

I

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Slacker Redemption: Wallace and Generation X

For the last ten years or so, Wallace critics have tended to regard the one-two punch of “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction” and the 1993 *Contemporary Fiction* interview with Larry McCaffery as David Foster Wallace’s attempt both to situate himself firmly in the tradition of American postmodern fiction, a tradition represented by such luminaries as John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, Robert Coover, and Don DeLillo, while also carving out a new direction for postmodernism that simultaneously honored postmodern self-reflexivity and affirmed what Wallace famously called “single-entendre principles.”¹ After the publication of *Infinite Jest* (1996), one could not help but read “E Unibus Pluram” as a blueprint for the unique mixture of self-consciousness and dogged earnestness that characterized Wallace’s masterpiece, a doubleness that marked the novel as a clear advance in the development of American postmodernism. Yet as sound and useful as that reading has been, it has nevertheless excised those two key documents in the Wallace corpus from the concrete particulars of their historical and cultural movement. And for those readers who first encountered “E Unibus Pluram” and the McCaffery interview in the pages of the summer 1993 issue of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, there was very little sense that David Wallace was setting the groundwork for a masterpiece still three years in the distance: rather, Wallace was talking about, and bringing a fresh and exhilarating perspective on, our contemporary moment. And that contemporary moment was the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the Reagan-Bush era yielded to the Clinton years; when the recently collapsed Berlin Wall compelled neoconservative political theorist Francis Fukuyama to declare that history as we know it was over; when the generation that followed the baby boomers was finally emerging into a tentative adulthood and acquiring a coherent cultural identity to boot, an identity crystalized by the term Generation X; and when alternative culture, represented by white rock bands such as R.E.M., The Cure, and the Replacements, and by indie filmmakers such as Stephen Soderberg, Spike Lee, and Quentin Tarrantino, was

about to take over the mainstream. Although twenty-first-century US culture is now indelibly changed and marked by Wallace's intervention, I wish to reverse thrust here and resituate Wallace in the culture from which he emerged, and I also wish to contextualize his work before *Infinite Jest* in relation to postmodern fiction and mainstream and alternative popular culture of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Wallace was born in 1962. As such, he must be reckoned on the older end of the Generation X spectrum. Most cultural theorists and social scientists identify Generation Xers as born between the early 1960s and the mid-to-late 1970s. As the generation that immediately followed the baby boomers, Gen Xers were originally dubbed "babybusters or boomerangers" before novelist Douglas Coupland applied the already existent term Generation X, which was in fact the name of Billy Idol's original late 1970s punk band, to his own generation in his novel of the same name. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines Generation Xers as "a generation of young people (esp. North Americans reaching adulthood in the 1980s and 1990s) perceived to be disaffected, directionless, or irresponsible, and reluctant to participate in society." In her pop economics study *Slackernomics* (2008), Lisa Chamberlain provides an account of Generation X's birth that is fairly representative and hence can serve here as a shorthand way into the world that Wallace inherited. As the baby boomers settled into middle age and embodied the very same establishment they once sought to overturn, a backlash against the 1960s counterculture resulted in the mainstream "reasserting itself with a vengeance: anti-hippy, -feminist, -homo – against all identity politics in general – but mostly against the notion of anticonsumerism and antimaterialism."² Earnestness, now identified with the discredited politics of the 1960s, gave way to cynicism. Generation Xer's, the inheritors of this new ethos, were offered two competing responses: they could embrace the new yuppie dominant, a class represented in Chamberlain's account by *Family Ties* character Alex P. Keaton, a teenage conservative heartthrob who, week after week, made a national mockery of his parents' 1960s liberal pieties; or they could reject the Reaganized mainstream for the apathetic periphery inhabited by Coupland's disaffected slackers, where yuppie success was scorned in favor of low-paying, low-ambition "McJobs," to use Coupland's own syllogism, and "pop culture" was elevated to a form of intellectual currency.³

