

Supervisor's Report on M.A. Thesis by Alex Russell

"Wallace Among the Machines: David Foster Wallace, Technology and the Self"

Mr. Alex Russell sets out to interrogate in his thesis work the problem and challenge of technology and the self in the writings of David Foster Wallace: "I aim to show how Wallace complicated his view of technology as *defining* the contemporary relationship to selfhood in the wake of postmodernism - evidenced in "E Unibus Pluram" and, in particular, *Infinite Jest* - to a view of technology in *The Pale King* as potentially *erasing* the possibility of working toward a meaningful self in the first place. In the earlier novel, we are presented with an opportunity to change our approach to living in the face of pervasive and dangerous entertainment technologies, epitomised by the fatally captivating "Infinite Jest" film cartridge. There are routes of recovery [...] available as a way out of the ontologically deadening atmosphere of the novel's America" (15). Russell adds of *Infinite Jest* and of *The Pale King*, "In both works, this thesis hopes to show, technology is presented as encouraging us to shirk the responsibility of crafting a self, ultimately working to obfuscate what Wallace believes it means to be a human being" (15). This well encapsulates what the candidate sets out to accomplish.

The thesis contains 100 pages across five sections (including 12 subsections) and a Bibliography. The main five parts include the following: "1. Introduction, 2. Wallace and His Self, 3. Entertainment Technology in *Infinite Jest*, 4. *The Pale King*: Technology and Technologies of the Self, 5. Conclusion: Illusions *Ad Inf*". Stylistically the text is well written and well structured. However, there are a few glitches such as the following: "that has result from this" requires "that has resulted from this" (11), "to teach it's children" (17) should have an "its" instead; "be able decipherable" (20) should just read as "be decipherable"; "threaten to ends its" (26) should just be "threaten to end its"; "he beings his" (27) should be "he begins his"; "exaplined" (51) should be "explained"; "an traditional" (57) should be "a traditional"; "the *The Pale King*'s" does not need the first "the"; "hitaning" (77) should be "hiatus".

Content-wise, in Wallace "there is no inherent, pre-existing self, only "the horrific struggle to establish a human self [that] results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle" (*CL*, p.64)" (18). This is noteworthy for its centrality in Wallace. In another key point with regard to a Wallace short story "Forever Overhead": "Wallace characterises the leap of becoming as a leap from a monologic to a dialogic relation to the world, portrayed as moving out of one's head and engaging with the other" (20). This kind of intersubjectivization seems key in Wallace's writings. Furthermore, in this same context, "The leap itself constitutes the boy's reply. It is at this moment that he opens up to a dialogue with the world, encapsulated by the final word of the story: "Hello" (p.13)" (21). This single word says a good deal about the problem of connectivity in Wallace. Not only this: "Adam Kelly is right to highlight the immense importance Wallace "places on the redeeming value of dialogue itself" throughout all his work. In his piece on the "Dialogic dialogue" of Wallace's fiction, Kelly quotes Mikhail Bakhtin's study of Dostoevsky - a novelist whom Wallace greatly admired and, as has been examined, in many ways closely emulated [...]" (21). This high valuation of Dostoevsky is notable, for

it also constructs a Wallace as having a long view with regard to literary lineage, however much he may have learnt from such C20 antecedents as Joyce, Faulkner, Pynchon, et. al.

Furthermore, “As Wallace himself wrote of Dostoevsky [...] his “concern was always what it is to be a human being — that is, how to be an actual *person*, someone whose life is informed by values and principles, instead of just an especially shrewd kind of self-preserving animal”” (21). This is interesting stuff. Also, “Dialogue and engagement with the other is for Wallace the way in which that self is assembled out of this nothingness” (22). The Wallacian self thus is ostensibly instituted through forms of intersubjectivization. What is more, in another area of concern, “the hip ironists that Wallace saw as populating late 20th-century America appear as updated versions of Kierkegaard's hypothetical aesthete with his aesthetic way of life, set against the ethicist in *Either/Or*. The aesthetic way of life is based on the primacy of the individual desire [...]. Importantly, the long-term result of this fidelity to individual wants, Kierkegaard contends, is depression and despair” (24). Hence the way in which Wallace saw his contemporary USA, for: “Seeing this way of life being encouraged by the technology of his age, Wallace, like Kierkegaard, saw the aesthetic way of life - now propagated as the ironic way of life - as the source of the disaffection and ennui that appeared to him to be sweeping America” (24). These are compelling and diagnostic points about the USA in the C21. Moreover with regard to negative freedom, which is freedom from, and positive freedom, which is freedom to, “The distinction between the two freedoms is itself the central point of contention in the Marathe-Steeply debate that runs throughout *Infinite Jest*. The freedom-from is a brand of freedom Wallace was aware is foundational in the American concept of liberty and selfhood” (25). What we need therefore according to Wallace “is positive freedom, the freedom-to, which requires active engagement and choice” (28). Also in Wallace a “view of selfhood that requires an active engagement, even if just in thought, with what is around you. It requires you choose, as the aesthete refuses to, what structures will determine what you can be and do with your life and under whose aegis you will allow yourself to work” (28). This holds critical water and is notable for its emphasis also on simple “thought”.

