

The World of David Foster Wallace

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1. Global Positions

American literature, we have been told, has a problem with the world. This is the least one might infer from the comments of Horace Engdahl, former permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy, who, in 2008, explained the dearth of American Nobel Prizes in literature by saying, “Europe still is the center of the literary world . . . not the United States. . . . The US is too isolated, too insular. They don’t translate enough and don’t really participate in the big dialogue of literature.”¹ Elsewhere, Engdahl has written that “the preconditions for the award of the prize are the freedom of thought and the cosmopolitanism that are the progeny of the Enlightenment,” and that “writing always in some sense means deserting one’s kind,” which leads him to conclude that great writers often have—perhaps ought

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1. Quoted in Charles McGrath, “Lost in Translation? A Swede’s Snub of U.S. Lit,” *New York Times*, October 4, 2008, www.nytimes.com/2008/10/05/weekinreview/05mcgrath.html.

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to have—exilic relationships to their national origins.² The well-documented Eurocentric bias of the Swedish Academy notwithstanding, Engdahl provides a stark indictment of American literary failure, one that goes well beyond the workings of the prize system.³ Despite a handful of exceptions (such as Karen Tei Yamashita, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Teju Cole), and despite the prominence of multicultural and immigrant fiction since the 1980s, the contemporary US literary field, taken as a whole, is commonly alleged to be too parochial, local, and narrowly national. American literature apparently refuses to join the enlightened world republic of letters. This is, in many ways, a convincing critique, for not only does the New York City–centered corporate publishing industry systematically fail to translate texts into English, but foreign-language study in both secondary school and at the university level is in serious crisis in the United States.⁴ As austerity budgets squeeze public schools, and as language-study programs are eliminated, we might well expect America’s embodied cultural capital—in the form of readers and writers knowledgeable about non-English traditions—to fall into greater disrepair, leaving US literature even less well equipped to compete on the global field of literary combat.

The irony of the situation could hardly be more perspicuous. At a time when prominent literary critics such as Wai Chee Dimock, Lawrence Buell, and Jonathan Arac have called on humanists to think about American writing within radically expanded spatial and historical horizons, US

2. Horace Engdahl, “The Nobel Prize: Dawn of a New Canon?,” accessed September 1, 2012, www.waltic.com/files/PDF/Dawn_of_a_New_Canon.pdf. Engdahl’s essay was also published in an extended form as “Canonization and World Literature: The Nobel Experience,” in *World Literature: A Reader*, ed. Theo D’haen, César Domínguez, and Mads Thomsen (New York: Routledge, 2012) and in *World Literature, World Culture: History, Theory, Analysis*, ed. Karen-Margrethe Simonsen and Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen (Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 2008).

3. On the prize system, see James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008). On the Eurocentric bias of the Nobel, see the unpublished quantitative study by Graham Sack, “Literary Capital . . . Literally: Culturomics, Translation Networks, and The World Republic of Letters,” accessed August 27, 2012, www.columbia.edu/~gas2117/LiteraryCapitalTranslation.pdf (document no longer available online).

4. For an analysis of the Anglo-American literary publishing field, see John B. Thompson, *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Polity, 2010). On the failure of foreign-language study in the United States, what its authors call “the nation’s language deficit,” see MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, *Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2007), www.mla.org/flreport/.

cultural production, both popular and elite, has withdrawn into its shell.⁵ In fact, it is widely argued, the US literary field hasn't grown more cosmopolitan since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Whether they regard the attacks as a way of opposing globalization (Jean Baudrillard's notion in *The Spirit of Terrorism* that they were a "response to globalization"⁶) or as the very fulfillment of its logic (*The 9/11 Commission Report* suggests that al-Qaeda might have been "more globalized than we were"⁷), many critics agree that American novelists have, when considering the meaning of the attacks, botched the necessary job of engaging the world. Bruce Robbins, for instance, charges that contemporary American fiction fails to be a true "global positioning system."⁸ After 9/11, novelists have retreated into domestic themes (Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children*, Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*), have figured the world as a zone of atrocity from which non-American characters must escape (Dave Eggers's *What Is the What*, Gary Shteyngart's *Absurdistan*, Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*), and have narcissistically imagined that the American "street" has itself become a world or the only sort of world that now commands our attention (Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*). That is, in attempting to engage the world, the American 9/11 novel has become, if anything, increasingly "anti-worldly."⁹ Even canonical postmodernists such as DeLillo seem to have grown surprisingly local at exactly the time when the world more than ever needs to be studied, understood, and imaginatively transformed on the broadest conceivable scale. Indeed, his

5. Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell, eds., *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); and Jonathan Arac, "Global and Babel: Language and Planet in American Literature," in *Shades of the Planet*, 19–38.

6. Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism: And Other Essays*, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 2003), 12.

7. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States* (New York: SoHo Books, 2004), 340.

8. Bruce Robbins, "The Worlding of the American Novel," in *Cambridge History of the American Novel*, ed. Leonard Cassuto, Clare Virginia Eby, and Benjamin Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1099.

9. Robbins, "The Worlding of the American Novel," 1098. Others have echoed Robbins's critique, such as Richard Gray, "Open Doors, Closed Minds: American Prose Writing at a Time of Crisis," *American Literary History* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 128–51. See also Michael Rothberg, "A Failure of the Imagination: Diagnosing the Post-9/11 Novel: A Response to Richard Gray," *American Literary History* 21, no. 1 (2009): 152–58.

latest novels (*The Body Artist*, *Cosmopolis*, and *Point Omega*) can seem as if they are literary miniatures when compared to the sweeping aspirations of his earlier, encyclopedic books (*The Names* and *Underworld*). Given the degree to which US postmodernist fiction of the 1960s and 1970s had worldly ambitions,¹⁰ this development might be regarded as a disappointing regression or an arresting of what Edward Mendelson saw as the trajectory of the encyclopedic impulse, from the construction of national epics such as Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* to the internationalism of Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*.¹¹

As troubling as these tendencies are, Engdahl's and Robbins's indictments raise a number of unresolved questions. One issue is empirical. What, after all, counts as an authentically worldly novel? How many worldly novels must be published—and what sort of reception must these novels receive—before a particular national literary field is considered to be worldly enough? With almost one hundred thousand novels published each year in the United States,¹² by the Big Six and countless indie presses, how can such generalizations do justice to the plural and segmented sphere of US literary production? For those sympathetic to pessimistic accounts such as Robbins's, these questions might be addressed by developing new

10. See Emily Apter, "On Oneworldedness: Or Paranoia as a World System," *American Literary History* 18, no. 2 (Summer 2006), 365–89, for a discussion of the relationship of Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory to the encyclopedic ambition of many canonical postmodernist authors, including Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo. See also Shameem Black, *Fiction across Borders: Imagining the Lives of Others in Late Twentieth-Century Novels* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). Ecocriticism has also become a powerful framework within which to reconsider the global ambitions of postmodernist fiction, as Ursula K. Heise shows in *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). These recent arguments about postmodernism's worldliness might be regarded as a corrective to Fredric Jameson's claim, in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), that postmodern approaches to global awareness are reducible to conspiracy narrative and paranoia, which must be regarded as a false mode of cognitive mapping. For a discussion of what a successful aesthetic of cognitive mapping might look like under a regime of neoliberal globalization, see Lee Konstantinou, "The Brand as Cognitive Map in William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition*," *boundary 2* 36, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 67–97.

11. Edward Mendelson, "Encyclopedic Narrative: From Dante to Pynchon," *Modern Language Notes* 91, no. 6 (December 1976): 1267–75.

