹⁵ For Wallace, the corporeal realities of these two bodies in such close proximity have “a tip-of-the-tongue-type quality that remains elusive for at least the first two sets.”¹⁶ Wallace structures the story around that delayed epiphany by mapping the Federer/Caines dialectic onto the championship match between Federer and Rafael Nadal, where, in the course of dissecting both men’s games (“Federer’s forehand is a great liquid whip”¹⁷), he also discusses media attention, racket technology, the horizontal plane of live spectatorship compared to the vertical angle seen on TV (“and the truth is that TV tennis is to live tennis pretty much as video porn is to the felt reality of human love”¹⁸)—the shape of the story follows closely the contours of the questions he scripted back at the All England Lawn and Tennis Club. The consociation of Federer’s elegance and Caine’s illness does not predominate, but it is, ultimately, what animates the story and gives it lasting significance.

Near the end of the narrative, in the match's third set, Wallace experiences what a cab driver had earlier promised: "a bloody near-religious experience."¹⁹ But it does not result from Federer's beauty alone; rather, when Wallace contrasts that sublimity with Caines's fragility, he experiences "literally, for an instant ecstatically" a sensation that is "hard to describe" and "like a thought that's also a feeling."²⁰ The physicality of these two bodies, though not in equipoise, is nonetheless connected, causing a sort of transcendence in Wallace, as he concludes: "But the truth is that whatever deity, entity, energy, or random genetic flux produces sick children also produced Roger Federer, and just look at him down there. Look at that."²¹ This double imperative underscores a genuine sense of wonderment, and yet, as he did in "Consider the Lobster," Wallace buries this conclusion in the second paragraph of a late footnote.²² What initially seems like an unorthodox finish to the feature actually sets up a larger conclusion in the main text. Wallace counters conventional wisdom about modern tennis by saying that the "speed and strength of today's pro game are merely its skeleton, not its flesh."²³ The game's grace—for Wallace, its flesh—has been "re-embodied" by Federer, and it is with this understanding of Federer's seeming otherworldliness—"on the sacred grass of Wimbledon,"²⁴ no less—that Wallace ends the main text, telling readers, "Genius is not replicable. Inspiration, though, is contagious, and multiform—and even just to see, close up, power and aggression made vulnerable to beauty is to feel inspired and (in a fleeting, mortal way) reconciled."²⁵ What is restored in this moment at the end of the story is nothing short of faith. The reconciliation of sacred and profane causes Wallace to come to terms with his own powerlessness and existential insignificance.²⁶ He feels redeemed, and this is the religious experience promised by the cab driver and offered as the initial title of the piece.

The collection's other work of literary journalism is also tennis-themed (Wallace once said that tennis "was the one sport I know enough about to be truly beautiful to me"²⁷). "Democracy and Commerce at the US Open" was originally published under the same name in *Tennis* magazine in 1995. Wallace explores the relationship between the two titular topics over the Labor Day weekend in Queens, New York City. The story is significant for being one of Wallace's earliest pieces of his journalism to employ footnotes. The article, however, is more directionless than the other "floating eyeball" journalism of this era (for example, "Getting Away from Already Being Pretty Much Away from It All" and "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again"), and his thesis is more overt. He juxtaposes the democratic spirit of the Open with the aristocratic reality of the attendees, noting, "In sum, the socioeconomic aura here for the day's headline match is one of management rather than labor."²⁸ The labor, as it turns out, is working on the day set aside for their *fête*, and Wallace spends a good amount of time surveying the sad irony of the vendors and their patrons. The event's eponymous egalitarianism is supplanted by crass commercialism; moreover, it is lacking the sense of *noblesse oblige* tradition that at least pervaded Wimbledon. The Open is closed to many, and the spirit of democracy, so prominent in its advertising, only exists to sell products. Wallace's conclusions on capitalism are rather obvious, and the attendant tennis analysis is not nearly as strong as in the Federer piece or his 1995 profile of Michael Joyce.

