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Paolo Pitari

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The Influence of Sartre's "What Is Literature?" on David Foster Wallace's Literary Project

Paolo Pitari^{a,b}

^aDepartment of Linguistics and Comparative Cultural Studies, Ca' Bernardo, Venice, Italy; ^bDepartment of English and American Studies, Ludwig Maximilians Universität München, Munich, Germany

ABSTRACT

This article argues that Sartre's "What Is Literature?" had a profound and direct influence on David Foster Wallace's conception of literature. At the very least, a number of factors oblige scholars to take this interpretation seriously. We know that Sartre's existentialism pervades Wallace's fiction, that Wallace repeatedly mentioned the Existentialists throughout his work, that he'd learned French to read them in the original, and that Sartre was one of his favorites, as testified by Zadie Smith. Most importantly, a comparative analysis of Sartre's text and Wallace's nonfiction shows not only striking parallels but also almost exact repetitions in the writers' fundamental ideals. In this sense, Sartre's direct influence on Wallace appears so major as to invest multiple specific details of Wallace's conception of literature both in its content and in the logical structuring of that content. In this article, we explore the extent of this influence through a structured investigation of its multiple features, showing that many of Wallace's tenets – the rejection of Realism, the affirmation of meaning-as-use and of literature as a means to human communion and individual and social engagement, and many many more – follow from Sartre's discourse.

Introduction

There are only two direct references to Jean-Paul Sartre in Wallace's work: one to Sartre's *Nausea* in "The Empty Plenum: David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*" (1990), and the other to Sartre's general philosophy in "Iris's Story: An Inversion of Philosophical Skepticism (review of Siri Hustvedt's *The Blindfold*)" (1992). Wallace never referred to Sartre's great literary manifesto "What Is Literature?" (1947) (hereafter, WIL?), and yet a number of factors suggests that WIL? may have had a profound and direct influence on Wallace's conception of literature. First, there are many direct references to the French Existentialists in Wallace's work, as, e.g., in *The Pale King*: "maybe it's not metaphysics. Maybe it's existential. I'm talking about the individual US citizen's deep fear, the same basic fear that you and I have and that everybody has except nobody ever talks about it except existentialists in convoluted French prose. Or Pascal. Our smallness, or insignificance and mortality" (TPK 143). Second, we know that Wallace was familiar with a wide range of French writers, that French was the only foreign language he could read, and that he had learned French precisely to read the Existentialists in the original (see chapter five of Lucas Thompson's *Global Wallace*). Third, in her essay "Brief Interviews with Hideous Men: The Difficult Gifts of David Foster Wallace" (2009), Zadie Smith writes that Sartre was one of Wallace's great influences, and she describes in accordance with the categories of Sartrean philosophy both Wallace's characters – "Freedom is what you do with what's been done to you. This, Sartre's dictum, hangs over these passive people. [...] Thrown into the world, condemned to be free – and hideously responsible for that freedom" (Smith 264) – and Wallace's own artistic creed – "If Wallace insists on awareness, his

particular creed is – to use a Wallacerian word – *extrorse*; awareness must move always in an outward direction, away from the self” (ibid. 268).

That people are thrown into the world, condemned to be free, and responsible for their freedom are the fundamental categories of Sartre’s ontology, and the idea that human consciousness always looks outward is the fundamental tenet of his phenomenology. Sartre presents all these ideas both in his major work *Being and Nothingness* (1943) and throughout his other writings, and as Allard den Dulk shows in his critical work (exploring and expanding upon Zadie Smith’s indication), these Sartrean concepts pervade Wallace’s entire work.¹

