

The Divided Selves of David Foster Wallace

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Abstract

*This paper attempts to provide a new reading of the works of David Foster Wallace. Wallace, as a writer and as a person, is susceptible to readings which focus on mind and mental states, and whilst this is appropriate and effective, it also leads to what I propose is Wallace's main interest being overlooked. That interest can be summed up by the question: what is it like to have, and to be, a body that both is and is not us? Persons have bodies, and bodies are, in a very real way, agents; they are composites of drives and response mechanisms, and these may not always be in accord with our thoughts about ourselves. This paper demonstrates the presence of extraordinary bodies in Wallace's works, and argues that Wallace considered the body to be a useful means of investigating the metaphysical aspects of 'being'. The paper explores this via a brief overview of Wallace's early works, before moving on to a reading of Hal from *Infinite Jest* (1996), and David Cusk from *The Pale King* (2011).*

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The American author David Foster Wallace is most famous for his 1996 novel, *Infinite Jest*, for his suicide in 2008, and for the posthumous publication of his unfinished novel *The Pale King* in 2012. Wallace revisits several themes throughout his career – such as postmodern writing, contemporary materialism, drug addiction, obsession, and tennis (which Wallace played as a junior) – all of which have been engagingly discussed by critics such as Marshall Boswell and Stephen Burn. However, this list highlights an almost ubiquitous problem in

Wallace scholarship: the reading of his work through the focus of his statements at interview, and through his own biography. The result of this tendency is that Wallace comes to be read as important primarily through his attempt to overcome some of the literary malaise, shallowness, and wilful affectlessness of postmodernism and minimalism. These literary issues were important for Wallace, and he undoubtedly attempted to revitalise fiction with, for want of a better term, humanism. Addressing this in an interview with Larry McCaffery, he stated that, ‘Minimalism’s just the other side of metafictional recursion. The basic problem’s still the one of the mediating narrative consciousness. Both minimalism and metafiction try to resolve the problem in radical ways. Opposed, but both so extreme they end up empty’ (McCaffery, 1993: 144). Nicoline Timmer, in *Do You Feel it Too?: The Post-postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium* (2010), provides a good example of reading Wallace through this lens. This paper, whilst acknowledging the fruitfulness of this kind of reading, focuses rather on a number of understudied trends in Wallace’s writing, such as deformity, sex and sexual deviancy and dysfunctional mind-body relations. I want to suggest that all of these concerns, and the above mentioned issues of obsession and addiction, and sports, are used by Wallace to address a more fundamental preoccupation, which is, simply, bodies. What is it like, Wallace seems to ask, to find ourselves *as* a body, or *in* a body, that both is and is not ours, and which both is and is not us? How do we come to terms with a body that does things which we may not want it to do, which does not or cannot do things which we want it to do, and with which, and by which, we are physically and metaphysically identified? The consistent answer, I will argue, is, ‘awkward and painful’.

This engagement with bodies is predicated on a distinction between *being* and *having*, which Nick Crossley discusses in *Reflexive Embodiment*, when he notes that ‘I am both the subject who sees somebody in the mirror and the object who is seen. Likewise, when I wash I am both the object who is washed and the subject or agent who does the washing’ (Crossley, 2006: 1). Gabriel Marcel, in *Being and Having*, also addresses this seeming duality, stating that ‘incarnation is the situation of a being who appears to himself to be, as it were, *bound* to a body. This “given” is opaque to itself: opposition to the *cogito*. Of this body, I can neither say that it is I, nor that it is not I, nor that it is for me (object)’ (Marcel, 1949: 11). I will approach this concern in Wallace’s works via two quotations, followed by a necessarily short, but nonetheless informative, survey of this theme in Wallace’s earliest works, before moving on to one example from *Infinite Jest*, and one from *The Pale King*.

The first of the two quotations is from Wallace’s 2006 essay ‘Federer as a Religious Experience’. Wallace suggests that we love great sports stars, such as Roger Federer, because they demonstrate the potential to be reconciled with one’s body:

There’s a great deal that’s bad about having a body. If this is not so obviously true that no one needs examples, we can just quickly mention pain, sores, odors, nausea, aging, gravity, sepsis, clumsiness, illness, limits — every last schism between our physical wills and our actual capacities. Can anyone doubt we need help being reconciled? Crave it? It’s your body that dies, after all (Wallace, 2006).