More interesting than its cultural commentary is what *Both Flesh and Not* reveals about Wallace's complex relationship with genre classification and the fact/fiction divide. It contains his 2001 review of the anthology *The Best of the Prose Poem: An International Journal* for the literary journal *Rain Taxi*. The publication limited him to 1,000 words, which Wallace elided by transgressing the traditional review format. He composed the entire piece as a series of bullet points, each beginning with a dependent clause followed by a colon (which functions as a verb)²⁹ and then a predicate. His rhetorical reasoning was both innovative and ironic: "Tactical reason for review form: The words preceding each item's colon technically constitute neither subjective complement nor appositive nor really any recognized grammatical unit at all; hence none of these antecolonial words should count against *R. T.*'s rigid 1000-word limit."³⁰ He called this "new, transgeneric critical form: the Indexical Book Review."³¹ Wallace's grammatical formula may have emancipated him for the strictures of a word limit, but there is more to this maneuver than his usual solipsism and smartassery. He was mimicking the genre-bending proclivities of the prose poems he was reviewing and calling attention to the benefits of genre subversiveness. His review highlights the motivations and guidelines not just for the prose poem but for all alternative literary forms, including the "[o]ther, better-known and/or currently fashionable transgeneric literary forms: the Nonfiction Novel, the Prose Poem, the Lyric Essay, etc."³² Literary journalism can surely be mapped onto that list, which then allows critics to understand how conflicted Wallace was about genre classifications and how contradictory his thoughts and actions were at times.³³ It is important to understand these angles at which Wallace approached his journalism because he has been attacked to some degree since his death about his less-than-fervent fidelity to facts.

During a public conversation at the 2011 New Yorker Festival, Wallace's close friend and literary competitor, Jonathan Franzen, told David Remnick that he and Wallace disagreed about whether embellishment was an acceptable journalistic trait. Unsolicited, Franzen tells Remnick, "David and I disagreed on that." Surprised, Remnick then randomly picks Wallace's 1996 story "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again" and asks Franzen, "He said it was okay to make up dialogue on a cruise ship?" To which Franzen replies, "For instance, yeah." Franzen, who regularly contributes to Remnick's magazine, then posits that one reason Wallace never published any nonfiction in the *New Yorker* was because of its historically rigorous fact-checking process. Remnick admitted Wallace tried, but he never says why the proposals were turned down.³⁴

D.T. Max, himself a *New Yorker* staff writer, picked up this fabulist thread in his 2012 biography of Wallace, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*. Max uncovers problems of various degrees in selected pieces of Wallace's journalism, especially the early work. For example, he points out that Wallace misrepresents his hometown in the 1990 *Harper's* essay "Tennis, Trigonometry, Tornadoes."³⁵ In the story, Wallace says he grew up in the small town of Philo, IL, when in fact he was raised ten miles northwest of there in Urbana-Champaign.³⁶ Max also provides evidence of Wallace's most egregious error, which occurred in his 1994 *Harper's* story "Ticket to the Fair."³⁷ In that story Wallace returns home to his native Illinois, after a decade on the East Coast, to

investigate its state fair. One day he brings the “shrewd counsel of a colorful local” whom he dubs “Native Companion.”³⁸ Wallace describes his guide as someone who used to detassel “summer corn with me in high school” and a “native Midwestern, from my hometown. My prom date a dozen years ago.”³⁹ The problem, as Max points out, is that “Native C.” never attended Urbana-Champaign High nor was she really much of a companion. Her name was Kymberly Harris, a woman Wallace had recently begun dating but whom “he barely knew.” And her salty-tongued country twang—the perfect foil for Wallace’s neurotic East Coast persona—wasn’t even the voice of Kymberly Harris, but rather that of poet, memoirist, and former Wallace love interest Mary Karr. Max says Wallace’s editor at *Harper’s*, Colin Harrison, “was aware that Wallace sometimes embellished” and admitted he “drank the Kool Aid” in service to Wallace’s comic vision.⁴⁰