Here, we argue that while Sartre’s influence on Wallace has already been recognized, its extent is far from being fully appreciated and broadens to regions yet unexplored. While Thompson has shown that Wallace had read Sartre, and while Smith, den Dulk, Ryerson, and Hirt have all exhibited part of the influence of Sartre’s philosophy on the existential content of Wallace’s fiction, here we focus specifically on the striking correspondence between the contents of WIL? and Wallace’s own literary manifestos.² Thompson himself has already mentioned that it seems likely that Wallace read WIL? and that many of Wallace’s ideas cohere with Sartre’s manifesto. But Thompson only mentions a possibility. Here, we want to prove and to explore the extent of WIL?’s influence on Wallace, and to submit that, in light of the above-mentioned factors and of the extent and depth of the correspondence between WIL? and Wallace’s discourse, WIL? can be interpreted as a text that directly and profoundly influenced Wallace’s conception of literature. Perhaps, this interpretation of direct influence cannot be ascertained beyond all doubts due to the lack of references to WIL? in Wallace’s work. Nonetheless, what follows exhibits what is almost surely the direct influence of WIL? on Wallace and what is certainly (1) an outstanding degree of concordance between two of the great literary minds of the twentieth century regarding the meaning of literature and (2) the yet-unexplored extent and depth of Wallace’s adherence to the concepts of Sartrean philosophy.

The analysis shows that there is still much more to understand with regards to the extent of Sartre’s influence on Wallace, despite the good work done by other critics thus far. Likewise, it confirms the fundamental role of Existentialism in Wallace’s oeuvre and at the same time, it indicates that we haven’t yet come to a full understanding of the depth and width of Wallace’s alignment with this philosophy. This contributes to the development of our awareness of the degree of Wallace’s use of appropriation as a means of artistic creation: Wallace’s relationship with postmodernism has long been studied but substantial research in Wallace’s relationship with writers from other periods and countries is a fairly recent critical phenomenon and there is still a lot to discover. We need to further our knowledge of Wallace’s cross-cultural, cross-linguistic, and cross-temporal artistic relations. This work in comparative literature will give us a deeper understanding of Wallace’s oeuvre while at the same time telling us something about the dynamics in the history of art and literature. This essay aims to contribute to this process – and (last but not least) to display one of the infinite ways in which Jean-Paul Sartre’s work still influences Western literature and thought at large.

The Ontological Horizon, Where Everything Occurs in Relation to Everything Else

The first correspondence between WIL? and Wallace’s discourse is that, in both, the idea of literature is a necessary consequence of larger ontological beliefs. For Sartre and Wallace, that is, the concept of literature depends on one’s fundamental beliefs about the nature of reality, and therefore it is impossible to think of literature as a specialized field independent of all that occurs in the world. Sartre builds WIL? upon the ontology of *Being and Nothingness*. This is why WIL? presents an ideal of literature-as-freedom: by writing, “the writer chooses to appeal to the freedom of other men” (63), and the reader, by opening the book, asserts that “the object has its source in human freedom” (ibid. 61). As a result, both writer and reader act so that they “may re-adapt the totality of being to man” (ibid. 63) and thus change the world and “assume responsibility for it” (ibid. 56) through literature.

This conception of literature can be correct only if the ontology of *Being and Nothingness* is true. And if Wallace doesn't make the relationship between his ontological beliefs and his conception of literature as obvious as Sartre does, yet his commitment to the ontological horizon manifests itself in his decrying of the postmodern ethos as the cause of the fall of art, in his finding the redemption of literature in Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations*, in his fundamental focus on worship, and in the striking correspondence between his and Sartre's conceptions of literature, whereby – as is shown in what follows – Wallace follows WIL?'s argument down to many of its most specific details. For Wallace too, one's conception of literature must be derived from one's ontology.

The Partiality of True Literature

Sartre writes about the authentic prose writer that

He has given up the impossible dream of giving an impartial picture of Society and the human condition. Man is the being towards whom no being can be impartial, not even God. For God, if He existed, would be, as certain mystics have seen Him, in a *situation* in relationship to man. And [man] is also the being [who] cannot even see a situation without changing it, for [his] gaze congeals, destroys, or sculpts, or, as does eternity, changes the object in itself. It is in love, in hate, in anger, in fear, in joy, in indignation, in admiration, in hope, in despair, that man and the world reveal themselves *in their truth* (WIL? 37, Bernard Frechtman's translation with my emendations in square brackets).³

For Sartre, the authentic prose writer is one who knows that the truth is in subjectivity and in partiality (objectivity and impartiality are not available to human beings) and writes accordingly. This is why the prose writer must abandon the impossible dream of traditional literary realism – “the error of realism has been to believe that the real reveals itself to contemplation, and that consequently one could draw an impartial picture of it” (ibid. 66) – and must embrace the particularity of the individual situation, knowing that one's perceptions change the observed object – “perception is partial” (ibid.) – and that the truth resides within the idiosyncrasies of a man's feelings in relation to being.