Crucially, Wallace “viewed the greatest ontological threat in America at the end of the twentieth century as a commercial culture that promoted passive and uncritical spectation” (35). A more active viewing and listening agent here is thus required. Not only this, as Russell writes, “allowing oneself to be “seduced”, as Wallace puts it in his essay, by the delusional self offered by commercial entertainment is effectively abdicating the responsibility of achieving a meaningful self in the real world.” (36). These are astute points.

For Russell, “The reconceptualization of subjectivity found in *Infinite Jest* is, for Wallace, more restoration than re-configuration: re-establishing the responsibility required for selfhood that the solipsistic tendencies of America’s television culture worked to erode” (55). Fascinatingly, because it valorizes a certain spirit of the old-fashioned: “In many respects, despite the novel’s experimental aesthetics, Wallace remains a staunch traditionalist, keen to re-assert the boundaries scrubbed out by the postmodernist turn not just in literature but, thanks to its absorption through these media technologies, in the culture as a whole. [...]. Human beings, he contends, need the imposed limits that give

existence direction and meaning” (60). **Does the candidate concur that transforming tradition holds special value and meaning and if so why or if not why not? For example, what does one make of the possibility of “limits” that give structure and focus to human lives?**

Vitally, too, in a nice formalization of the problem of form and content: “There is a tension in *The Pale King*, as it can be said there is in all of Wallace’s work, between a desire for virtuosic literary performance and an acknowledgement that such performance may be part of the problem in the first place: is it just hollow aesthetics obscuring meaningful substance? In *The Pale King*, the meaningful work is done off-stage. To have it strut and fret for our benefit would be to undermine its importance” (75). **Does the candidate consider this also to be a problem, viz., that the performance ends up being a content largely evacuated of its conditions of possibility; or, is it otherwise?**

In a discussion of Gilles Deleuze’s take on Bartleby who would “prefer not to” from the short story by Herman Melville, “Bartley, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street”: “In contemporary, postmodern America, Wallace sees Bartleby everywhere, preferring not to do anything at all. [...]. For him, it is clear [...] that he wishes to restore and strengthen a dedication to civic-mindedness *in the service* of the nation-state and the structures of power that Bartleby’s formula holds the potential to otherwise dismantle” (81–82). This is a sharp-eyed observation about the future of the nation state in our era of neoliberal globalization. In addition, “From Wallace’s critique of postmodernism alone, it is clear he wishes to move beyond the subversion of the social structure and enact its reconfiguration and reinforcement” (84). Ostensibly ideas of transposing tradition as suggested above would here enter the equation. As for the internet, “Wallace viewed this new technology as a distraction from, rather than a platform of, human expression and connectivity” (90). **Is this really true though? Are there not numberless ways in which new forms of togetherness may be mediated by the internet (e.g., email, skype, etc.)?** In this way we sidestep even the question of social media. Also, “The task of crafting a self is meant to be a difficult, concerted effort, not the work of a few taps on the screen” (93). Last not least, what are we to make of these last words in the thesis, “In “waking”, for Wallace, there was the ardent belief in the way back to a simpler, purer form of the self” (95). **Could the candidate clarify and elaborate a bit upon what he means by “a simpler, purer form of the self”?**

In light of the foregoing mentions, I hereby recommend the pre thesis defense mark of 1 (výborně) for this thesis work.

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