Another problematic situation occurred in 1998, when *Premiere* assigned Wallace to cover the Adult Video News Awards. The magazine enlisted Evan Wright of *Hustler* to coreport the piece with Wallace. Max notes how Wallace—with Wright’s permission—excerpted material from an earlier article Wright authored and incorporated it, with embellishments, into his *Premiere* piece. However, when “Neither Adult nor Entertainment” was published in the September 1998 issue, the article did carry a double byline (though both were pseudonyms).⁴¹ The double byline is not enough to excuse the embellishment, but it does complicate the overall understanding of the situation. Much like Tom Junod satirically fabricating parts of “Michael Stipe Has Great Hair” (*Esquire*, 2001) as an intentional send-up of the celebrity profile genre, the Wallace/Wright (né Willem R. deGroot and Matt Rundlet) report offers itself as a surreal study of a Las Vegas porn expo (not unlike another hallowed piece of hallucinatory literary journalism set in Sin City).⁴²

Although Max does provide damnable evidence of wrongdoing in these two stories, he carelessly projects their offenses onto several other articles, thus raising suspicion about Wallace’s overall relationship to the truth in his nonfiction. The wariness is warranted, but suspicion alone is insufficient. Max fails to back up much of his speculation with concrete evidence of wrongdoing. Instead, he breezes through Wallace’s nonfiction and flags everything that *sounds* fishy. Without offering any physical proof, he dismisses details that “improved on reality” and says that one scene “was likely Wallace’s invention” and another story “was likely made up” while another “one suspects. . . was invented.”⁴³ Max especially overreaches when he makes much ado about Wallace eating two lobsters while reporting from the Maine Lobster Festival. He intimates that this is, once again, evidence of Wallace’s duplicity. But as I’ve pointed out elsewhere, Wallace never said he was averse to the delicacy, and the story “Consider the Lobster” is about the complexity of consciousness, not animal rights. The fact that Wallace consumed crustaceans while reporting further solidifies his point near the story’s end, in the second paragraph of footnote 20: “[I]t all seems to come down to individual conscience, going with (no pun) your gut.”⁴⁴

Max’s objective in writing a biography is to provide a story of Wallace’s life, and that telling often involves softening edges and smoothing the corners of complication. Unlike in an academic appraisal, he does not dwell on Wallace’s ambivalence

about genre guidelines. But what is maddening about the biography is that despite dismissing large chunks of Wallace's journalism as "fanciful" and not his "real work," Max nonetheless mines these stories for primary source material that he then uses in his own biographical retelling. If certain facts are buffered by a "layer of myth," as Max asserts, then doesn't he undermine his own credibility by relying on those same stories for diaristic details?⁴⁵

Another problem with Max's treatment of Wallace's nonfiction isn't just that he makes broad generalizations regarding Wallace's fidelity to facts; it's that Max, himself, gets some of his facts wrong. For several semesters in the late 1990s, Wallace team-taught a class called "Creative Nonfiction" with Doug Hesse while a member of the English department faculty at Illinois State University. The course was a workshop devoted to the practice of writing what the syllabus defined as "a somewhat problematic term for a broad category of prose works such as personal essays and memoirs, profiles, nature and travel writings of a certain quality, essays of ideas, new journalism and so on." It then goes on to define the two components of the course: *creative* and *nonfiction*. An explanation of "nonfiction" emphasizes: "[I]f an event is claimed as having happened, it must happen." But its adjective's definition hedges: "And yet, the 'creative' half of the title suggests an impulse other than Enlightenment perspicuity motivates the writer and shapes the writing."⁴⁶ Max, ever dubious of Wallace's commitment to accuracy, surmises in a chapter seven endnote: "But in the classroom Wallace was known to be the less dogmatic of the two teachers when it came to literal accuracy, and one senses his hand in a later sentence on the syllabus."⁴⁷ Here is an instance where Max's speculation is identifiably false. He interviewed Hesse extensively for the biography, but Hesse, who is now the director of writing at the University of Denver, told me, "[Max] got that part wrong. [He] never asked who did what. Dave did write the 'rules' for workshopping, though, and we both chose readings." But otherwise, Hesse said, he was responsible for the syllabus.⁴⁸ Hesse also said that Wallace was "pretty invested in nonfiction" during the semesters they taught together and that, at the time, Wallace was "tired of teaching fiction." Although this error is literally a note appended to the back of the book, the Hesse inaccuracy illustrates the danger of speculation and calls into question the legitimacy of Max's other suspicions.