The latter demographic encompasses Wallace's early readership, which he identified in 1993 as "people more or less like me, in their twenties or thirties . . . who've been raised with U.S. commercial culture and are engaged with it and informed by and fascinated with it but still hungry for something commercial art can't provide."⁴ Wallace was hardly alone in noting his generation's keen, and not entirely ironic, fascination with US commercial

culture. In *Generation X: Americans Aged 18 to 34*, a 2001 reference work on consumer trends, author Susan Mitchell found that “popular culture is ‘The Arts’” for this generation.⁵ Wallace himself observed, in “E Unibus Pluram,” that the “U.S. generation born after 1950 is the first for whom television was something to be lived with instead of just looked at”; he goes on to say that “where we are different [from our fathers] is that we have no memory of a world without such electric definition.”⁶ In a convoluted recursion that sounds like a David Foster Wallace invention, by the early 1990s Hollywood script writers had clued in to Generation X’s love-hate relationship with the disposable artifacts of pop culture and began portraying that attitude in such self-conscious “Gen X” films as *Reality Bites* (1994), in which the characters reference everything from School House Rock to the Brady Bunch, and *Singles* (1992), Cameron Crowe’s grunge-era romantic comedy, and in *Friends*, in which the character Chandler Bing, at least in the show’s early seasons, was clearly intended to embody that peculiar Gen X creation, the encyclopedic pop-culture ironist. As Rob Owens observes in *GenXTV: The Brady Bunch to Melrose Place* (1999), “The use of pop culture references is the biggest difference between *Friends* and its predecessors . . . This device is clearly a trademark of Generation X.”⁷

While such mainstream trafficking in pop-culture references sounds old hat now – in fact, it is the very air we breathe – the trend was still *new* in the early 1990s and represented a shift in attitude toward television and pop culture that Wallace was instrumental in capturing and analyzing. And, as is usually the case, whereas popular culture itself was late in picking up on this shift, the fiction of Wallace’s generation, and Wallace’s own early work as well, was already embodying the new pop-culture reality, as witnessed by *The Broom of the System’s* (1987) scattered references to *The Bob Newhart Show* and *The Munsters* and the “convex mirror” preoccupation with television that anchored his first story collection, *Girl with Curious Hair* (1989), whose fictional representations of such pop-culture figures as Pat Sajak, Alex Trebek, and David Letterman were intended, Wallace explained in the book’s elaborate copyright-page disclaimer, not to “denote, or pretend to private information about, actual 3-D persons, living, dead, or otherwise” but are “meant only to denote figures, images, the stuff of collective dreams.”⁸ As a testament to how groundbreaking Wallace’s pop-infused stories were, the book was held up for publication for nearly a year as lawyers for Norton tried to work out the possible libelous implications of fictionalizing ostensibly “real” celebrities.⁹ “The belief that pop images are basically just mimetic devices,” he argues in “E Unibus Pluram,” “is one of the attitudes that separates most U.S. fiction writers under c. 40 from the writerly generation that precedes us, and designs our grad-school curricula.”¹⁰ Wallace goes on to

describe a workshop wherein his professor insisted that the students' stories should avoid "trendy mass-popular-media" references, at which point "trans-generational discourse broke down."¹¹

What was particularly prescient in the context of the early 1990s was Wallace's analysis of the complex love-hate relationship members of Generation X had to their own encyclopedic knowledge of, and affection for, the pop culture of their childhoods. As he observes early in "E Unibus Pluram," "much of the pleasure my generation takes from television lies in making fun of it. But you have to remember that younger Americans grew up as much with people's disdain for TV as we did with TV itself."¹² And, as Wallace's now famous argument has it, lavishing derision on disposable entertainment that one nevertheless loves leads to a lonely form of meta-watching that is the source of "a great despair and stasis in U.S. culture" that for "aspiring fiction writers . . . pose[s] especially terrible problems."¹³ He was also the first serious social critic to have argued that, by the early 1990s, television had found a successful way to address the otherwise troubling fact that its most sought-after advertising target – namely, that cherished 18 to 34 demographic, which in 1993 meant Generation X – watched television with tender, ironic derision. The solution was for television, and televised advertising, to apply that same brand of ironic, self-conscious derision to itself. Wallace was also the first serious social critic to connect his generation's brand of ironic meta-watching, and television's then new embrace of self-consciousness, to "post WWII literature, namely U.S. postmodernism." In his most ringing statement of the situation as he saw it, Wallace writes, "For at least ten years now, television has been ingeniously absorbing, homogenizing, and re-presenting the very same cynical postmodern aesthetic that was once the best alternative to the appeal of Low, over-easy, mass-marketed narrative."¹⁴