Wallace shares the same worldview and consequent conception of literature. He laments that “while serious science butters its bread with the fact that the separation of subject/observer and object/experiment is impossible” (McCaffery 40), still “fiction likes to ignore this fact's implications” (ibid.). Like Sartre, Wallace extracts the following specific conception of the writer's responsibility from this belief in the ontological truth of subjectivity and partiality: writers must write in accordance with this truth and therefore reject traditional literary realism. This is why in various interviews Wallace states that “the conventions of what was called Realism don't seem all that real anymore” (Shechner 108) and that “obviously realism is an illusion of realism” (Paulson 130). This is why he holds that the literary artist's job is to represent the “fragmentary, scrambled, jumbled” (McCaffery 38) nature of reality in a way that “feels real to me” (Goldfarb 145) and is “true to me” (Kennedy and Polk 13). For Wallace, reality is *to me*, it is subjective and partial, and a literary work that aspires to truth must represent this. Therefore, like Sartre, Wallace begins from a worldview based on principles similar to what in physics is called the observer effect, and from there he derives his rejection of traditional literary realism as well as his affirmation of the need of a new literary form that respects truth as it appears to our twentieth-century minds: subjective and partial.

We thus witness another instance of Wallace's discourse aligning with WIL?'s in detail, both in its content and structure. This is the kind of proof that leads us to infer the direct influence of WIL? on Wallace's conception of literature, and what follows is an accumulation of further proof of this kind. The agreement between Sartre and Wallace on this point is definitive; both authors take their rejection of objectivity to its logical end: that is, to the affirmation that their rejection of traditional literary Realism is what actually defines them as true realists, i.e., representors of the truth. This is, e.g., the sense in which Wallace states: “I've always thought of myself as a realist” (Miller 60).

The Rejection of Traditional Literary Realism is also the Rejection of Traditional Mimesis

The rejection of traditional literary realism also brings Sartre and Wallace to reject the traditional conception of mimesis. Sartre writes that the artist “wants to create a thing” (WIL? 26), not to represent another, that “there is no reason why” works of art “should have a definable significance, that is, should refer particularly to another object” (ibid.), and that, in talking about artistic creation, “I say ‘create,’ not ‘imitate’” (ibid. 333), because it is wrong to think of artworks as imitations, i.e., as objects whose essence and end are mimesis.⁴

Wallace follows Sartre in this sense too. In “Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young” (1988), he writes that “the idea that literary language is any kind of neutral medium” (63) or “a mirror” (ibid. 64) to reality “has finally taken it on the chin” (ibid.). Here, he closes the argument with the blunt statement: “the crux being that, if mimesis isn’t dead, then it’s on life-support courtesy of those who soon enough will be” (ibid.). Five years later, he would tell McCaffery that the “sixties had the effect of finally demolishing the authority that mimesis had assumed” (McCaffery 27) in tradition. Wallace thus explicitly follows WIL? in declaring the end of mimesis. And he, like Sartre, founds his rejection of mimesis on his most fundamental ontological beliefs.

Both Sartre and Wallace reject traditional mimesis, and yet they both still want their works to represent the truth and thus be mimetic. For Sartre, in literature, the “aim is to give the fullest possible representation” (“WIL? 70) of the truth and therefore to “correctly indicate a certain thing or notion” (ibid. 35). For Wallace, the aim is still to generate “a kind of mimesis” (Shechner 109), or “to create enough mimesis” (Lipsky 291), through the use of a new form capable of representing “a world whose texture and sensuous feel is totally different” (ibid.) from the past. The goal is “to show that nothing’s really changed [and] that what’s always been important is still important” (ibid.).