Max's mistake does not excuse Wallace for exaggerating certain details in selected works of literary journalism, but Max does a disservice to his, and Wallace's, readers by painting the fabulist charges with such a broad brush. He gives inadequate attention to Wallace's own remarks on the subject, both embedded in his work and offered during interviews. For instance, in "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again," Wallace confesses how betrayed he felt upon learning that his favorite memoirist, Frank Conroy, deceived readers by essentially writing an advertisement for the cruise ship company.⁴⁹ Nor does Max consider the reply letters that Wallace wrote to students in Anne Fadiman's advanced nonfiction writing classes at Yale University, where he told one student—Daniel Fromson, who is now, in a brilliant bit of irony, a copyeditor and web producer at that bastion for all that is true and accurate, the *New Yorker*—"the root challenge here is to form and honor a fairly rigorous contract with the reader. . . [s]o that the reader gets the overall impression that here's a narra-

tor who's primarily engaged in trying to Tell the Truth."⁵⁰ Neither does Max consider Wallace's answer to a WBUR listener who called into an interview between himself and Michael Goldfarb to ask about his maturation as a nonfiction writer, to which Wallace replied, "I know I don't do as much nonfiction as I used to as a writer, and I think part of it is that I don't have the heart or stomach to say even truthful things that might hurt somebody's feelings."⁵¹ These examples illustrate a writer committed to capturing the truth ("You know, in a weird way, there's really only one basic problem in all writing—how to get some empathy with the reader"⁵²) but who was at times unsure—despite a compulsion to constantly consider these categories—about what was allowed in telling it. Admittedly, during an 1998 interview with Tom Scocca for the *Boston Phoenix*, Wallace answered the question: "How do you handle being responsible for facts—after writing fiction, coming to a genre where the things you say have to be on some level verifiably true?" by saying:

The thing is, really, between you and me and the *Boston Phoenix's* understanding readers, you hire a fiction writer to do nonfiction, there's going to be the occasional bit of embellishment. Not to mention the fact that when people tell you stuff, very often it comes out real stilted, if you just write down exactly what they said. You sort of have to rewrite it so it sounds more out loud, which I think means putting in some likes or taking out punctuation that the person might originally have said. And I don't really make any apologies for that.⁵³

But, he also told a French interviewer in 2005, "For me, there is only one difference between fiction and what you call 'journalism.' But it's a big difference. In nonfiction, everything has to be true, and it also has to be documented, because magazines have fact checkers and lawyers who are very thorough."⁵⁴ The takeaway seems to be that Wallace believed, at times, in the porousness of certain borders when it came to genre formation, which is incongruent with contemporary literary journalism's dogmatic allegiance to facticity. This paradox plays out in two other essays from *Both Flesh and Not*: "The Best of the Prose Poem" and "Deciderization 2007—A Special Report."

In "The Best of the Prose Poem," Wallace states that the reason alternate literary forms exist is to "comment on, complicate, subvert, defamiliarize, transgress against, or otherwise fuck with received ideas of genre, category, and (especially) formal conventions/constraints."⁵⁵ And it is not a stretch to argue that Wallace, with his continual assertions that he was not a journalist and that there was, in fact, a special category for fiction writers who crossed over into the realm of reportage, felt buoyed by his ability to recognize—and theoretically justify⁵⁶—the possibilities inherent in his journalistic transgressions, if they were in the name of creating reader empathy. But Wallace also understood that such subversiveness was rooted in a mainstream understanding of categories with well-defined boundaries: "[T]hese putatively 'transgressive' forms depend heavily on received ideas of genre, category, and formal conventions, since without such an established context there's nothing much to transgress against. Transgeneric forms are therefore most viable—most interesting, least fatuous—during eras when literary genres themselves are relatively stable and their conventions well established and codified and no one seems much disposed to fuck

with them.”⁵⁷ With the right kind of ears it is not hard to hear this statement as an echo of John Hartsock’s claim that each distinct period of literary journalism history arose because of an epistemological crisis within the profession with regard to the ability to cover a rapidly changing phenomenal world.⁵⁸