But Wallace was not content with merely locating the source of his generation's discontent. Rather, at the exact moment when US commercial culture discovered, and began exploiting, what was unique about its prized demographic – the irony, the disaffection, the obsession with pop culture – Wallace was looking for a way forward. In this effort he was certainly not alone. Once again, writers of literary fiction were well ahead of the zeitgeist curve. Richard Powers, in his 1988 sophomore novel *Prisoner's Dilemma*, accepts, and also finds problematic, the fact that irony is the primary mode for thoughtful people confronting the hollow simulacrum that is contemporary existence, a situation one character defines as "the antieverything infection"¹⁵ For Powers, one way forward was to adopt an attitude he terms "Crackpot Realism," whereby one realistically confronts the enormity of late twentieth-century desolation while willfully, and naïvely, pushing

through one's default irony toward a more redemptive approach to contemporary existence. Similarly, Jonathan Franzen's second novel, *Strong Motion* (1992), risks sentiment and earnestness in its startlingly direct and angry approach to such complex political issues as gender equality and ecoterrorism. The novel's style also represented a clear break from that of his first novel, *The Twenty-Seventh City* (1988), wherein, according to Franzen's own description, the author sent his rhetorical bombs "in a Jiffy-Pak mailer of irony and understatement."¹⁶

Both novelists, whom Wallace overtly identified as his closest peers, were seeking to embody the irony and disaffection of their generation while also looking for a way to reaffirm what Franzen called "humane values." Franzen makes this affirmation in an essay Wallace commissioned him to write as part of a 1996 special issue of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* devoted to "The Future of Fiction." There, Franzen lists four articles of faith that characterize "serious fiction": a belief in the individual; a "pessimistic" conviction that things will not improve any time soon; a strong "commitment to mediating between the author's subjectivity and the world"; and an affirmation of "honesty," "responsibility," "love," and "significance," the latter of which constitute "humane values."¹⁷ In short, Wallace's innovative call for a fiction that combines self-reflexivity and earnestness, that joins "cynicism" and "naiveté," was by no means a lone cry from the wilderness.

Whereas both *Prisoner's Dilemma* and *The Twenty-Seventh City* explore the limitations of neoliberalism in the context of real political change, Wallace's early work is conspicuously apolitical, and in this aspect he can also be seen to embody a uniquely Gen X ethos. In the context of our current hyperpartisan, thoroughly politicized era, it is easy to overlook the fact that Wallace's ascent to the top ranks of the US literary establishment took place during a rare, brief, and, as these kinds of things always turn out to be, false period of relative historical complacency. The collapse of the Soviet Union occurred two years after the 1987 appearance of *The Broom of the System*; by September 11, 2001, Wallace had published *Infinite Jest, A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (1997), and *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999). Beginning with his *Rolling Stone* essay on the 9/11 attacks, "The View from Mrs. Thompsons," and continuing through to his blistering portrait of right-wing radio host John Ziegler and, of course, his unfinished novel *The Pale King* (2011), Wallace's work became more political, and more pointed, the political partisanship of the new century replacing pop-culture irony in his work as the source of our isolation and failure to find real meaning and purpose in our life. Had his work not developed and matured in these various ways,

Wallace might have joined his *bête noire* Mark Leyner among the ranks of forgotten writers-of-the-moment. The key point is that, before 9/11, his work treated politics, if at all, as *farce*. What's more, both of his first two novels are set in an imagined future, quarantining them even further from direct engagement with the contemporary politics of their time. And it was in that precise atmosphere of relative calm in the West that Wallace, a middle-class white male, had the luxury to work out his ideas about information overload, addiction, entertainment, solipsism, and loneliness.