12. On the number of novels published in the United States, see Matthew Wilkens, "How Many Novels Are Published Each Year?," *Work Product*, mattwilkens.com/2009/10/14/how-many-novels-are-published-each-year/.

comparative research methods, better databases, or more sophisticated quantitative tools to determine the relative levels of worldliness of different national literary fields, based on agreed-upon criteria. The second, thornier problem is theoretical. All these critiques share an unquestioned assumption: that worldliness is a problem of representation. The exilic biography of the novelist reappears as exilic form or content, legible to prize committees. Facts about the world-system—deterritorialization, the existence of diasporic public spheres, or neoimperial relations of power—become the basis for norms by which we judge literary success, discoverable through the interpretation of individual texts. The question of representation is, likewise, the core theme of scholarship on artistic responses to 9/11.¹³ A narrow set of themes motivates this criticism. How do artists narratively emplot the complex, coordinated activities and causal chains involving government agents, terrorists, and civilians across multiple distributed spaces and through history? Do falling men appear in these artworks? In what sense were the Twin Towers both real and imaginative structures, both before and after their destruction? And so on. For these critics, the worldliness of any particular novel, whether or not concerning 9/11, is simultaneously a geopolitical and representational issue or, better still, a geopolitical issue whose legible symptom is a homologous textual feature or genre.

It should be clear that this mode of interpretation is indebted to a set of questions most forcefully articulated in the writings of Hayden White. In his classic *Metahistory*, White argues that emplotment—the organization of raw historical materials into narrative genres (romance, comedy, tragedy, or satire)—is a necessary feature of historiographical style.¹⁴ The thesis that historiography only comes to us via narrative genres has been controversial, famously leading White to consider, when confronting the “inexpungeable relativity in every representation of historical phenomena,” whether there are guidelines for how one ought to emplot certain highly charged events such as the Holocaust.¹⁵ White concludes, famously, “that mod-

13. Examples are too numerous to list fully. See the essays in Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn, eds., *Literature after 9/11* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Véronique Bragard, Christophe Dony, and Warren Rosenberg, eds., *Portraying 9/11: Essays on Representations in Comics, Literature, Film, and Theatre* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011); and Martin Randall, *9/11 and the Literature of Terror* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011).

14. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975).

15. Hayden White, “Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth in Historical Repre-

ernist modes of representation may offer possibilities of representing the reality of both the Holocaust and the experience of it that no other version of realism could do.”¹⁶ Inexpungible relativity is not, therefore, a warrant for choosing one’s modes of emplotment arbitrarily. Contemporary investigations of world literature and 9/11 fiction take on similar questions, hoping to match the materials of reality to strategies of representation. A recent issue of *Modern Language Quarterly*, for instance, insists that postcolonial criticism has overemphasized modernist critical categories to the detriment of what the editors of the issue call “peripheral realisms,”¹⁷ which deserve as much attention as worldly modernisms. In his preface to the issue, Joe Cleary notes that our understanding of realism is largely based on accounts derived from the nineteenth-century European novel and is inflected by the polarization of Cold War politics, which pitted First World modernisms against Second World realisms, leaving nonaligned nations with a stark choice—or, as some of the contributors suggest, an opportunity. In approaching the worldliness of texts this way, we are trapped in a version of the Sisyphean realism-modernism debate, as old as Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis* and Georg Lukács’s writings against expressionism and naturalism. The spinning wheel of revaluations and counterrevaluations could, it is fair to say, go on forever without resolution. Even Fredric Jameson—who has done more than anyone to help us see realism and modernism in their dialectical relation, and to situate these categories historically—doesn’t escape the assumption that there is some literary style that is necessary to the substrate of worldly facts. For Jameson, though the relationship between text and world is complex, “the individual text or cultural artifact . . . is . . . a field of force in which the dynamics of sign systems of several distinct modes of production can be registered and apprehended.”¹⁸

At the time Jameson staged his intervention into these debates, he wanted to argue for the salience of the concept of postmodernism. In his

sentation,” in *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 27.

16. White, “Historical Emplotment,” 27, 41.

17. Joe Cleary, “Realism after Modernism and the Literary World-System,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (September 2012): 255–68. As Cleary notes, “postcolonial studies has privileged modernist-associated terms such as hybridity, polyphony, pastiche, irony, and defamiliarization rather than realist-associated conceptual categories such as historical transition, class consciousness, and totality” (265).

18. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 98.

influential account, postmodern art—and theory itself—became nothing less than the attendant cultural expressions of late capitalism, which is one reason why he insisted that, with the full integration of modernism into the workings of the economy, “artists and writers who want to change their styles may well once again come to the conclusion that they must first change the world.”¹⁹ But today, as he would himself probably acknowledge, it is increasingly clear that Jameson’s interpretation of the modernism-realism debate itself emerged from the historically specific locus of the postmodern university; it was an interpretation very much at home among the tenure-track symbolic analysts who made their careers in the humanities, where the major task of the day was nothing less than the management, manipulation, and overthrow of sign systems.²⁰ The contemporary erosion of the humanities within the neoliberal university has, I would suggest, made a hermeneutic based on theoretically sophisticated versions of close reading seem less efficacious than it once did, inspiring a wholesale reassessment of critique and dominant hermeneutic practices. Against prior critical models, for example, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus have called for a practice of “surface reading,” which they contrast with “symptomatic readings,” a practice they recognize as having an affinity with traditional models of close reading.²¹ Instead of reading texts symptomatically, they suggest, we might read surfaces, or read instead for affect, pleasure, cultural value, not for what is hidden but for what is in plain sight. Others have made arguments in a similar spirit, suggesting we might engage in a practice of “generous reading” (Timothy Bewes), “distant reading” (Franco Moretti), or “digital reading” (N. Katherine Hayles).²² All of these might be regarded as post-postmodern attempts, however flawed or preliminary, to move beyond practices of what I am calling, for the sake of simplicity, close reading.²³ In a

19. Fredric Jameson, “The Ideology of the Text,” in *Ideologies of Theory: Essays, 1971–1986*, vol. 1, *Situations of Theory*, foreword by Neil Larsen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 71.

20. I draw the term *symbolic analyst* from Robert Reich, *The Work of Nations: Preparing Ourselves for 21st Century Capitalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992).

21. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” *Representations* 108, no. 1 (Fall 2009): 1–21.

22. Timothy Bewes, “Reading with the Grain: A New World in Literary Criticism,” *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 21, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 1; Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature,” *New Left Review* 1 (January/February 2000): 54–68; N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 59.

23. My identification of close reading with textual explication and symptomatic reading needs more justification than I can provide here. It must suffice to say that I share the film

more Jamesonian mode, we might ascribe this shift away from close reading to the rise of contingent labor, the rapid defunding of public schools, the outright abolition of smaller language departments, the corporate realignment of the administration, conditions which arise within the same neoliberal institutions that underwrite the unworldliness of the American literary field in the first place. However we evaluate these proposed successors to close reading, we shouldn't be surprised that an increasingly precarious educational environment has put tremendous pressure on established interpretive habits and practices.²⁴ In any case, this new critical wave, though quite heterogeneous, doesn't mean to celebrate either modernism or realism. After all, under the skillful eye of a close reader, any modernist text can be made to disclose its hidden links to reality, and any so-called realist might turn out to be the machinelike scriptor of tissues of textuality. We need to move beyond the deadlock of such arguments. In invoking this new critical tendency—to reiterate my earlier point—I mean to suggest that we might gain something by avoiding or even temporarily suspending the deeply ingrained habit of assessing the worldliness of individual texts or groups of texts through a practice of close reading.