In one of the book’s final essays—and one of the last pieces of nonfiction that Wallace wrote—he trades in his job as a “professional writer” for a new designation, “professional reader,” while serving as guest editor for *Best American Essays 2007*. The article’s title “Deciderization 2007—A Special Report” is a pun on then-President George W. Bush’s penchant for verbal mishaps. Despite being commander-in-chief of the anthology’s selections, Wallace admits he “isn’t sure what an essay even is” and says he would enjoy the collection’s first story (“Werner,” by Jo Ann Beard) regardless of categorization: “It’s a narrative essay, I think the subgenre’s called, although the truth is that I don’t believe I would have loved the piece any less or differently if it had been classed as a short story, which is to say not an essay at all but fiction.”⁵⁹ These examples would seem to illustrate Wallace’s utter ambivalence regarding genre variance (he later says he’s “not really even all that confident or concerned about the differences between nonfiction and fiction, with ‘differences’ here meaning formal or definitive”⁶⁰), yet a few pages later he says, “There are, as it happens, intergenre differences that I know and care about as a writer, though these differences are hard to talk about in a way that people who don’t write both fiction and nonfiction will understand.”⁶¹ But then despite indicating an interest in these differences he sweeps aside such classifications several pages later: “Personally, I find taxonomic arguments like this dull and irrelevant.”⁶² Tedious as it may be to parse these disparate and contradictory threads, they illustrate that Wallace’s thinking about genre was complex, multifaceted, and that it evolved during his writing life.

In an interview with the *Atlantic*, Max offers a more subtle take on Wallace’s transgressions than he provides in his biography: “But I don’t think Wallace’s very last pieces have very much embellishment. . . .As he got older, I think he begins to play it a lot more straight-forward.”⁶³ He then shared an excerpt from a letter Wallace wrote in 2007 to another former Illinois Street colleague, Becky Bradway. The letter is revealing for Wallace’s sober reevaluation of the enhancement of facts. Max included part of it in *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*: “We all knew, and know, that any embellishment is dangerous, and that a writer’s justifying embellishments via claiming that it actually enhances overall ‘truth’ is *exceedingly* dangerous, since the claim is structurally identical to all Ends Justify Means rationalizations.”⁶⁴ Unfortunately, Max tucks this revelation into the book’s 169th and very last endnote on page 325. A more prominent placement would have offered a more complete picture of Wallace and his relationship with nonfiction.

The best critique of Max and his biography may come from Wallace himself. A final essay from *Both Flesh and Not* helps readers understand what Wallace may have thought of *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story* and provides contextualization for future Wallace criticism. “Borges on the Couch” is a scathing review of Edwin Williamson’s literary biography *Borges: A Life*, wherein Wallace accuses the author of employing the intentional fallacy throughout the work: “It is in these claims about personal stuff

encoded in the writer's art that the book's real defect lies."⁶⁵ Wallace goes on to say that the text "is at its very worst when Williamson is discussing specific pieces in light of Borges's personal life."⁶⁶ Furthermore, Wallace argued that most biographical projects "are shallow, forced, and distorted—as indeed they must be if the biographer's project is to be justified."⁶⁷ For as much as Max marginalized Wallace's nonfiction, he just as readily read his fiction as nearly mimetic of Wallace's life. The review "Borges on the Couch" reveals just how much Wallace would have disliked that treatment.

After "Borges on the Couch" reappeared for public debate upon the publication of *Both Flesh and Not*, Max composed a blog post on the *New Yorker* website that sought to defend his biography and neutralize critics from employing this kind of attack. He correctly noted that in addition to his hypercritical review, Wallace also published a glowing tribute to Joseph Frank's biography of Dostoyevsky in *Consider the Lobster*. Max admitted that "biography explains a lot but it does not explain everything, indeed it may not explain the most important things" before concluding "So, in the end, what you think of a biography, to paraphrase D.F.W., may depend less on what's in the biographer's heart than what's in yours."⁶⁸ If there are any problems to be found in *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, no matter how small, Max is essentially saying: "It's not me, it's you." Nonetheless, the recursive battles fought out in Wallace's name are evidence that his literary legacy continues to grow each year after his death.