Therefore, in both Sartre and Wallace the rejection of mimesis becomes a re-affirmation of mimesis. This is only a surface paradox that is resolved once one sees that this process is a rejection of traditional mimesis in favor of a new conception of mimesis, one to be constructed in accordance with the knowledge of contemporary philosophy. For Sartre and Wallace, it is the traditional realist mimesis founded on the beliefs in absolute truth and absolute representation that must be rejected; on the contrary, the new mimesis founded upon the truth of subjectivity and partiality must be affirmed. Neither Sartre nor Wallace, though, could ever articulate a proper definition of this new mimesis to clearly distinguish it from the traditional one in both theory and practice. But for both of them, what remained unchanged was that literary art, through mimesis, discloses the truth. This is why Sartre states that “to write is thus both to disclose the world and to offer it as a task to the generosity of the reader” (WIL? 65), and why Wallace says that to write is to set down “what’s true” (Lipsky 38).

A Late Wittgensteinian Conception of Language and the Resulting Conception of Literature

In WIL?, Sartre writes that every “speaker is *in a situation* in language; he is invested by words” (30).⁵ From this premise, he derives that a prose writer is “a man who *makes use* of words” (ibid. 34), a man who *acts* through words in the world of human communion. Obviously, this conception of language is closely related to Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations*’ ideal of “meaning as *use*,” which is precisely the ideal to which Wallace dedicated his first novel *The Broom of the System* (1987) and on which he built his literary career, declaring that the *Investigations* “is the single most comprehensive and beautiful argument against solipsism that’s ever been made” (McCaffery 44). In this sense, the late Wittgenstein, Sartre, and Wallace all share the same view of humanity and language: human beings exist in a linguistic situation and must act accordingly, they are invested by words. It’s very likely that Wallace recognized in WIL? this Wittgensteinian view of language, thus finding further reason to align with Sartre’s philosophy. Wallace follows Sartre even in deriving the

same conception of literature from this theory of language: since human beings are invested by words, literature must constitute itself as a means of human communion and social action, an anodyne against loneliness that invites people to establish full human relationships and to take responsibility for their being-in-the-world. From these postulates Sartre and Wallace even derive yet another corresponding consequence: a specific ideal of the writer's responsibility toward the other.

Literature must be a Form of Existential and Social Commitment

For Sartre, “the project of writing” (WIL? 76) must be founded upon the responsibility to act toward “the free exceeding of a certain human and total situation” (ibid.). In other words, writing must favor the general improvement of the human condition. Sartre derives this artistic ethos from the entire set of his ontological premises: every individual is free and therefore burdened by the responsibility of his freedom – “the world is my task” (ibid. 65) –, and therefore every individual must take upon himself the responsibility of respecting the truth and making the world a better place. Plus, “*being situated* is an essential and necessary characteristic of freedom” (ibid. 133), and therefore every individual is fully responsible for the situation that surrounds him and for the others that exist within this situation. From this, it follows that a writer must write writing that is other-directed, because “the author is in a situation, like all other men” (ibid. 132). Finally, since language is a communal means wherein humans create meaning through the use of words (a meaning that is thus communal by definition), the writer must use language for the community; that's his particular responsibility. And for Sartre, the writer takes this responsibility by submitting the truth of the human predicament to the inherent freedom of the reader who, in encountering the text, must take on the responsibility of confronting its content.

In this sense, Wallace again follows Sartre in his views about literature and the writer's responsibility. Wallace thinks that the true artist must take on the responsibility of writing “serious, real, conscientious, ambitious art” (FFs 68), and that he must do so with “moral rigor” (JFD 266) and for the reader: he must “*give* the reader something” (McCaffery 50) and attempt to “effect change” (FFs 67), i.e. “to change or enlighten or broaden or reorient” (FFs 52) both individuals and society at large. Wallace, like Sartre, derives this ethos from his own most fundamental beliefs, which also closely recall Sartre's. Wallace pronounces his most explicit adherence to the existentialist tenet that *the world is my task* in the essay “Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness from Which Probably Not Enough Has Been Removed” (1999), where he writes that a self is not “something you just *have*” (64) and that “the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle” (ibid.). Like Sartre, Wallace derives his ideal of the writer's individual responsibility toward engagement with the world from this main tenet of Existentialism, and likewise, he derives his ideal of the writer's commitment to the other and society from the theories of facticity (Sartre's in-situatedness) and meaning-as-use. And while Wallace doesn't insist on facticity as much as Sartre does, he does repeatedly state that all writers are “sentient citizens of a community” (EUP 34) and that therefore their writings arise in relationship and response to that specific community. We can then say that Wallace *acts out* Sartre's ideal of facticity, an ideal that both authors also extend to language. Finally, for Wallace – as for Sartre and Wittgenstein – language is “dependent on human community” (McCaffery 40) and thus always “a function of relationships between persons” (ibid.), and this entails (as Sartre also believed) that the writer's responsibilities are to “reaffirm the idea of art being a living transaction between humans” (ibid. 41) and to commit to “the fact that language and linguistic intercourse is, in and of itself, redeeming, remedy-ing” (ibid. 33).