Numerous Wallace scholars have already contextualized Wallace's critique of late 1980s hip irony against the backdrop of Francis Fukuyama's neoconservative tome, *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), which expanded upon a 1989 essay of the same name that first appeared in *National Interest*. Both Samuel Cohen's *After the End of History: American Fiction in the 1990s* (2009) and Lee Konstantinou's *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction* (2016) survey the work of Wallace and his 1990s literary peers within the context of Fukuyama's optimistic reading of the Soviet Union's collapse. Put briefly, Fukuyama reads the end of the Cold War and the so-called triumph of liberal democracy as the fulfillment of a Hegelian concept of history – that is, history as “a single, coherent, evolutionary process, when taking into account the experience of all people in all times.”¹⁸ Liberal capitalism had won, while all other models had been obliterated as ineffective and no longer operative. Although we know from D. T. Max that Wallace did vote for Reagan once, no one is arguing that Wallace was a neoconservative. Rather, Fukuyama's thesis helps us understand the prevailing national mood that inspired Wallace to imagine Johnny Gentle's O.N.A.N. As Konstantinou puts it, “When history ends, we face nothing less than ‘centuries of boredom’”; and that aura of boredom led, at the time, to a broad sense that “life in post-industrial democracies [was] listless and without flavor; loneliness and a kind of bland sadness were all one could expect of the new world order.”¹⁹ What is equally emblematic of this time period is Wallace's approach to history and politics. Whether or not he imagined himself writing fiction after the End of History, as Fukuyama and Hegel have it, it is nevertheless true that he tended to view both history and politics as theater, and, even more important, as something *manufactured* in the absence of real historical change, real political exigencies.

In *The Broom of the System*, for instance, politics rears its head in only one instance, namely, via the creation by Raymond Zusatz, the governor of Ohio in Wallace's fictionalized 1990, of the Great Ohio Desert, or G.O.D. for short. Worried that “the state is getting soft” and becoming “one big suburb and industrial park and mall,” Zusatz proposes that the state construct a vast

desert made of black sand to serve as “a point of savage reference for the good people of Ohio. A place to fear and love. A blasted region. . . . A place without malls. An Other for Ohio’s self.”²⁰ Similarly, Konstantinou has shown us the remarkable degree to which Wallace’s postmillennium O.N.A.N. reflects Fukuyama’s post–Cold War vision. In a passage Konstantinou also quotes, Wallace contextualizes the world of *Infinite Jest* as a “post-Soviet and -Jihad era when – somehow even worse – there was no real Foreign Menace of any real unified potency to hate and fear, and the US sort of turned on itself and its own philosophical fatigue and hideous redolent wastes with a spasm of panicked rage that in retrospect seems possible only in a time of geopolitical supremacy.”²¹ Against this Fukuyamaesque backdrop emerges President and former lounge singer Johnny Gentle, who is “totally up-front about seeing American renewal as an essentially aesthetic affair,” and who, once in office, must manufacture, in the absence of a genuine global enemy, “some cohesion-renewing Other,” which, in the novel, turns out, comically, to be Canadians.²²

Although it is now almost axiomatic to regard President Johnny Gentle as an eerily prophetic harbinger of President Donald Trump, the Gentle material, when read in the context of the first Clinton administration, discloses the degree to which politics at that time was viewed as largely inconsequential, a view best typified by the fact that Bill Clinton’s 1997 State of the Union address was broadcast on split screen to make room for the conclusion of the O. J. Simpson civil trial. This same sense of inconsequentiality prevailed all the way until September 11, 2001. The most pressing story on cable news networks on September 10, 2001, the day before the attacks on the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon, involved the murder of a DC intern named Chandra Levy and the possibility, breathlessly floated for months by cable news pundits and legal celebrities, that her murderer might have been Democratic Senator Gary Condit. The story preoccupied the cable news networks 24/7 for the entire summer and early fall of 2001 and instantly disappeared from the national consciousness on September 11. The *Time* magazine front-page story during the week of September 11 was titled “Where Have You Gone, Colin Powell?” and explored why “the man many thought would walk in to the presidency himself a few years ago, [was] leaving such shallow footprints.”²³ Salman Rushdie’s novel *Fury*, published in August 2001, depicts “the first hot season of the third millennium” as a prosperous but empty “golden age,” or a decadent, directionless modern-day Rome, to be exact, in which politics is dismissed as a circus and New York is visited by “the motorcades of two largely interchangeable and certainly unlovable candidates” whom Rushdie calls “Gush” and “Bore.”²⁴

Wallace himself captured this same mood of empty inconsequentiality in his lengthy *Rolling Stone* piece on the John McCain campaign of 2000, a piece whose first subsection after its playful prologue is titled “Who Cares.” There he asks,

Do you even give a shit whether McCain can or ought to win [?] Since you’re reading *Rolling Stone*, the chances are good that you are an American between say 18 and 35, which demographically makes you a Young Voter. And no generation of Young Voters has ever cared less about politics and politicians than yours. There’s hard demographic and voter-pattern data backing this up . . . assuming you give a shit about data.²⁵