Writing about David Foster Wallace reanimates his spirit and momentarily suspends the reality that there will be no more words from him. Perhaps such a selfish sentiment helps explain why there have been so many words written—both formally in books and magazines and informally on countless blogs—since his death in 2008. In the five years since his suicide, more than ten books have been published that either posthumously carry his name as author or place him at the center of critical study.⁶⁹ Nearly all of the critical works focus exclusively on Wallace's fiction. The first collection to come out, *Consider David Foster Wallace* (Sideshow Media Group, 2010), grew out of a July 2009 conference at the University of Liverpool. Although the pieces tread heavily in literary theory and have an oralish, conference-paper quality to them, the collection's editor, David Hering, is to be commended for spearheading the project and starting the sustained conversation on Wallace's literary legacy. The second collection, *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* (University of Iowa Press, 2012), offers a blend of academic appraisals (including my own) and personal tributes from writers and friends like Don DeLillo, George Saunders, and Jonathan Franzen. The scholarship/remembrance bifurcation takes some getting used to, but the memorials are achingly raw and personal, and the articles' arguments, perhaps owing to more distance between Wallace's death and the book's publication, feel more developed. The most recent collection, *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) continues that maturation process with a thoughtful, dense collection that spans the entire oeuvre of Wallace's fiction. In fact, besides my own article, "Getting Away from It All: The Literary Journalism of David Foster Wallace and Nietzsche's Concept of Oblivion," the only other collected essay dedicated to Wallace's nonfiction is Christoph Ribbat's "Seething Static: Notes on Wallace and Journalism" in *Consider David Foster Wallace*. Ribbat seeks to situate Wallace in an

American journalistic tradition; however, his history is incomplete, only extending back to the New Journalism era of the 1960s and Tom Wolfe's famous formulations. Moreover, his article examines a too-small sample of Wallace's work (mostly stories collected in *Consider the Lobster*) and insufficiently concludes that his reportage is of a type Robert Boynton (problematically) dubbed "the new, new journalism."

The most acute assessment of Wallace's journalism comes, perhaps unsurprisingly, from a journalist. When Wallace's unfinished novel *The Pale King* was published in 2011, John Jeremiah Sullivan reviewed it for *GQ* magazine. Sullivan's appraisal begins with a consideration of Wallace's nonfiction, including a humorous backstory about how *Play* magazine had actually asked him to do the Federer story—after Wallace had initially turned them down. At one point seemingly stunned, Sullivan says, "Here's a thing that is hard to imagine: being so inventive a writer that when you die, the language is impoverished. That's what Wallace's suicide did, two and a half years ago. It wasn't just a sad thing, it was a blow."⁷⁰ And perhaps that's the difficult, lasting takeaway of *Both Flesh and Not*: the knowledge that that's it. The reader must reconcile the vitality of the words on the page with the mortality of their author.

NOTES

1. David Foster Wallace, "R. Federer Interview Qs," container 27.10, David Foster Wallace Archive, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.

2. I've written before about Wallace's penchant for distancing himself from being called a *journalist*. See pages 38–39 of "Getting Away from It All: The Literary Journalism of David Foster Wallace and Nietzsche's Concept of Oblivion," in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, eds. Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), 25–52.

3. In a 2005 interview, Wallace said: "Nobody here is quite sure how to classify the writing that results when novelists and poets write nonfiction for magazines." Didier Jacobs, "Interview with David Foster Wallace," in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2012), 153–154.

4. David Higdon, "Strokes of Genius," *ESPN The Magazine*, September 19, 2008, <http://sports.espn.go.com/espnmag/story?id=3596140>.

5. Matt Bucher, "D.F. Wallace Both Flesh and Not," *Simple Ranger* (blog), November 16, 2012, <http://www.simpleranger.net/d-f-wallace-both-flesh-and-not/>.

6. Roger Federer, "I'm Roger Federer, a Professional Tennis Player from Switzerland. AMA!," Reddit, May 24, 2013, http://www.reddit.com/r/IAMa/comments/1ezaf/im_roger_federer_a_professional_tennis_player/.