The Postulation of an Opposition between True and False Writing

In WIL?, Sartre postulates an ontological opposition between the nature of poetry and prose, and while he does not explicitly say that poetry gives a false representation of reality, he says that prose is

the realm of truth and that poetry stands in opposition to it. Wallace says nothing about the difference between poetry and prose and would probably reject Sartre's opposition between the two (Wallace admired Philip Larkin, e.g.), but what must draw our attention is that Wallace formulates his opposition between the truth of avant-garde writing and the falsehood of traditional realism in terms that are very similar to those in which Sartre formulates the opposition between poetry and prose. In turn, said terms stand in close relation to both authors' rejection of traditional literary realism and affirmation of a Wittgensteinian conception of language.

Sartre writes that "poets are men who refuse to *utilize* language" (WIL? 29) and who therefore "name nothing at all" (ibid.). Poets think that "language is a structure of the external world" (ibid. 30) and "the mirror of the world" (ibid.). They see "in the word the *image*" (ibid.) and think that "it too is a thing, uncreated and eternal" (ibid.), and from this, they conclude that they can relate to language as if they existed "outside language" (ibid.). Thus, poets fail to understand the true nature of language, its embeddedness in human subjectivity, freedom, facticity, action, and becoming, and therefore they use the language according to a false idea. On the contrary, prose writers work with the knowledge that "we are within language as within our body" (ibid. 35) and that "the word is a certain particular moment of action and has no meaning outside it" (ibid.). Prose writers know that "to speak is to act" (ibid. 36) and that "the quest for truth takes place in and by language conceived as a certain kind of instrument" (ibid. 29). For this reason, they *make use* of language and "dream of *naming* the world" (ibid.), knowing that to name is to *reveal* and that to reveal is to *change*. As a result, prose writers want "to be essential to this universe" (ibid. 66), and they treat language according to the truth.

We have seen that, in "Fictional Futures," Wallace writes that writers must know that the ideal of language-as-mirror-of-nature is false and obsolete. Five years later, Wallace tells McCaffery that writers must follow; Wittgenstein's late rejection of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) with its "picture theory of meaning" (McCaffery 44) and its presumption "that the only possible relation between language and the world is denotative, referential" (ibid.). Wallace aligns with the late Wittgenstein (and Sartre) because to him words are *not* "little mimetic pictures" (ibid.) and because probably "there's nothing 'outside' language for language to have to picture or refer to" (ibid. 45). This is why he concludes that the traditional literary realists (like Sartre's poets) are wrong in treating language as an objective mirror of reality, as something one could stand outside of and observe with scientific detachment. In this sense, Wallace follows Sartre in declaring that the writer who knows the truth of language understands that "we're *in* language" (ibid.) and "stuck in" it (ibid. 44). This ideal writer knows that "we're at least all in here together" (ibid.) and writes in accordance with this truth and with the intention of "being *true* to the way the language works now" (Lipsky 272). The ideal writer thus also respects Wittgenstein's dictum "I don't know my way about" (McCaffery 45), the dictum that expresses one's awareness of one's untranscendable immersion in a specific linguistic situation.