Whereas representational or figural readings—even those that employ the most sophisticated, dialectical understandings of mimesis—essentially test texts for a sort of fidelity or homology to the world, new models inspired by the drive to move beyond close reading ask how the world forms specific texts or groups of texts. It is the difference between analyzing *what* a text encodes about the world and *how* it has been made by the world. To be sure, the impact of this *how* can reappear at a representational level within particular texts, like the footprint on the shore of

critic David Bordwell's conviction that "both the explicatory and the symptomatic modes [of reading] share a fundamental interpretive logic and rhetoric," making use of "similar inferential moves and persuasive devices." David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), xiii. Indeed, as Jonathan Culler suggested more than thirty years ago, "Whatever critical affiliations we may proclaim, we are all New Critics, in that it requires a strenuous effort to escape notions of the autonomy of the literary work, the importance of demonstrating its unity, and the requirement of 'close reading.'" Jonathan Culler, "Beyond Interpretation," in *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 3.

24. See Jeffrey Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), esp. chap. 4, "The Associate Vice Provost in the Gray Flannel Suit: Administrative Labor and the Corporate University," 66–86.

Crusoe's island, but not necessarily, and not always as a homologous form. This analysis of how texts relate to contexts is, it should be clear, inspired by Moretti's "taking an explanatory matrix from social history and applying it to literary history," his examination of global "*laws of literary evolution*" (I prefer the term *development*) of prose forms.²⁵ My case study is David Foster Wallace's 2004 novella "The Suffering Channel," which at first appears only to confirm the damning indictment rehearsed in my opening paragraphs. An almost paradigmatic example of "9/11 fiction," "The Suffering Channel" seems to do little to move readers beyond the territorial borders of the United States. It makes a great effort to avoid representing the terrorist attacks, let alone the complex international history leading up to them. Moreover, as though meaning to confirm Engdahl's comments on the narrowness of American authors, Wallace saw his own literary value specifically as a function of his loquacious parochialism: "I'm not a great journalist, and I can't interview anybody, but what I can do is kind of, I will slice open my head for you. And let you see a cross-section of just a kind of average, averagely bright person's head at this thing."²⁶ Though he here describes his approach to writing nonfiction, Wallace often characterized the value of his writing, both fiction and nonfiction, in terms of his typicality, his ability to give an unusually articulate description of the experience of an "average, averagely bright" American, an averageness he frequently, anxiously described as highly educated, straight, white, and male, with all the limitations such a problematic definition of averageness entails.²⁷ When he makes comments like this, one cannot help but suspect that the writer most associated with the figure of infinity might instead be a purveyor of false infinities or at least decidedly American finitudes. In this essay, I hope to show that despite its narrative focus on the United States and its investigation of what many critical accounts of "The Suffering Channel" regard as American concerns, Wallace's novella showcases a longing for the international. Wallace turns his narrowness of focus into a brilliant exploration of—indeed, we might say a performance of—the deficit of embodied cultural

25. Moretti, "Conjectures in World Literature," 56, 58, emphasis in original.

26. Stephen Burn, ed., *Conversations with David Foster Wallace* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 86.

27. For Wallace's description of his own social location, see his "Authority and American Usage," in *Consider the Lobster, and Other Essays* (New York: Little, Brown, 2006), esp. 107–9. Kathleen Fitzpatrick also offers an insightful reading of Wallace's "whiteness" in *The Anxiety of Obsolescence: The American Novel in the Age of Television* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006), esp. 201–34.

capital, linguistic capital, and cosmopolitan habitus in the post-postmodern United States. The US underinvests in cultivating cosmopolitan citizens, which, at a time of world crisis, leaves the country's most talented artists and writers struggling against a deficit inscribed within their own imaginations. Wallace's genius was to redeploy the linguistic and cultural resources of this delimited, "average" habitus to create a strange sort of negative map of the world, as though someone had built a working fighter jet using only an erector set.

2. Everyone Poops

Interrogating the art of Wallace for its worldly constituents may at first seem perverse. After all, across his three novels, three story collections, two nonfiction volumes, and his other works, Wallace focuses almost exclusively on what have been characterized as US-centric themes. He represents, in his fiction and nonfiction, a sort of postmodern parochialism, identified for him with irony and cynicism, that he found himself complicit in perpetuating and that he wanted to escape, hoping to forge a post-postmodern aesthetic. In the near-future world of *Infinite Jest*, though its citizens celebrate Interdependence Day rather than Independence Day, the Organization of North American Nations (ONAN) is usually—rightly—understood more as an enlarged version of the United States circa 1996 than as anything else. Despite ONAN's incorporation of Mexico and Canada, *Infinite Jest* is typically taken as a critique of what Hayles describes as the "paradoxical structures of possessive individualism," an individualism that characters in Wallace's novel identify as specifically American, contrasted, humorously, with a more communitarian Canadian ideology.²⁸ In one of the novel's most celebrated set pieces, which recalls DeLillo's *End Zone* and parodies the thought of Baudrillard, *Infinite Jest* depicts a nuclear warfare geopolitical simulation game called Eschaton. This game treats tennis courts as a map of the world and tennis balls as intercontinental ballistic missiles. The students at the Enfield Tennis Academy, who stage a new game of Eschaton every year, are depicted as adolescently detached from

28. N. Katherine Hayles, "The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity: Virtual Ecologies, Entertainment, and *Infinite Jest*," *New Literary History* 30, no. 3 (Summer 1999): 678. In his analysis of *Infinite Jest*, Michael North rightly describes the conflict of the novel as divided between "American" selfishness and a Canadian (or at least Quebecois) version of collectivity or selflessness. See Michael North, *Machine-Age Comedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 173.

the reality right in front of their noses, obsessed with nerdy geopolitics and a mode of strategic thinking that Wallace associates with his postmodernist forebears.²⁹ In the world of *Infinite Jest*, it is notably wheelchair-bound Canadian terrorists, a Quebecois separatist group known as Les Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents [*sic*], who are imagined to be outside the closed/narcissistic media loop ONAN has constructed. Wallace's posthumously published, unfinished third novel, *The Pale King* (2011), is, if anything, even more inward looking than its predecessor. Set in Peoria, Illinois, at an IRS tax-processing center during the 1980s, Wallace's novel paints a portrait of Reagan's America that manages only briefly to introduce one Iranian character, Ms. F. Chahla Neti-Neti, and otherwise makes little reference to anything outside the territorial boundaries of the United States, aside from the occasional mention of Vietnam.

Paul Giles is one of the few critics to claim that Wallace's fiction shows "how globalization works not just as a distant political theory but as something that affects the hearts and minds of the national community."³⁰ Giles is not wrong to argue for a transnational dimension to Wallace's work, but there is also a clear break in Wallace's fiction from the internationalism of writers such as Pynchon and DeLillo. Wallace suggests that it is increasingly hard, even in an age of globalization, to imagine an outside to American culture for residents of the contemporary United States. In recognizing this dilemma, he is conscious of himself as part of an emerging post-postmodern wave of American artists, indebted to the worldly visions of their predecessors but unable to replicate them. Moreover, Wallace rejects the solution offered by some of his contemporaries, especially the globe-trotting novelist and journalist William T. Vollmann, with whom he felt intensely competitive. As Michele L. Hardesty notes, across almost twenty books of fiction and journalism, Vollmann has, at his best, shown himself to be a writer who "crosses boundaries of nation, class, culture, and doctrine to understand and represent those on the other side, while acknowledging how those same boundaries protect his own privileges."³¹ By contrast, Wallace is rigorously committed to fully inhabiting his privilege and is

29. For a recent analysis of the Eschaton scene in terms of Cold War strategic planning, see Dan Grausam, *On Endings: American Postmodern Fiction and the Cold War* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 98–103.

30. Paul Giles, "Sentimental Posthumanism: David Foster Wallace," *Twentieth-Century Literature* 53, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 327–44.