7. Michael MacCambridge, "Director's Cut: Federer as Religious Experience," *Grantland.com*, September 9, 2011.

8. In the inaugural issue of *Literary Journalism Studies*, Norman Sims identified "the reality boundary" as one of four key issues facing future scholars in this field. Norman Sims, "The Problem and Promise of Literary Journalism Studies," *Literary Journalism Studies* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 7–15.

9. The correction, which appeared on August 27, 2006, concerned Wallace's intricate description of a point played out between Federer and Andre Agassi. Copping an almost *New*

Yorkerish tone, the correction said, in part, that the writer had “incorrectly described Agassi’s position on the final shot of the point. There was an exchange of groundstrokes in the middle of the point that was not described. And Agassi remained at the baseline on Federer’s winning shot; he did not go to the net.”

10. It was at this time when Kevlar and graphite composites started to supplant wood as the racket’s raw material. Wallace pegs Lendl as the forerunner in the game’s transition to power baseline play.

11. Proprioception: “The unconscious perception of movement and spatial orientation arising from stimuli within the body itself.”

12. Federer Moments: “These are times, watching the young Swiss at play, when the jaw drops and eyes protrude and sounds are made that bring spouses in from other rooms to see if you’re OK.” David Foster Wallace, “Federer Both Flesh and Not,” in *Both Flesh and Not: Essays* (New York: Little, Brown, 2012), 5, 7.

13. *Ibid.*, 7.

14. David Foster Wallace, “Consider the Lobster,” in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (New York: Little, Brown, 2005), 236–237.

15. Wallace, “Federer Both Flesh and Not,” 20.

16. *Ibid.*, 13.

17. *Ibid.*, 14.

18. *Ibid.*, 7.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*, 8.

21. *Ibid.*, 32.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*, 7.

25. *Ibid.*, 33.

26. The idea of the “sacred and profane” in religious studies originates with French sociologist Emile Durkheim and saw its clearest articulation in the work of Mircea Eliade.

27. David Foster Wallace, “David Foster Wallace,” interview with Laura Miller, *Salon.com*, March 8, 1996, http://www.salon.com/1996/03/09/wallace_5/.

28. David Foster Wallace, “Democracy and Commerce at the US Open,” in *Both Flesh and Not: Essays* (New York: Little, Brown, 2012), 131.

29. In a similar way Ezra Pound uses the semicolon in his modernist masterpiece “In the Station of the Metro.”

30. David Foster Wallace, “The Best of the Prose Poem,” in *Both Flesh and Not: Essays* (New York: Little, Brown, 2012), 243.

31. *Ibid.* .

32. *Ibid.*

33. Wallace told a Wisconsin Public Radio program: “These various classifications are important for critics, right? You have to form different things into groups or you have to talk about a trillion different particulars.” Steve Paulson, “To the Best of Our Knowledge: David Foster Wallace Interview,” in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2012), 149.

34. Michelle Dean, “A Supposedly True Thing Jonathan Franzen Said About David Foster Wallace,” *TheAwl.com*, October 11, 2011, <http://www.theawl.com/2011/10/a-supposedly-true-thing-jonathan-franzen-said-about-david-foster-wallace>.

35. Reprinted as “Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley,” in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (New York: Little, Brown, 1997), 3–20.