From this Wittgensteinian-Sartrean theory of language, Wallace derives (following Sartre) the idea that the writer must know that language is an instrument for action and communion in the human-linguistic world and work accordingly. This is why, for Wallace, writing is the quest for what "feels real" (Goldfarb 145) and "what's true" (Lipsky 38), a quest that – since we're all stuck in language together – the writer must pursue with and for the reader. In this sense, Wallace aligns with Sartre's own project in WIL? to reject the picture theory of language, affirm the conceptions of meaning-as-use and in-situatedness, and derive a specific ideal of the writer's responsibilities from this worldview: literature must overcome the falsity of realist works created according to the picture theory of meaning.

For both Sartre and Wallace, the "author's intentions" (WIL? 60) are a fundamental, non-subtractable part of literary meaning, and one that is necessary to overcome the falsity of realism and objectivity. To them, intentionality is required for the literary work to constitute itself as a relationship between writer and reader, and this relationship is the essence of literary meaning. For Sartre, the highest literary moments occur when an author names and thus reveals a specific truth that belongs to the "individual" (ibid. 36) reader. When the author does this, the reader "sees himself" (ibid.) in the work and feels that he himself is revealed in the work. Wallace's ideas correspond perfectly. To him, the magic of fiction occurs when, in reading, you realize that "somebody at least for a moment feels about something or sees something the way

that I do” (Miller 62), when you feel as one with the author and the author, in revealing himself, also reveals who you are, when fiction sets up “an intimate conversation between two consciousness” (Lipsky 289), the writer’s and the reader’s, so that the reader sees himself in the work and feels less alone inside.

This is why Sartre and Wallace agree that literature must be a *gift*. Sartre states that “the work is never a natural datum, but an *exigence* and a *gift*” (WIL? 67), Wallace that the “feeling of intimacy between the writer and the reader” is “our opening” and “our gift” (Lipsky 72).⁶ Finally, this is why they agree that the production of literature must be a moral action: for Sartre, “at the heart of the aesthetic imperative we discern the moral imperative” (WIL? 67); for Wallace, writers must write “morally passionate, passionately moral fiction” (JFD 274).

The Writer’s Responsibility: (1) To Reveal the Truth

As we have seen, for both Sartre and Wallace everything follows from a particular theory of the truth: from Existential ontology they derive their discourse. The writer is a being-in-the-world and a being-in-language, and he must act accordingly. The existence of a being-in-the-world is a project: “the world is my task” and “existence precedes essence” (Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism* 20). We do not *have* a self; our *existence* is the “struggle to establish a human self.” This struggle is our project, and a project has an end, and to reach an end man uses means. The writer pursues the establishment of the self through the means of literature and, in turn, words are his means to produce literature. This is why, for Sartre, the writer is “a man who *makes use* of words” (WIL? 34), and this is why Wallace finds the basis for his work in Wittgenstein’s meaning-as-use.

Both Sartre and Wallace think that the end of literature is to reveal the truth (this is how literature can help us establish our human selves). They therefore think that words are means to reveal the truth. As we have seen, for Sartre the writer must name (and thus reveal) the world, and for Wallace, he must represent what feels real, what’s true. Sartre writes that the writer must choose “action by disclosure” (ibid. 37) in order to “reveal the situation” (ibid.) and to “reveal it to myself and to others” (ibid.). Wallace states that the writer must “capture and talk about the way the world feels on our nerve endings” (Lipsky 36); that is, he must pursue “the sense of *capturing*, capturing what the world feels like to us” (ibid. 38), in order to represent and confront “real lived life” (JFD 272).

Both Sartre and Wallace, then, clearly establish that the end of literature is the disclosure and revelation of the truth. For both of them, though, this quest for the truth is a means to further ends. To write is to act by giving each thing its proper name, thus capturing its truth. To name is to reveal, and to reveal is to break open the minds of both oneself and the other in order to let awareness shine into them. In this sense, to reveal the truth is to change the world and the individuals therein. This is why, for Sartre, the writer reveals the situation “*in order* to change it” (WIL? 37), and why, for Wallace, true literature captures what’s real in order to “effect change” (FFs 67); that is, “to change or enlighten or broaden or reorient” (ibid. 52). This is why the writer must take the responsibility of existential and social commitment upon himself, and why he is responsible in front of the other. To write is to reveal the truth and to reveal the truth is to change the world, but to change the world is, first and foremost, to accept responsibility for oneself and for what happens around you. We are all here, first and foremost, to be responsible for the truth. There is no better artistic expression of this ethos than Boris Pasternak’s famous scene in *Doctor Zhivago* (1957), when Lara walks along a pilgrims’ path and “for a moment she rediscovered the purpose of her life. She was here on earth to grasp the meaning of its wild enchantment and to call each thing by its right name” (67).