31. Michele L. Hardesty, "Looking for the Good Fight: William T. Vollmann's *An Afghanistan Picture Show*," *boundary 2* 36, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 101.

unsure whether it is possible to cross boundaries between his location and some “other side.” Indeed, as D. T. Max notes, Wallace was uncomfortable with Vollmann, both artistically and personally, partly because Vollmann was “too odd for the fundamentally bourgeois Wallace.”³² From Wallace’s perspective, Vollmann’s fictions come to look like bohemian tourism, a sub-species of the countercultural irony that Wallace considered endemic to US culture. Far more difficult, Wallace suggests, is to stand still, to observe the coruscating patterns of one’s own social, political, and ideological location unflinchingly. Standing firmly in that limited location, the 9/11 attacks proffer for Wallace a fleeting consciousness of an outside to the enclosed sphere of the onanistic US media system, providing the spectacular occasion for him to confront his own blind spots. His task in “The Suffering Channel” is both to confront this lacuna in his awareness of the world and to find a way to dramatize that lacuna, without recourse to postmodernist models of symptomology (such as conspiracy). In his pursuit of these aims, Wallace’s novella not only offers up an individual text ripe for post-postmodern interpretation but also contributes to the methodological debates these interpreters are currently involved in.

First published in his collection *Oblivion* (2004), “The Suffering Channel” tells the story of Roto-Rooter employee Brint Moltke, a crippledly shy man from Indiana with an unusual talent: the ability to defecate “exquisite pieces of art,” perfectly formed sculptures made of shit, shaped through some unconscious process by his talented colon.³³ During the summer of 2001, his artistry comes to the attention of the “salaryman” journalist Virgil “Skip” Atwater, one of two staff writers for the “WHAT IN THE WORLD section” (TSC, 246) of *Style*, a magazine owned by “Eckleschafft-Böd Medien A.G., a German conglomerate that controls nearly 40 percent of all US trade publishing,” whose editorial offices, Wallace makes a point of mentioning, are located in 1 World Trade Center and will “enter history two months hence” (TSC, 296, 245).³⁴ In “The Suffering Channel,” discourses

32. D. T. Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story* (New York: Viking, 2012), 130.

33. David Foster Wallace, “The Suffering Channel,” in *Oblivion: Stories* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2005), 238. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as TSC.

34. “The Suffering Channel” has already spawned numerous commentaries, essays, and investigations. See Chad Harbach, “David Foster Wallace!,” *n+1*, no. 1 (July 2004): 171–76; Benjamin Bird, “History, Emotion, and the Body: Mourning in Post-9/11 Fiction,” *Literature Compass* 4, no. 3 (May 2007): 561–75; Camilla Nelson, “You Can’t Write a Social Novel after September 11,” *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing* 5, no. 1 (2008): 50–64; Annie McClanahan, “Future’s Shock: Plausibility,

concerning poop expose the excrementally narcissistic nature of American media but also bear a surprising residue of Utopia, the promise that, at the very least, the entire community of Homo sapiens, whatever conflicts might divide it, can be said to poop. “The Suffering Channel” confronts the limitations of the US culture Wallace found himself enmeshed within and attempts to envision what might be found outside this bubble world. Participants in the American mediasphere are figured as eating where they shit or eating what they shit. At the same time, American consumers of media shit feel a persistent sense of dread; they’re convinced that some unnameable Lynchian evil inhabits everyday life.³⁵ In an essay originally written for *Premier* in 1996, Wallace describes David Lynch’s approach to evil in this way: “Lynch’s movies are not about *monsters* (i.e., people whose intrinsic natures are evil) but about *hauntings*, about evil as environment, possibility, force.”³⁶ It is of particular importance to Wallace that Lynchian evil not be understood in terms of a “depth model” and the “epistemological privilege” such models confer upon persons aware of what “lies beneath.”³⁷ Lynch’s films create brutal diegetic worlds, in which “Respectable Surfaces and Seamy Undersides are mingled, integrated, literally *mixed up*” in order to create viewer discomfort.³⁸ A similar technique, the mixture of surfaces and undersides, is apparent in “The Suffering Channel,” and in *Oblivion* more generally, which is by far Wallace’s most Lynchian book. The evil Wallace invokes in “The Suffering Channel” is not so much al-Qaeda as

Preemption, and the Fiction of 9/11,” *symplokē* 17, nos. 1–2 (2009): 41–62; Olivia Banner, “They’re Literally Shit’: Masculinity and the Work of Art in an Age of Waste Recycling,” *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies*, nos. 10/11 (2009), www.uiowa.edu/~ijcs/waste/banner.html; Marc Oxoby, “The Mediated Trauma of September, 11, 2001, in William Gibson’s *Pattern Recognition* and David Foster Wallace’s ‘The Suffering Channel,’” in *Portraying 9/11*, 102–17; and Andrew Altschul, “The Management of Insignificance: Thoughts on ‘The Suffering Channel,’ Reality, and Shit,” *Quarterly Conversation*, no. 24 (2011), quarterlyconversation.com/who-was-david-foster-wallace-the-management-of-insignificance-thoughts-on-the-suffering-channel-reality-and-shit. “The Suffering Channel” is also the Wallace text that James Wood discusses in *How Fiction Works* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 31–32.

35. For a discussion of the relationship of dread as affect to risk theory, especially in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*, see Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*, 162–69.

36. David Foster Wallace, “David Lynch Keeps His Head,” in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1998), 204, emphasis in original.

37. Wallace, “David Lynch Keeps His Head,” 208.

38. Wallace, “David Lynch Keeps His Head,” 208.

the lacuna of the world itself, a real space that haunts the almost flawlessly self-contained surface of the US mediasphere.

At several crucial moments in “The Suffering Channel,” Wallace underscores how Brint’s unusual medium of artistic expression is “literally mixed up” with the dangerous unworldliness of the story’s characters, Wallace’s readers, and Wallace himself. When *Style*’s various high-powered, near-anorexic Manhattanite executive interns gather to discuss the philosophical dimensions of Moltke’s shit sculptures, their conversation quickly takes an international turn:

She had at some point spent a trimester at Cambridge, and still spoke with a slight British accent, and asked generally now whether anyone else who traveled abroad much had noticed that in German toilets the hole into which the poop is supposed to disappear when you flush is positioned way in front, so that the poop just sort of *lies* there in full view and there’s almost no way you can avoid looking at it when you get up and turn around to flush. Which she observes was so almost stereotypically German, almost as if you were supposed to study and analyze your poop and make sure it passed muster before you flushed it down. Here a senior shade who seemed always to make it a point to wear something garishly retro on Mondays inserted a reminiscence about first seeing the word FAHRT in great block letters on signs all over Swiss and German rail stations, on childhood trips, and how she and her stepsisters had spent whole long Eurail rides cracking one another up by making childish jokes about travelers’ various FAHRTs. Whereas, the SURFACES head intern continued with a slight cold smile at the shade’s interruption, whereas in French toilets, though, the hole tended to be way in the back so that the poop vanished ASAP, meaning the whole thing was set up to be as elegant and tasteful as possible . . . although in France there was also the whole bidet issue, which many of the interns agreed always struck them as weird and kind of unhygienic. There was then a quick anecdote about someone’s once having asked a French concierge about the really low drinking fountain in the *salle de bains*, which also struck a nerve of risibility at the table.

At different intervals, two or three of the interns who smoked would excuse themselves briefly and step out to smoke and then return—Tutti Mangia’s management had made it clear that they didn’t really want like eight people at a time out there under the awning.

‘So then what about the US toilets here, with the hole in the middle and all this water so it all floats and goes around and around in a little dance before it goes down—what’s up with that?’

The design director’s intern wore a very simple severe Prada jacket over a black silk tee. ‘They don’t always go around and around. Some toilets are really fast and powerful and it’s gone right away.’