More importantly, Wallace goes on to include himself among that same demographic, admitting in full that the real subject of his essay is less McCain’s campaign than “the enormous shuddering yawn that the political process tends to evoke in us now in this post-Watergate-post-Iran-Contra-post-Whitewater-post-Lewinsky era” – the era, in other words, that defined the politics, or apathetic lack thereof, of Generation X.²⁶

But Wallace was not content to accept this apathy, no more than he was content to embrace the *Beavis-and-Butthead* slacker irony that characterized his generation during the last decade of the twentieth century. As D. T. Max correctly observed, Wallace’s McCain essay wasn’t just about contemporary politics: rather, he used “his unaccustomed ringside seat at American history to further preoccupations that dated back to his ‘E Unibus Pluram’ essay.”²⁷ For Wallace, US politics had become another self-reflexive, and hollowed-out, simulacrum that people of his generation in particular viewed with a cynical sneer, and, as warranted as such an approach might be, that cynicism had real-life consequences that Wallace is at pains to reverse. Midway through “Up, Simba,” Wallace breaks from his narrative to explain,

If you are bored and disgusted by politics and don’t bother to vote, you are in effect voting for the entrenched Establishment of the two major parties, who please rest assured are not dumb, and who are keenly aware that it is in their interests to keep you disgusted and bored and cynical and to give you every possible psychological reason to stay home doing one-hitters and watching MTV on primary day. By all means stay home if you want, but don’t bullshit yourself that you’re not voting. In reality, there is *no such thing as not voting*.²⁸

Wallace would later reprise a similar argument in his Kenyon Commencement Address, and in very similar language, when he affirms, “In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is *what* to worship.”²⁹ The essay’s final move also

parallels the final section of “E Unibus Pluram” in that both essays, after conceding that cynicism and suspicion are warranted responses to the dehumanizing emptiness that is contemporary culture, nevertheless appeal to the reader’s capacity for earnestness and sincerity. As regards McCain, Wallace suggests if his readers have started “fearing [their] own cynicism almost as much as [they] fear [their] own credulity,” then they should try to remember McCain’s four years in solitary confinement during the Vietnam War. “There were no techs’ cameras in that box,” Wallace reminds us, “no aides or consultants, no paradoxes or gray areas; nothing to sell. There was just one guy and whatever in his character sustained him. This is a huge deal.”³⁰

The Pale King, which is set during the early to mid-1980s, and hence serves as the only Wallace novel set in the recognizable past, contains Wallace’s most direct and detailed portrait of Generation X apathy in the form of Chris Fogle. A self-proclaimed “wastoid” and “nihilist,” Fogle shamefully recalls an episode when his father, who is clearly delineated as being part of an earlier, more conformist, and more civic-minded generation, finds Chris and his friends recovering from a three-day debauch, which memory Fogle identifies as “being the worst confirmation of the worst kind of generation-gap stereotype and parental disgust for their decadent, wastoid kids.”³¹ Similarly, at the end of his McCaffery interview, Wallace describes his generation’s relationship to the 1960s counterculture as “a bit like the way you feel when you’re in high school and your parents go on a trip and you throw a party. . . . For while it’s great, free and freeing . . . but then time passes, and the party gets louder and louder, . . . and you gradually start wishing your parents would come back and restore some fucking order in your house.”³² But Wallace also leads Fogle out of his nihilistic abyss by having him stumble into an accounting class, wherein the stern Jesuit professor proclaims, “Gentlemen, you are called to account.”³³ Fogle abruptly abandons his “wastoid” ennui and becomes an IRS agent. As a creature of the Reagan years and the complex coopting of rebellion that characterized his political education, Wallace consistently arrived at relatively conservative solutions to the problems arising from the dead end of irony and cynicism, a tendency he shared with Franzen as well, who concluded his 1996 essay on “The Future of the Novel” by arguing that “when the times get really, really awful, you retrench; you reexamine old content in new contexts; you try to preserve. . . . The day comes when the truly subversive literature is in some measure conservative.”³⁴ Franzen’s words anticipate those of Glendenning, who observes in *The Pale King*: “There are all kinds of conservatives depending on what it is they want to conserve.”³⁵

In much the same way that Wallace's core themes and concerns were shaped by the political culture of the Reagan years, so, too, were his vaunted literary innovations largely a byproduct of the late 1980s literary landscape, a landscape Wallace himself analyzed and cheerfully skewered in his 1988 essay, "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young." Wallace quietly suppressed this essay, or at any rate chose not to reprint it, during his lifetime largely because he would reprint, almost word for word, large chunks of it in "E Unibus Pluram," an essay that productively builds upon the earlier essay's somewhat tentative exploration of the impact of television and pop culture on his generation's fictional production. Nevertheless, when read on its own, "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young" provides an accurate portrait of the literary marketplace that Wallace had to navigate with his first two books while also offering fascinating insight into the forces that helped shape Wallace's groundbreaking early fiction.