The Writer’s Responsibility: (2) To Confront the Reader’s Consciousness

For Sartre and Wallace, to unveil the truth in writing is to force the truth upon the consciousness of the reader. Therefore, the writer’s job is to change the world by confronting the reader with what he does not, by himself, dare to face. In this sense, Sartre writes that the writer must accept the responsibility of being the man who “has chosen to reveal the world and particularly to reveal man to other men so that the latter may

assume full responsibility before the object which has been thus laid bare” (WIL? 38). For Sartre, therefore, “the function of the writer is to act in such a way that nobody can be ignorant of the world and that nobody may say that he is innocent of what it’s all about” (ibid.). Likewise, for Wallace, “the magic of fiction is that it addresses and [aggravates] the loneliness that dominates people” (McCaffery 31).

Wallace thinks that literature must not act as an “anesthetic” (ibid. 32) against suffering, but rather it must “move people to countenance it, since any possible human redemption requires us first to face what’s dreadful, what we want to deny” (ibid.). In this sense too, then, Wallace follows Sartre: like Sartre, he says that literature must force the truth upon the reader’s consciousness. And if, for Sartre, literature must do this by naming what has not yet been named, for Wallace likewise, literature must recover the original truth of all things “over there across the chasms of illusion, mediation, demographics, marketing, imago and appearance” (EUP 52), and therefore it must give each thing its right name and also shatter the false names that, in the 1980s and 1990s, the culture of entertainment has given to things in its veil of illusion, established to anesthetize the mass audience. This means that the final aim of the writer must be to produce literature “that makes the reader confront things rather than ignore them” (Miller 61) and that forces the reader “to put away childish things and confront stuff about spirituality and values” (ibid. 59). In this sense, true literature must “disturb the comfortable” (McCaffery 21) and “teach the reader that he’s way smarter than he thought he was” (ibid.). Finally, it must teach that “the moral job is ours” (ibid. 84).

Quite clearly, then, Wallace follows Sartre in theorizing that literature must give each thing its right name in order to confront the reader’s consciousness and force him to take responsibility for himself and for the world. Literature must do this because responsibility is both the burden of humanity and the only possible human redemption. This is why Wallace also *acts out* Sartre’s principles through the undertaking of his literary career.

The Writer’s Responsibility: (3) Existential and Social Commitment

Entailed in the ideals of literature as revelation of the truth and of literature as antagonist of the reader’s consciousness is the notion of the writer’s existential and social responsibility. Sartre writes that “the writer should commit himself completely in his works” (WIL? 46). The committed writer knows that words are means to reveal the truth, and therefore he “knows that words are actions,” “because to name is to show, and to show is to change” (ibid. 81), and to change is to act. This is the sense of Sartre’s famous quote of Parain: the committed writer “knows that words, as Brice Parain says, are ‘loaded pistols.’ If he speaks, he fires. He may be silent, but since he has chosen to fire” (ibid. 38) he must take responsibility for his choice and write literature of existential and social commitment.⁷

Likewise, Wallace called out writers to produce literature of commitment ever since “Fictional Futures” (1988). Here, he writes that “it [is] *imperative* that art *not* be nihilistic” (FFs 67) and that we need “serious, real, conscientious, aware, ambitious art” (ibid. 68). In addition, “E Unibus Pluram” (1993), Wallace’s most famous manifesto, is itself a call for writers to “endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles” with “reverence and conviction” (EUP 81). Wallace too then thinks that writers must commit themselves in their work completely, and in “Joseph Frank’s Dostoevsky” (1996) he presents Dostoevsky as the very incarnation of this ideal. Wallace writes that Dostoevsky was always looking to “dramatize the profoundest parts of all humans, the parts most conflicted, most serious – the ones with most at stake” (JFD 265). Dostoevsky always wrote “fiction about the stuff that’s really important”: “identity, moral value, death, will, sexual vs. spiritual love, greed, freedom, obsession, reason, faith, suicide” (ibid.), “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” (ibid.). In this sense, Dostoevsky was a champion of individual-existential commitment. But to Wallace he was more than that. He managed to connect his individual-existential commitment with a communal-social commitment, which is why his writings “dare to try to use serious art to advance ideologies” (ibid. 274) and “dramatize his moral-spiritual themes against the background of Russian history” (ibid. 258).