‘Maybe up on eighty-two it is!’ Two of the newer staff interns leaned slightly toward each other as they laughed. (TSC, 264–65)

At the level of the sentence, this passage evinces many of the slangy “nobrow” tics and habits that characterized Wallace’s style.³⁹ Phrases such as “asked *generally now*,” “way in front,” “*whole* long,” “*really* low,” and “they didn’t really want *like* eight people” (my emphases) appear not only in dialogue and free indirect discourse but also in the language of Wallace’s omniscient narrator. James Wood suggests persuasively that Wallace’s “unidentified free indirect style . . . prosecutes an intense argument about the decomposition of language in America” by “making us live through this linguistic America with him.”⁴⁰ Wallace’s style is indeed deliberately American and is specifically the vernacular style of late twentieth-century US culture industries.⁴¹ Beyond Wallace’s mimicry of US media discourse and the verbal style of media workers, the satirical force of this specific passage pulls in a few directions. First, there is the question of poop itself. This conversation spotlights both the universality of bodily wastes and cultural differences in the treatment of such waste, transforming toilet design into an allegory of national character. The interns’ display of transcultural know-ingness—their comparative method—becomes, in the social world of *Style*, a means of cultural combat, of showing one’s cosmopolitan street cred.⁴² Though they all speak in the knowing but informal language of the mass media, telling stories about poop becomes one way these aspiring cosmo-

39. I draw the term *nobrow* from John Seabrook, *Nobrow: The Culture of Marketing, the Marketing of Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001).

40. Wood, *How Fiction Works*, 31, 33.

41. Maud Newton discusses Wallace’s style in terms of American media discourse, especially web discourse, in “Another Thing to Sort of Pin on David Foster Wallace,” *New York Times*, August 19, 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/08/21/magazine/another-thing-to-sort-of-pin-on-david-foster-wallace.html.

42. In her review of concepts of masculinity in “The Suffering Channel,” Olivia Banner frequently describes the women who work at *Style* as living in a “cosmopolitan center,” missing what I think is one of the central dramatic ironies of Wallace’s story (Banner, “They’re Literally Shit”).

politans distinguish themselves from ignorant provincials, including the provincials in their midst, those interns who wear something “garishly retro,” who tell embarrassing stories about stepsiblings, and who deserve little more than a “cold smile” from more sophisticated colleagues. And so, what initially seems to be an allegory of national character turns out to be, especially in the final discussion of US toilet design, an allegory of the hidden class system that 1 World Trade Center makes architectural. Put crudely, US toilets behave rather differently on the sixteenth floor (“it all floats and goes around and around”) and on the eighty-second floor (“really fast and powerful and it’s gone right away”).

The division between stylish eighty-second-floor senior interns and garish sixteenth-floor interns isn’t the only division of cultural power Wallace emphasizes in “The Suffering Channel.” The closed loop of the US media system is, in Wallace’s imagination, also geographically bifurcated. At the core of the system, we have those coastal Americans, the highly professional, extremely thin interns at *Style*, *not* eating at Tutti Mangia, who produce US culture. At the system’s periphery, midwestern Americans, such as Brint’s wife, Amber—described as “the sexiest morbidly obese woman Atwater had ever seen” (TSC, 250)—do little more than consume the nobrow culture her counterparts in New York produce, living blasted lives of what Lauren Berlant has poignantly called cruel optimism.⁴³ Skip Atwater, born in the Midwest but now working for the East Coast culture industry, serves as a bridge figure, shuttling between these social zones, finding the stories of “ordinary” Americans, packaging these stories, and selling those ordinary Americans’ stories back to them. The cultural geography of “The Suffering Channel” is thus starkly divided between arrogant sophisticated urbanites and envious unsophisticated suburban Middle Americans, another class division masked (albeit poorly) by the populist American vernacular proffered by *Style*. The primary concern of Skip and his coworkers at *Style* is whether the closed loop of the US media system can, despite its trade in shit, transfigure that shit into something representative of “the American psyche.” The “strange unspoken consensus,” in Skip’s view, is that American life is “objectively insignificant” (TSC, 283–84). And yet another fact that goes “unspoken,” which the context of 9/11 makes plain, is the degree to which American experience is, for those who live outside the United States, anything but objectively insignificant. American power and

43. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

culture are, in many parts of the world, both before and after 9/11, a central fact of life. *Style's* style of media populism, Wallace suggests, is founded on a narcissistic obsession with the contours of the "American psyche," which leaves both media consumers and producers poorly equipped to anticipate the pending terrorist attacks.

This failure is especially visible in the model of the US media system that appears in Wallace's essay on 9/11, "The View from Mrs. Thompson's," which was first published in *Rolling Stone*. The media model in this essay is almost identical to the fictive media model presented in "The Suffering Channel." The essay begins as if it were a memo, listing the dates it discusses ("11-13 SEPTEMBER 2001") and declaring its subject as "OBVIOUS."⁴⁴ Wallace's emphasis on apparently neutral dates and on what for his readers he assumes is obvious might seem suspect from the perspective of a dissident like Noam Chomsky, whose response to 9/11 frequently emphasized "the first 9/11," that is, September 11, 1973, the date the United States helped overthrow the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende, laying the groundwork for Augusto Pinochet's reign of terror in Chile.⁴⁵ Such a historically informed, comparative, global perspective, the perspective of "arguably the most cosmopolitan of American intellectuals," in the incisive formulation of Robbins, seems decidedly lacking in "The View from Mrs. Thompson's."⁴⁶ And yet Wallace's 9/11 essay takes on a complex political valence as his observation of the "view" from Mrs. Thompson's accretes an unspoken sense of dread, which Wallace describes as "the Horror." Initially, one might assume that "the Horror" must refer to the terrorist attacks, but as Wallace sketches the portrait of the media habits of Mrs. Thompson and those who inhabit her milieu, the reader increasingly comes to realize that this assumption is mistaken. As in "The Suffering Channel," Wallace distinguishes between Bloomington-based Middle American consumers of media and Manhattan-based coastal producers. Wallace's midwesterners are depicted as not "unfriendly but . . . reserved" (VMT, 128), flag-waving, church-going individuals for whom "reality—any

44. David Foster Wallace, "The View from Mrs. Thompson's," in *Consider the Lobster*, 128. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as VMT.

45. Noam Chomsky, *9-11: Was There an Alternative?* (New York: Seven Stories, 2011), 23-25.

46. Bruce Robbins, "Chomsky's Golden Rule: Comparison and Cosmopolitanism," *New Literary History* 40, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 547. For a passionate defense of the "view from above," see also Bruce Robbins, *Feeling Global: Internationalism in Distress* (New York: New York University Press, 1989).

felt sense of a larger world—is mainly televisual” (VMT, 134), enthusiastic patrons of the musical *Cats* who nonetheless have no mental sense of the geography of Manhattan (VMT, 139), who are “startlingly lacking” in cynicism (VMT, 139). “What these Bloomington ladies are, or start to seem to me, is innocent,” he writes (VMT, 139). By contrast, Wallace figures himself and those who are “hip enough to lodge the sick and obvious po-mo complaint” about the attacks (that “We’ve Seen This Before”) as inhabiting the reality Mrs. Thompson and her friends only get to watch on TV (VMT, 140). Wallace concludes that “part of the horror of the Horror was knowing, deep in my heart, that whatever America the men in those planes hated so much was far more my America . . . than it was these ladies” (VMT, 140).