When *The Broom of the System* first appeared in 1987, it was published in paperback as part of Penguin's "Contemporary American Fiction" imprint. The previous year, Penguin published the paperback edition of Bret Easton Ellis's *Less Than Zero* to much commercial success, a novel Ellis wrote while an undergraduate at Bennington and published when he was all of 21. Meanwhile, Random House had launched its flashy new paperback imprint, Vintage Contemporaries, with glossy book jackets that looked like 1980s new wave album covers, the big success from this latter venture being Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City*. Other writers who emerged during this period while still in their early 20s were David Levitt, Mona Simpson, Lorrie Moore, Michael Chabon, and the aforementioned Powers and Franzen. Wallace began his publishing career, in other words, during a brief moment when "writers' proximity to their own puberties seemed now an asset."³⁶ While the popular media of the time referred to this group of young writers as the literary Brat Pack, Wallace preferred the term "the Conspicuously Young." He goes on to divide the work of this generation into three categories: "Neiman-Marcus Nihilism," which encompassed the zombie yuppie fiction of Ellis and McInerney; "Catatonic Realism," by which he meant apprentice fiction in the Raymond Carver tradition; and "Workshop Hermeticism," which referred to the sort of polished, but unchallenging, work that was taught, revised, and promoted by the MFA workshop industry.³⁷

While Wallace is happy in this essay to ponder his aesthetic affiliation with writers such as David Levitt and Jay McInerney, who, the charge went (and Wallace made this charge twice, here and in "E Unibus Pluram"), had a "habit of delineating characters according to the commercial slogans that appear on their T-shirts,"³⁸ he is adamant about separating himself from the

workshop writers of category three, a virulent section of the essay that provides a window into Wallace's own fractious experience as an MFA student at the University of Arizona in Tucson, an experience that no doubt shaped him into the most original and trailblazing fiction writer of his Brat Pack generation.

D. T. Max's account of Wallace's years at Tucson confirms, and probably draws from, Wallace's portrait in this early essay of the writer's workshop experience of the mid-1980s. Max argues that Wallace's professors were suspicious, or at any rate tired, of postmodernism, which they "associated with a different era," and of minimalism, either of the Catatonic or the Neiman-Marcus variety, which "smelled trendy to them"; rather, what they wanted was "the well-made realist short story."³⁹ As Mark McGurl persuasively argues in *The Program Era*, the dominant status of "realism" in creative writing workshops can be seen as a product of the "write-what-you-know" dictum, which favors a "crudely empiricist conception of knowledge as that which the author has directly observed"; this valorization of "autobiographical self-expressivity" is then tempered by "the professional impersonality of craft."⁴⁰ Thus has emerged the workshop formula of self-expression ("find your voice") plus self-discipline ("show don't tell").⁴¹ Wallace's early work aggressively flouted both dictums. According to Max, one of Wallace's professors, after reading "Solomon Silverfish," a flamboyant Gass-influenced piece that Wallace submitted for workshop, "took Wallace aside and told him that if he continued to write the way he was writing, 'we'd hate to lose you.'"⁴²

This experience clearly colors Wallace's critique of the writing workshop ethos of the late 1980s that he spells out in "Fictional Futures." First, he points out that, for the program staff, "every minute spent on class and department business is ... a minute not spent on their own art."⁴³ The members of the staff then "take the resentment out in large part on the psyches of their pupils," and in particular those students endowed with a "basic willingness to engage his instructor in the kind of dynamic back-and-forth any real creative education requires."⁴⁴ His next complaint is that the workshop situation rewards students who play according to the rules of the "school game," which are as follows: "(1) Determine what the instructor wants; and (2) Supply it forthwith."⁴⁵ Conversely, Wallace insists, the "practice of art" by its very nature "always exists in at least some state of tension with the rules of its practice, as essentially an applied system of rules."⁴⁶ Speaking obliquely of himself, he concludes this section by arguing that the "'next' generation of American writers" should move past the "relatively stable air of New Criticism and Anglo-American aesthetics" that still controlled the workshop ethos and write fiction that demonstrates