36. D.T. Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* (New York: Viking, 2012), 319.
37. Reprinted as "Getting Away from Already Being Pretty Much Away from It All," in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (New York: Little, Brown 1997), 83–137.
38. *Ibid.*, 90.
39. *Ibid.*, 92, 100.
40. Max, *Every Love Story*, 186.
41. *Ibid.*, 245. Reprinted as "Big Red Son," in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (New York: Little, Brown, 2005), 3–50. In the fine print of the book's colophon Wallace explains that "the article appeared bipseudonymously and now for odd and hard-to-explain reasons doesn't quite work if the 'we' and 'your correspondents' thing gets singularized."
42. Wallace, it should be noted, disliked Hunter S. Thompson's gonzo style of journalism, calling it "naïve and narcissistic," though he acknowledged *Hell's Angels* was an exception that he enjoyed. He was also not a fan of Tom Wolfe. He did, however, admire the nonfiction of James Baldwin, Joan Didion, John McPhee, Annie Dillard, Cynthia Ozick, and others. Jacob, "Interview with David Foster Wallace" in *Conversations*, 155.
43. Max, *Every Love Story*, 319, 320, 186, 320.
44. Wallace, "Consider the Lobster," 252.
45. Max, *Every Love Story*, 185.
46. Syllabus, "English 447.02: Creative Nonfiction, Professors David Wallace and Doug Hesse," container 32.6, David Foster Wallace Archive, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin..
47. Max, *Every Love Story*, 322.
48. Doug Hesse, e-mail message to author, March 3, 2013. It should be noted that when Wallace taught the course at Pomona College in the early 2000s, he adopted Hesse's course description on his own syllabus.
49. David Foster Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again," in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (New York: Little, Brown, 1997), 287.
50. David Foster Wallace, "It All Gets Quite Tricky," *Harper's*, November 2008, 32.
51. Michael Goldfarb, "The Connection: David Foster Wallace," in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press), 149.
52. Caleb Crain, "Approaching Infinity," in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press), 124.
53. Tom Scocca, "David Foster Wallace," in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2012): 85.
54. Jacob, "Interview with David Foster Wallace," 154.
55. Wallace, "The Best of the Prose Poem," 244.
56. In a back-and-forth volley with his editor, Michael Pietsch, over suggested cuts to his mammoth novel *Infinite Jest*, Wallace returned a Pietsch suggestion about a change on page 785 by saying, "I can give you 5,000 words of theoretico-structural arguments for this, but let's spare one another, shall we?" David Foster Wallace, "Always Another Word," *Harper's*, January 2009, 26.
57. Wallace, "The Best of the Prose Poem," 244.
58. John Hartsock, *A History of American Literary Journalism: The Emergence of a Modern Narrative Form*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 15.
59. David Foster Wallace, "Deciderization 2007—An Special Report," in *Both Flesh and Not: Essays* (New York: Little, Brown, 2012), 300.
60. *Ibid.*, 301–302.

61. Ibid.

62. Ibid, 311.

63. Eric Been, "David Foster Wallace: Genius, Fabulist, Would-Be Murderer," *Atlantic*, September 6, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/09/david-foster-wallace-genius-fabulist-would-be-murderer/261997/>.

64. Max, *Every Love Story*, 325.

65. David Foster Wallace, "Borges on the Couch," in *Both Flesh and Not: Essays* (New York: Little, Brown, 2012), 287.

66. Ibid., 288–289.

67. Ibid., 289.

68. D.T. Max, "D.F.W.: The Biographical Enterprise W/R/T Fiction," "Page-Turner," *New Yorker* online, December 20, 2012, <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2012/12/dfw-the-biographical-enterprise-wrt-fiction.html>.

69. In chronological order: David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, About Living a Compassionate Life* (Little, Brown, 2009); *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. David Hering (SSMG Press, 2010); David Lipsky, *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Roadtrip with David Foster Wallace* (Broadway Books, 2010); David Foster Wallace, *Everything and More: A Compact History of Infinity*, reissue (W.W. Norton, 2010); David Foster Wallace, *Fate, Time, and Language: An Essay on Free Will*, eds. Steven M. Cahn and Maureen Eckert (Columbia University Press, 2011); David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King* (Little, Brown, 2011); Stephen J. Burn, *David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest: A Reader's Guide*, 2nd ed. (Bloomsbury Academic, 2012); *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (University of Mississippi Press, 2012); *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, eds. Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (University of Iowa Press, 2012); D.T. Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story* (Viking, 2012); David Foster Wallace, *Both Flesh and Not* (Little, Brown, 2012); *David Foster Wallace: The Last Interview and Other Conversations* (Melville House, 2012); *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, eds. Stephen J. Burn and Marshall Boswell (Palgrave Macmillan 2013); Karen Green, *Bough Down* (Siglio 2013); David Foster Wallace and Mark Costello, *Signifying Rappers*, reissue (Back Bay Books 1990; Little, Brown, 2013).

70. John Jeremiah Sullivan, "Too Much Information," *GQ*, May 2011, <http://www.gq.com/entertainment/books/201105/david-foster-wallace-the-pale-king-john-jeremiah-sullivan>.