“The View from Mrs. Thompson’s” can help us better understand the political effects of the media system Wallace imagines in “The Suffering Channel.” Whereas residents of flyover country like the Indiana-based Moltkes aspire more than anything to join the coastal culture industries that manufacture their essentially mediated reality, the coastal elites who create *Style* fantasize about European excursions, wearing “a trimester in Cambridge” and “a slight British accent” as markers of distinction. Likewise, whereas the Middle American media consumers at Mrs. Thompson’s are “innocent,” Wallace and his ilk are in this formulation guilty, corrupted by postmodern self-consciousness and irony, which for some reason invites foreign hatred and attack.⁴⁷ Unlike some neoconservatives, who imagine the United States to be divided between authentic heartland red states and cynical coastal blue states, Wallace doesn’t advocate returning to some sort of midwestern authenticity, red-state conservatism, or the innocence of Mrs. Thompson. After all, in a US mediasphere that almost exclusively circulates shit, it is hard to imagine how being a consumer of shit is better than being its producer, as though learning to genuinely appreciate *Cats* were the prerequisite to a good life. A psychic involution into the heartland would only compound the insularity and narcissism Wallace criticizes.

Moreover, Wallace challenges the view that coastal, media-savvy Americans avoid naïveté. Indeed, it should now be clear that, though they may in some sense be “guilty,” Americans who work for postmodern cul-

47. For a discussion of Wallace’s complex relationship with irony, see Lee Konstantinou, “No Bull: David Foster Wallace and Postironic Belief,” in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, ed. Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), 83–112; and Adam Kelly, “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction,” in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. David Hering (Hollywood, CA: Sideshow Media Group, 2010), 131–46.

ture industries betray a grave ignorance of a world they think they understand. Notice, in the long passage quoted above, that the interns' focus on Western European toilets undercuts the reader's ability to take the allegory of toilet design as national character at face value, suggesting that universals derived from these examples are hopelessly Eurocentric and that the alleged anthropological sophistication of these twenty-something interns should be regarded with some degree of skepticism. Wallace's invocation of Western European toilets suggests that the pseudocosmopolitanism of *Style's* interns provides no better grounds for understanding the pending terrorist attacks than the view from Mrs. Thompson's. That the short article Skip is writing will appear in a section of the magazine called WHAT IN THE WORLD, where *WORLD* refers to anything but the world—despite the magazine's ownership by a German conglomerate—further exposes *Style's* pseudocosmopolitanism. *What in the world* might also serve as an expression of the surviving interns' perplexity following the destruction of the Twin Towers. "The Suffering Channel" is built on the clash of two incompatible understandings of cosmopolitanism, the pseudocosmopolitanism of *Style* magazine and a genuine cosmopolitanism that would be up to the task of understanding the historical, political, and economic contexts of the attacks. By staging a confrontation between these incompatible understandings of cosmopolitanism, "The Suffering Channel," more than any of his other stories, discloses some of the most troubling aporias of Wallace's style. Wallace's inability to represent a genuine cosmopolitanism in this story is not simply an individual failure but is, for him, an indictment of the very "view" that he understands himself to be inhabiting.

3. The Cosmopolitan Imagination

The dire failure of the pseudocosmopolitan imagination manifests at a second crucial moment in "The Suffering Channel," in relation to the fictional cable network that gives the story its title. In the novella, R. Vaughn Corliss, a cable executive who has created a new network dedicated to showing images of hideous human suffering, becomes the subject of a second WHAT IN THE WORLD story that Skip is writing. In a complicated bit of plotting, Corliss's network is drawn into the excremental sculpture story. Editors at *Style* cynically manipulate Brint into appearing on The Suffering Channel as a way of manufacturing a trumped-up controversy that will then be covered by the magazine itself, all in order to avoid looking as if the magazine were exploiting the Moltkes. What makes Corliss's complicity

in this turn of events plausible is what we learn to be his “most tightly held secret vision or dream,” the dream of founding “a channel devoted wholly to images of celebrities shitting” (TSC, 295). In one of the funniest passages in the story, Wallace lists a catalog of thirty-two celebrities Corliss secretly dreams of filming during acts of defecation:

Reese Witherspoon shitting. Juliette Lewis shitting. Michael Jordan shitting. Longtime House Minority Whip Dick Gephardt shitting. Pamela Anderson shitting. George F. Will, with his bow tie and pruny mouth, shitting. Former PGA legend Hale Irwin shitting. Stones bassist Ron Wood shitting. Pope John Paul shitting as special attendants hold his robes’ hems up off the floor. Leonard Maltin, Annette Bening, Michael Flatley, either or both of the Olsen twins, shitting. And so on. (TSC, 295)

Just as important as the almost exclusive Americanness of the catalog of pooping celebrities—only a few non-Americans appear on the list—is Corliss’s “corollary vision of the images beamed into space, digitally sequenced for maximum range and coherence, and of advanced alien species studying this footage in order to learn *almost everything necessary about planet earth circa 2001*” (TSC, 295, my emphasis). This fantasy says a great deal about how Wallace regards the imaginative scope and the limitations of supposedly noninnocent Americans such as himself. At first, Wallace’s exhaustive catalog of pooping celebrities addresses a specifically American, media-savvy reader who will be intimately familiar with these names. If we laugh at the thought that Corliss fantasizes about Reese Witherspoon shitting, we do so in part because we know who Witherspoon is. Whether or not we (as empirical readers of this passage) are actually American, or avid consumers of American media, Wallace’s style hails us as if we were. After being hailed this way, Corliss’s “corollary vision” stages a complex disidentification with this hypothetical American perspective. The imagined reader no longer occupies the view from Mrs. Thompson’s Bloomington house or the Moltkes’ Indiana duplex but rather the position of an advanced alien observer relative to the list of celebrity proper names. The notion that these specifically American celebrities might give alien observers a purview into “everything necessary about planet earth circa 2001” grates against our knowledge, with the benefit of hindsight, that there’s a large and complex world beyond Corliss’s limited imagination. We might again recall Chomsky’s invocation, in his book *Hegemony or Survival* and elsewhere, of the way “a hypothetical extra-

terrestrial observer” might regard American imperial power.⁴⁸ As Robbins notes, “When we read” Chomsky, “whether we are Americans or not, we feel at least momentarily as if we ourselves were aliens, spectators looking down from a great height on the bad behavior of our fellow earthlings.”⁴⁹ Chomsky’s aliens occupy something like John Rawls’s original position.⁵⁰ They have no cultural particularity, bad or self-interested motives, concrete commitments to any community that might compete with abstract modes of moral obligation, cognitive biases, or irrational tendencies. These alien observers are figures for rationality itself.

Wallace implies that there’s a problem with the view that any advanced extraterrestrial species would regard Corliss as a true cosmopolitan. Not only does the cable mogul think that he can fairly characterize the whole of 2001 based on the events of half a year, but he also thinks that his narrow slice of reality might be regarded by an extraterrestrial observer as exhausting what is interesting to say about the planet. It is precisely the gap between what Corliss imagines an alien observer would think of his channel and what we readers, in our final disidentification with the cable mogul, suspect they would really regard as important that exposes the structural deficit of cosmopolitanism that is not only the subject of Wallace’s story but also the condition of possibility that delimits the story’s global imagination. Wallace invites his implied American reader to disagree with Corliss, and in disagreeing to be forced into a form of self-criticism. What, Wallace asks, would it feel like to look down upon ourselves from a position outside ourselves? How would it feel to be the sort of creature upon which a name like “Reese Witherspoon” had no more hold—no more capacity to elicit laughter—than any other name? Unlike Chomsky, who tells us what this rational extraterrestrial observer would think, Wallace implies that he is himself so enmeshed in the cultural particularities of his moment that he is unable to dramatize a genuinely cosmopolitan or extraterrestrial perspective. The significance of this self-critical gesture will doubtlessly differ for different readers. Those who feel inexorably enmeshed within the US media-

48. Noam Chomsky, *Hegemony or Survival: America’s Quest for Global Dominance* (New York: Holt, 2004), 2.

49. Robbins, “Chomsky’s Golden Rule,” 548.

50. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005). For the classic science fiction dramatization of what it might be like to see human life with extraterrestrial eyes, and in so doing discovering the rational faculties common to all sentient species—including humans—see Olaf Stapledon, *Star Maker* (New York: Dover, 2008).

sphere may find Wallace's performance bracing. Those who imagine they have no problem imagining an outside to the United States' self-involved media ecology, meanwhile, may find Wallace's story less compelling. Whatever stance one takes, I would insist that we should understand Wallace's dialectic of identification and disidentification, the play of local position and world perspective, specifically as an attempt to use prose style to intervene in the American literary field.