“long-overdue appreciation for the weird achievements of such aliens as Husserl, Heidegger, Bakhtin, Lacan, Barthes, Polet, Gadamer, deMan.”⁴⁷ To be sure, ambitious writers are generally prone to describe the literary landscape of their time in such a way as to make space for their own artistic agendas – whether the author in question is the T. S. Eliot of “Tradition and the Individual Talent” or the John Barth of “The Literature of Exhaustion” – and so Wallace’s pointed depiction of the late 1980s penchant for the Conspicuously Young hardly breaks new ground in this regard. Nevertheless, Wallace’s portrait provides fascinating insight into not only the literary landscape that Wallace hoped to transform but also how specifically he planned to render that transformation.

More so than Powers and Franzen, Wallace, for all the intellectual heft and ambition of his work, remains a “young person’s” writer. His most successful and popular texts not only feature students and twentysomethings – a cast of characters ranging from Lenore Beadsman and Hal Incandenza to Chris Fogel and Meredith Rand – but also address the issues that matter intimately to readers on the cusp of adulthood. Today’s college students were all born in the early 1990s, just when Wallace was putting together the body of fiction and nonfiction that would culminate in *Infinite Jest*. They have never known a world without the Internet, without e-mail, without cable television. They were still in single digits when Napster introduced the MP3 and ushered in the streaming revolution. Nevertheless, many of Wallace’s contemporary readers experience *Infinite Jest* as if it were written just for them, so perfectly does it depict and diagnose their world, and their experience with information, entertainment, and the pursuit of pleasure. The book’s future is their present. A sizable part of Wallace’s genius lies in the reach and accuracy of his prophetic vision, the seeds of which were planted in an alien soil, in a world that was only just beginning to become the world we live in now.

Notes

1. David Foster Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1997), p. 81.
2. Lisa Chamberlain, *Slackernomics: Generation X in the Age of Creative Destruction* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2008), p. 10.
3. Douglas Coupland, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1991), p. 5.
4. David Foster Wallace, “An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace,” by Larry McCaffery in Stephen J. Burn (ed.), *Conversations with David Foster Wallace* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2012), p. 22.

5. Susan Mitchell, *Generation X: Americans Aged 18 to 34* (Ithaca, NY: New Strategist, 2001), p. 51.
6. Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," p. 43.
7. Rob Owens, *GenXTV: The Brady Bunch to Melrose Place* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999), p. 119.
8. David Foster Wallace, *Girl with Curious Hair* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989), p. vi.
9. See D. T. Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* (New York: Viking, 2012), pp. 106–109.
10. Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," p. 43.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
15. Richard Powers, *Prisoner's Dilemma* (New York: Harper Collins, 1988), p. 170.
16. Franzen quoted in Stephen J. Burn, *Jonathan Franzen and the End of Postmodernism* (New York: Continuum, 2008), p. 72. Burn similarly connects *The Twenty-Seventh City* to *Prisoner's Dilemma*.
17. Jonathan Franzen, "I'll Be Doing More of Same," *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 16.11 (1996), p. 37.
18. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992), p. xii.
19. Lee Konstantinou, *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), pp. 167, 168.
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34. Franzen, "I'll Be Doing More of Same," p. 38.
35. Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 132.
36. David Foster Wallace, "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young," in *Both Flesh and Not: Essays* (New York: Little, Brown, 2012), p. 37.
37. *Ibid.*, pp. 39–40.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

39. D. T. Max, *Every Love Story*, pp. 60, 61.
40. Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), pp. 95, 102.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 64. Tellingly, Mark McGurl ignores this episode in a recent overview of Wallace's artistic project, "The Institution of Nothing: David Foster Wallace in the Program," *boundary 2* 41.3 (Fall 2014), 27–54. McGurl sees Wallace as not only a figure of "the Program Era" but one "whose situation marks a further step toward the *normalization* of the emergent conditions of the institutionalization that that term tries to name," p. 31.
43. Wallace, "Fictional Futures," p. 58.
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45. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
46. *Ibid.*
47. *Ibid.*, p. 63.