The use of the phrase ‘your body’ is suggestive and possible only in a schema which

posits a dichotomy between minds and bodies. There is then, by implication, a self, a mind, and it has, is appended to, or inheres in, a body which it painfully, profoundly disadvantages.

The second quotation is from *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*, by R. D. Laing, first published in 1960. Wallace owned and heavily annotated a copy of this as a student. In this book, Laing addresses schizoid persons, who are what he calls ‘ontologically insecure’:

[O]ntologically insecure [...] persons do not seem to have a sense of that basic unity which can abide through the most intense conflicts with oneself, but seem rather to have come to experience themselves as primarily split into a mind and a body. Usually they feel most closely identified with the “mind” (Laing, 1960: 65).

This would certainly seem to be applicable to Wallace’s views on the body, whose discussion in the above quotation is indicative of a level of splitting, and also of resentment *towards* the body, and *from* a mind. This identification with minds, and this alienation and dissociation from the body are also key to Wallace’s characters, which I will discuss below, and these two quotations offer some insight into Wallace’s writing.

We can begin a short but comprehensive survey by looking at the other end of the spectrum from Federer’s exemplary, almost transcendent ability; where the inability to achieve at sports highlights alienation from one’s body. In his 1990 essay, ‘Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley’, Wallace remembers his time playing junior tennis. He refers to himself as a ‘near-great junior player’ (Wallace, 1990: 4). However, tennis is a physically demanding game, and for Wallace puberty came late. He began, around age fourteen, to lose against players he had previously beaten, players who ‘became abruptly mannish and tall, with sudden sprays of hair on their thighs and their lips ...’ (*ibid.*: 12). Wallace says that, ‘I felt, as I became a later and later bloomer, alienated not just from my own recalcitrant body, but in a way from the whole elemental exterior I’d come to see as my coconspirator [...] I began, very quietly, to resent my physical place in the great schema’ (*ibid.*: 12-13).

This sense of self-alienation, and resentment at having a body which refuses, or is unable, to perform, is a focus in Wallace’s 1987 debut novel, *The Broom of the System*, notably in the character Rick Vigorous, who is pained by an impotence which results in his ‘inability to be truly inside of and surrounded by Lenore Beadsman’, his partner (Wallace, 1987: 72). Vigorous is endowed with what’s referred to as ‘juvenile genitalia’, and just as Wallace felt he was a boy playing tennis against men, Vigorous’s body has not met expectations: it has failed to develop. This example illustrates an interest in *having* a body. In the collection of short-stories *Girl with Curious Hair* (1989), published two years after *The Broom of the System*, Wallace begins an exploration of the more fundamental issue of “being embodied”, particularly in the story ‘Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way’. This is most evident in the character Mark Nechtr, who, ‘Like many Americans of his generation in this awkwardest of post-Imperial decades [...] is deeply ambivalent about being embodied; an informing fear that, were he really just an organism, he’d be nothing more than an ism of his

organs' (Wallace, 1989: 254, italics in original). Mark liked 'to call having a body corporeal punishment' and believes 'that a body is a prison and not a shelter' (*ibid.*: 262, 305). What this begins to make explicit in a way that will be explored in later works, is that the body, as well as being the place of our embodied self, is also the thing which simultaneously identifies and isolates us from other aspects of ourselves. As Wallace told Larry McCaffery in 1993, we are all 'marooned' in 'our own skull' (McCaffery 1993: 127).