If this is Wallace's aim, then the novelist and critic Chad Harbach is mistaken in his criticism of "The Suffering Channel." Harbach resists Wallace's decision to have the fictional world of his novella "intersect our own." Harbach suggests, speaking of Wallace's inclusion of the context of 9/11 in the story, "It's as if a German battalion wandered into Middle-earth without so much as a costume change. Or, perhaps more appropriately, as if the carpet bombing of Japan could be heard in Yoknapatawpha." Because Wallace and William Faulkner are "hermetic writers," Harbach insists, "external events cannot be imported smoothly into their fiction."⁵¹ It is true enough that "The Suffering Channel" is less hermetic than Wallace's other fictions, but the intrusion of history into his otherwise sealed fictive worlds is very precisely the story's point. "The Suffering Channel" highlights how "external events" have been kept out of Wallace's fictive worlds, demonstrates Wallace's growing awareness that an unworldly American culture has circumscribed the imaginative limits of these fictive worlds, and shows how dangerous these imaginative limits can be. Wallace's emphasis on limitation is not only a political exercise but also an aesthetic project, a careful manipulation of the reality effect. In the long passage quoted in the previous section, the details of what an executive intern wears ("a very simple severe Prada jacket over a black silk tee") mix with details that, though rhetorically presented as insignificant, take on ominous significance, given our knowledge of what will happen, drawn from information outside the world of the novella. In Roland Barthes's classic account, narrative is fundamentally different from description, in that narrative "appears as essentially *predictive*. . . . At each articulation of the narrative syntagm, someone says to the hero (or to the reader, it does not matter which): if you act in this way, if you choose this alternative, this is what will happen."⁵² Description, meanwhile, has no predictive function for Barthes. It resists meaning, by reduplicating "the great mythic opposition of the true-to-life (the lifelike) and the intelligible," belying

51. Harbach, "David Foster Wallace!," 174.

52. Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect," in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 142.

notions like function and meaning.⁵³ However, through a sort of narratological jujitsu, description meant to *denote* a reality before signification—literally, insignificant description—comes to *connote* reality. This is the reality effect, or the “significance of . . . insignificance.”⁵⁴ At any rate, this is the normal progression of the reality effect. In “The Suffering Channel,” Wallace essentially reverses the polarity of realist narrative codes, turning description into a narrative syntagm and eliminating almost completely traditional narrative development. Narrative as such is, in a sense, outsourced to history. The actual September 11 attacks give the novella its plot, and, given this fixed point of reference, Wallace projects his absent plot (the attacks) onto his fictive world (descriptions of his story’s setting). Time maps onto space.

As we have already seen, Wallace frequently proleptically anticipates the attacks when describing *Style’s* offices, writing, for example, of one executive intern that she “had ten weeks to live” (TSC, 326). Early in the novella, describing a restaurant at a Holiday Inn, Wallace’s narrator tells us, “The technical name of the Holiday Inn’s restaurant, according to the sign and menus, was Ye Olde Country Buffet. Hard to his left, an older couple was trying to get a great deal of luggage through the hallway’s glass doors. It was only a matter of time before they figured out that one should just go through and hold the doors open for the other. It was early in the afternoon of 1 July 2001” (TSC, 241). Further down the page, Wallace switches locations with this sentence: “Back at *Style’s* editorial offices on the sixteenth floor of 1 World Trade Center in New York, meanwhile, the associate editor was speaking with his head intern on the intercom while he typed internal emails” (TSC, 241). In a media world where events as such seem to have stopped happening, Wallace rediscovers a sense of dread—the dread of the imminent event—in a world of static things, in the specificity of dates (“1 July 2001”) and locations (“1 World Trade Center”). Because we know the 9/11 attacks are pending, the paradigm of description ends up doing the work of the syntagm of narration. As if meaning to invert the terms of Lukács’s argument in “Narrate or Describe?,” “The Suffering Channel” shows that what at first seems to be an insignificant welter of details about American crap consumerism, details Wallace’s pseudocosmopolitan characters think they’re merely observing from a superior vantage point, turns out to be precisely the raw material of narrative.⁵⁵

53. Barthes, “The Reality Effect,” 147.

54. Barthes, “The Reality Effect,” 143.

55. Georg Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?,” in *Writer and Critic, and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. Arthur Kahn (New York: Merlin Press, 1970), 116.

This eruption of narrative from description is significant in part because of the speed with which American culture rapidly assimilated 9/11 back into the routine operations of its excremental culture industry. If, shortly after the attacks, the satirical newspaper the *Onion* could write the headline, “A Shattered Nation Longs to Care about Stupid Bullshit Again,” by the time Wallace published his story in 2004, there was good reason to believe that the “nation” was very much back to caring about “stupid bullshit.”⁵⁶ What Wallace wants to do, it seems, is to find a style that keeps alive an awareness of the dangerous temporal intrusions of the world for those embedded within an essentially description-oriented, US-centered media culture. In short, Wallace wants the reader to experience dread whenever he or she encounters pop cultural effluvia, a fact that cuts against a provocative analysis of “The Suffering Channel” Annie McClanahan has offered in an article published in *symplokē*. In her essay, McClanahan juxtaposes “The Suffering Channel” with the history of scenario planning, giving a compelling account of how the narrative category of prolepsis operates in contemporary political discourse. Her key observation is that the rhetoric of scenario planning has replaced probabilistic and actuarial models of planning after 9/11 in the language the state uses to discuss terrorist and financial threats. From the ticking time bomb scenarios of the right-wing television show *24* to the broader rhetoric of preemption promoted by the US government, narrative plausibility and credibility have replaced other means of risk assessment. Under the scenario-planning paradigm, the certainty of narrative outcomes is confused for ontological certainty. This confusion of discourse and reality is perverse, and it is this perversity that McClanahan argues Wallace alerts us to. After all, diegesis only simulates the unfolding of events in time. “The Suffering Channel” “foregrounds the difference between an empirical world in which the anticipated future cannot be guaranteed and a narrative world in which it is always already in place” in order to create “a powerful critique of preemptive futurity.”⁵⁷ Her argument depends on aligning the novella’s depiction of the closed excremental loop of US media culture with scenario-planning practices. Just as Brint’s artistic “production” is the waste product of what he has consumed, so too, under the scenario-planning paradigm, does the “output” of a forecast turn into the “input” of evidence, creating “a closed circuit of specu-

56. “A Shattered Nation Longs to Care about Stupid Bullshit Again,” *Onion*, October 3, 2001, www.theonion.com/articles/a-shattered-nation-longs-to-care-about-stupid-bull,216/.