The two perspectives Wallace presents in the first two books, of *having* a body and *being* a body, are also central to *Infinite Jest* (1996), into which the almost ubiquitous presence of bodily deformity is added. The novel focuses on a film, called *Infinite Jest*, made by the avant-garde auteur James Incandenza, (shortly before his head-in-a-converted-microwave suicide), which is so entertaining that it literally amuses the viewer to death. The film is on the loose, and several intelligence agencies and a Quebecois separatist group are searching for it in order either to use it as a weapon, or prevent its use as a weapon on an America so intoxicated by its own pleasure-seeking that it would not hesitate to view the film, regardless of consequences.¹ The three central storylines orbit the eponymous video cartridge, and demonstrate Wallace's continued and developing concern with bodies and embodiment. One narrative strand features Reme Marathe, a member of the 'Wheelchair Assassins' and a Canadian separatist driven by love for a wife 'born as an infant without a skull' (Wallace, 1996: 89). Another strand follows Joelle van Dyne who starred in the film, and subsequently, due to an accident involving acid, went from being the 'Prettiest Girl Of All Time' to a member of the 'Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed' (*ibid.*: 239, 226). The central characters in the novel, the Incandenza family, are, to say the least, physically interesting; James O. Incandenza, maker of the titular film, nicknamed 'The Mad Stork', resembles an 'ecologically poisoned crane' (*ibid.*: 745); Hal Incandenza, junior tennis player, has an overly muscled arm 'like a gorilla's arm [...] pasted on the body of a child' (*ibid.*: 173); Orin Incandenza has an 'oversized left arm and big left leg' (*ibid.*: 43); Mario Incandenza is 'stunted and complexly deformed' (*ibid.*: 744), and Avril Incandenza, is 'over two meters tall' (*ibid.*: 755). This focus on "unusual" bodies does not, however, induce what Ato Quayson describes as aesthetic nervousness (Quayson, 2007). Quayson suggests that disability and deformity in texts create a kind of aesthetic lacunae, where the normalizing function of standard interpretative frameworks collapses, ceases to function. For Wallace, there is not such a focus on the stigma of disability, despite its prevalence; rather, Wallace uses this as trope to explore the universal condition of having, or being, a body, insofar as bodies are never standard, and insofar as, in the fictional world, all bodies strive toward the universal, and as such, are symbolic. This is not the case only with, as Quayson suggests, the disabled or deformed body: *having* a symbolic function is non-reducible to *being* pure symbol.

Hal Incandenza, arguably the book's central character, can be looked at in relation to the disembodied state discussed by Laing, in which, 'the individual experiences his self as being more or less divorced or detached from his body' (Laing, 1960: 65). The opening scene seems to present a successful, psychologically stable eighteen year old Hal, an academically and athletically highly functioning student of Enfield Tennis Academy, at a university admissions interview. Hal appears to be coping well under the pressure. The real problem comes when Hal is asked to defend the implied criticism that he is a highly gifted tennis player,

but that his academic scores have been doctored. Hal says, or thinks he says, 'I am not just a boy who plays tennis. I have an intricate history. Experiences and feelings. I am complex... I am not a machine. I feel and believe. I have opinions' (Wallace, 1996: 12). Hal says this with his eyes closed and finally opens them and finishes with the appeal, 'please don't think I don't care'. After opening his eyes he tells us, 'I look out. Directed my way is horror. I rise from the chair. I see jowls sagging, eyebrows high on trembling foreheads, cheeks bright-white. The chair recedes below me' (*ibid.*). Despite his obvious internal lucidity, his ability to hold and manipulate thoughts and words, to express, in his mind, pretty clearly what he wants to say, this is not translating when he is getting to the body, and this break between his intention to act, and the act, reaches a catastrophic point when Hal 'soothes the air with a casual hand', which results in both of his arms being 'pinioned from behind', and as he tells us, 'My forehead is pressed into parquet I never knew could be so cold. I am arrested. I try to be perceived as limp and pliable' (*ibid.*). Whilst he is on the floor, the deans discuss his actual behaviour, his speech is, apparently, 'subanimalistic noises and sounds', combined with his casual, air soothing but actual movement, 'Like a time-lapse, a flutter of some sort of awful [...] growth' (*ibid.* italics in the original). What is dramatically clear from this is that Hal is split; his body, way outside of not only his control, but also of his awareness, is not connected to the mind that is narrating, and whose narration the reader overhears. The name Hal, and the title *Infinite Jest* of course reference Hamlet, another character who suffers from something of a break between an intention to act, and action itself.²

Hal is, as Polonius might say, a tragical-comical exposition of Wallace's interest in a person's relationship with his or her body. By the time we reach *The Pale King*, however, Wallace has become more sober, more mundane in his concerns, which he also presents with something of a return to literary realism. This is apparent in the character David Cusk, who, '[a]t age sixteen and a half [...] started to have attacks of shattering public sweats' (Wallace, 2012: 91). One of the things Wallace highlights in this section is that Cusk's body is out of his control: it is, in fact, his enemy. He says that, 'just the presence of a pretty or popular girl in his sight line would make his internal temperature rise – he could feel it happening unwilling, even against his will – and start the heavy sweating' (*ibid.*: 92). But, Wallace tells us, Cusk cannot cause a sweat by conscious effort:

It especially didn't happen when he was alone in the upstairs bathroom in front of the mirror, trying to make an attack happen so he could study it in the mirror and see for himself, objectively, how bad and obvious it looked from various angles ... but he could never verify this because he could never get a real attack to happen when he wanted it to (*ibid.*: 95).