57. McClanahan, “Future’s Shock,” 43.

lation whose external truth can never be confirmed.”⁵⁸ This is, I hope my analysis makes clear, not a wholly convincing reading of “The Suffering Channel.” It is true that Wallace’s novella “produces a reader who is epistemologically divided by identifying both with the unknowing characters in the story and with her own historical knowledge.”⁵⁹ But the most powerful dramatic ironies of “The Suffering Channel” depend on the absolute certainty of narrative outcomes, based on an external knowledge of the 9/11 attacks. The epistemological division of the reader isn’t symmetrical; it is unambiguously a commentary on what has been called the “pre-9/11 mentality” of the interns.⁶⁰

By McClanahan’s account, if my interpretation is correct, Wallace would seem to endorse something like Dick Cheney’s “one percent doctrine,” the view that narrative plausibility should trump probability when determining which threats to take seriously.⁶¹ And yet the fact that Corliss and *Style*’s interns remain unaware of the pending terrorist attacks is not an invitation to join Cheney in engaging in paranoid storytelling to justify preemptive foreign invasions.⁶² Rather, Wallace’s frequent invocations of a confused or imperfect awareness of international contexts, the tragic belief that *WORLD* is just a synonym for the United States, his juxtaposition of a false cosmopolitanism with the possibility of some more genuine version—

58. McClanahan, “Future’s Shock,” 59.

59. McClanahan, “Future’s Shock,” 57.

60. Wallace’s critique of the interns’ imaginative failures doesn’t mean that he believes the attacks were in any ontological sense foreordained. Indeed, Wallace wrote a senior thesis at Amherst refuting the philosophical fatalism of Richard Taylor. His argument is that Taylor makes exactly the mistake that McClanahan identifies, mistaking futurity as a diegetic category—essentially a category of narrative, where the “future” basically just means what goes next in the syntagm of story—with futurity as an ontological category. Discourse can simulate ontological time, but to think they are the same is to think, with Taylor, that humans necessarily have no control over their own futures. See David Foster Wallace, “Richard Taylor’s ‘Fatalism’ and the Semantics of Physical Modality” (undergraduate honors thesis in philosophy, Amherst College, 1985), recently published as *Fate, Time, and Language: An Essay on Free Will*, ed. Steven M. Cahn and Maureen Eckert (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

61. On the “one percent doctrine,” see Ron Suskind, *The One Percent Doctrine: Deep Inside America’s Pursuit of Its Enemies since 9/11* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007).

62. In a short essay published in the *Atlantic*, Wallace asks whether we might regard “the 2,973 innocents killed in the atrocities of 9/11 not as victims but as democratic martyrs, ‘sacrifices on the altar of freedom.’” Whatever else regarding the victims of 9/11 as martyrs might mean, Wallace clearly rejects the logic of preemption. David Foster Wallace, “Just Asking,” *Atlantic*, November 2007, 25.

all of these are, as much as our knowledge of the pending terrorist attacks, reasons to suspect that the menacing, syntagmatic narrative of world history always threatens to erupt into the hermetically sealed, paradigmatic worlds of American literature at any moment, even if Americans continue to insist on immersing themselves in the “stupid bullshit” of their own media culture. Moreover, the dread this awareness elicits may have far more to do with the limited resources of one’s own psyche, its false sense of its own worldliness or knowingness, than with any specific external enemy. The actuality of the world is not elsewhere, “The Suffering Channel” shows, but always already present. A hermeneutic of close reading isn’t necessary to make the world legible because the outside to American media reality is right before our terrestrial eyes, legible in the pseudocosmopolitan laughter of interns, who are, after all, tittering at poop jokes while sitting in the very heart of American power.

4. Conclusion: Haunted by the World

The point of this analysis is not to pat Wallace on the back, to award him the gold star of genuine worldliness. It would not be possible to do so, in any case, on the basis of a single novella, or in light of any balanced reading of his career. Wallace’s writing simply doesn’t fulfill the representational criteria articulated by critics such as Engdahl or Robbins for worldly or cosmopolitan fiction. More importantly, to discuss Wallace’s cosmopolitanism in these terms is to miss the point of Wallace’s own mistrust of metaphors of depth, and his suggestion that evil is an “environment.” Wallace wants to find a literary form that demonstrates (rather than represents) the limited bounds of his own imagination, an “average, averagely bright” perspective, habituated by US media, which he regards as constitutionally unable to see on a planetary scale. Wallace’s fiction arguably highlights these lacunae, without pretending to overcome them, far more forcefully than the writing of those, such as Vollmann, who often try to escape their limited perspectives by getting on a plane and traveling to another country.⁶³

63. There is also a biographical dimension to Wallace’s localism. Wallace discusses his fear of flying with David Lipsky in the posthumously published book-length interview, *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself*, and in such unlikely places as *Everything and More*, his history of the concept of infinity. See David Lipsky, *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace* (New York: Broadway, 2010), 96, and David Foster Wallace, *Everything and More: A Compact History of Infinity* (New York: W. W. Norton), 16–17. The image of an American writer of encyclope-

In critiquing Vollmann in this way, we might want also to emphasize the great literary achievements that can, in skillful hands, arise from a radical narrowing of literary focus. A focus on the local—say, Henry David Thoreau’s Walden, Raymond Carver’s minimalist domestic spaces, DeLillo’s limousine interior—can obviously, in ways both direct and indirect, teach us a great deal about the global, as much as, if not more than, maximalist works. The more important point is that when many of our prominent literary critics allege that American writers lack cosmopolitan vision—whether those critics favor modernism, realism, or some variation on Jameson’s historical arguments about the social determinants of style—these critics are complaining about the inadequacy or badness of fit of these writers’ figurations to some underlying reality. But if my account is convincing, we might instead write the history of recent American fiction with greater sensitivity to the worldly presences or hauntings even in everyday depictions of national life. Our accounts of both recent American fiction and the field of 9/11 fiction would need to expand, fusing already rich thematic and formal discussions with discussions of the institutions, social traditions, and power relations that mediate the American writer’s relationship to the world. From this vantage point, worldliness is not a matter of homology or allegory but of ontology and sociology. After all, aspiring Martian-Americans are, let us recall, usually formed by or situated in the university; tremendous resources, training, and capital investments enhance their rational capacities. As Mark McGurl has argued in *The Program Era*, the rise of creative writing programs is nothing less than the “most important event in postwar American literary history.”⁶⁴ In the US-style research university, creative writing programs should be viewed, as much as scientific or military research, as a kind of advanced study or R&D, a form of public investment in the development of American writers. And as D. T. Max’s biography makes clear, Wallace was avowedly a creature of the school, and specifically the American university, accruing A-pluses with ease, writing two honors theses at Amherst, getting an MFA at the University of Arizona, briefly attending Harvard as a graduate student in philosophy, and teaching literature and creative writing at a variety of schools for the remainder of his life. Within institutions, Wallace flourished; outside them, he could barely func-

dic narrative who happens to be afraid of flying is striking, but making too much of this biographical fact risks occluding that Wallace emphasized the systemic and institutional grounds of his failed global vision.

64. Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), ix.

tion. Wallace was an exemplar of US education, a hyperthyroidal instance of what creative writers have the potential to become during the program era. That “The Suffering Channel” renders the failure of American institutions—especially educational, but also media, institutions—to produce cosmopolitan citizens is therefore not a coincidence. Wallace presents a special case study insofar as he was more articulate than others at imagining, from within, what the world looks like to those without the linguistic capital or habitus to engage it fully. The personal struggle of Wallace highlights the political stakes of this argument, emphasizing that—in an era of the program or the system—the solution to America’s “anti-worldly” literary field must be collective and institutional, not individual and private. Even the most talented single writer cannot, by definition, change the field alone. Such an empirical and quantitative perspective on the US literary field would be a prerequisite for understanding the specific ways educational and cultural institutions fail to address the world and would help highlight steps we might take to radically extend the cosmopolitan ambitions of the American novel, giving our great writers and artists the tools they need to enlarge the world of their imaginations.