This break is similar to, though not as catastrophic as, that of Hal in *Infinite Jest*. For Cusk, it is simply a heavy sweating, against his will, which emphasises his hostile relationship with his body. Another frustration about this kind of unwilling, uncontrolled physiological response, is that it highlights the oddity of syntagms such as 'my body': it is Cusk's body sweating, and yet, just like Wallace's statement that '(... we are all of us self-inaccessible and can, for example, touch parts of one another in ways that we could not even dream of with our own bodies)' (*ibid.*: 401), Cusk is the only person who is absolutely incapable, in principle, of

witnessing what “his” body looks like during an episode. This is partly because he cannot induce it at will, but also because his subjective awareness of what it means, what it signifies to and for Cusk, would make objective judgement very difficult. We can never see ourselves as others see us.

Wallace offers a psychoanalytic reading of Cusk, which focuses on the moment where a developmentally normal child would become split in what Lacan, following Freud, presumed to be a healthy and necessary way, realising that he was at once a mind and a body for others in a shared physical space. Wallace says that,

Psychodynamically, he [Cusk] was, as a subject, coming to a late and therefore traumatic understanding of himself as also an object, a body among other bodies, something that could see and yet also be seen. It was the sort of binary self-concept that many children attain as early as age five, often thanks to some chance encounter with a mirror, puddle, window, or photograph seen in just the right way. (Wallace, 2012: 92)

Here we can see Wallace directly referencing Lacan’s notion of “The Mirror Stage”, as it is presented in Lacan’s 1966 lecture, ‘The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience’ (Lacan, 1977: 1-7). The mirror stage, according to Laplanche and Pontalis in *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, ‘[...] is now said to constitute the matrix and first outline of what is to become the ego’ (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1988: 251). This stage is, as Wallace says above, fundamentally one of the primal apperception, the first moment where the child views itself, ‘as also an object, a body among other bodies, something that could see and yet also be seen’ (*ibid.*: 92), and, crucially, as an ‘I. Usually, it is the stage at which a child realises it is individuated, boundaried. However, Lacan says that his concept of the mirror stage ‘leads us to oppose any philosophy directly issuing from the Cogito’ (Lacan, 1977: 1). That is because it resists the unifying aspect of the ‘I’, which cannot, according to Lacan, ever be a single entity, or perceived as such, because what the mirror posits is an ‘Ideal-I’, one whose unity with the self can only ever be imaginarily projected. This union is prohibited, therefore, because the several separate aspects of self exist in different orders, split between the imaginary and the symbolic. Fiction, of course, being an amalgam of these two levels, these two functions, can offer a fantasy unification, one which could be seen as the foundation of the classic bildungsroman.

Cusk, then, needs to begin at the beginning, in a stage of being merely a body, and this is his opportunity for renewal, development, reconciliation. This is addressed directly at the end of the novel in the final sentences, when an unnamed character, presumably Cusk, is undergoing some form of therapy. He is told, ‘You do have a body you know [...] The way we start is to relax and become aware of the body [...] It is at the level of body that we proceed’ (Wallace, 2012: 538). It is at this point, then, that I conclude, by suggesting that, although Wallace was concerned with the state of contemporary literature, he was equally interested in people, and in the idea, the absurdity, of a body that is, on the best days, a bit of a let-down, essentially an impediment, a locus of the actualisation of various degrees of disability.

Endnotes

- 1 There is reason to compare the film to, or to view it as a version of, a thought experiment, known as the 'experience machine', proposed by Richard Nozick to refute utilitarianism in: *Philosophical Investigations*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981.
- 2 Hal's computer-like information storage and recall is also reminiscent of the computer Hal from *2001 A Space Odyssey*.

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Biography

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