In other words, Dostoevsky was aware of the in-situatedness of his being and language, and thus he was able to create literary works that incorporate both the “universal and particular” (ibid. 258), the communal-social commitment and the individual-existential commitment.

For Wallace, this is the essence of the true work of art, and Dostoevsky is the paradigm of the true artist. Contemporary writers instead produce works that are “effete and aestheticized” and “removed from what’s really important” (ibid. 273). Wallace denounces that “we have abandoned the field” (ibid.) that Dostoevsky used to occupy. Today’s writers should follow Dostoevsky’s model, what Wallace himself would try to do throughout his career. In this sense, we can say that Wallace tried to follow Dostoevsky’s model in order to answer Sartre’s call to a literature of commitment. Critics have rightly defined Wallace’s literature as “an attempt to address [the] problems [of our time] and suggest ways to alleviate or even overcome them” (Dulk, *Existentialist* 267), and as “engaged with cultural, social, and political issues” (Burn, “Introduction” xii). This is certainly the case, and it seems highly probable that Sartre influenced Wallace to undertake this literature of commitment.⁸

The Writer’s Responsibility: (4) To Write Countercultural Literature

Wallace also follows Sartre in positing that the writer’s commitment must lead to the production of literature whose social function is critical. Sartre writes that the writer’s “activity is *useless*” (WIL? 80), and even detrimental, to society, because “it is sometimes harmful for society to become self-conscious” (ibid.). The committed writer names the truth and therefore shows society for what it really is. Just as literature confronts the reader’s consciousness, so it confronts society’s. This is the critical function of literature: the production of social self-consciousness, which inhibits blind “progress” and diverts energy toward self-questioning: “the writer gives society a *guilty conscience*” (ibid. 81).

Wallace re-proposes the same outlook: to him, literature must confront the predicaments of Western-industrial society at the end of the century. In “Fictional Futures,” he argues that it’s the writers’ job to respond to the “new and singular environment in and about which we try to write fiction” (FFs 41). Writing must be a social commitment and thus react to its environment. “1987’s America is not a nice place to be” (ibid. 67), and literature must remind society of this truth. “When the poor old issue of trying to *be* good no longer even merits a straight face” (ibid. 67–68), literature must confront society and offer ways to overcome the predicaments of our time: “art is meaning, and meaning is power” (ibid. 68). Likewise, in EUP, Wallace says that writers must be “sentient citizens of a community” who create works with “a genuine socio-artistic agenda” (51). In our time, the agenda is to confront our “distinctly Western-industrial” (McCaffery 34) escapism from the reality of suffering, responsibility, value, faith, etc., which we enact through our culture of pleasure, entertainment, and consumerism.

Thus, literature must be critical, countercultural. In this sense, Wallace follows Sartre down to multiple specific details. Sartre berates critics because they don’t understand that “our great writers wanted to destroy, to edify, to demonstrate” (WIL? 43), not to pursue mere empty formal innovation. For Sartre, the formalism of critics results from their own bad faith and parasite attachment to bourgeois wealth. They don’t know anything about real literature.⁹ Likewise, in EUP, Wallace faults critics for thinking that postmodern literature arose from “aesthetic theories out of the bazoo” (EUP 34), as if literature and esthetics could be detached from the real world. For Wallace, the truth is that “the best postmodern fiction wasn’t just credible as art; it seemed downright socially useful in its capacity for what counterculture critics called ‘a *critical negation*’” (ibid. 66). The true postmodern artists wanted “to illuminate and explode hypocrisy” (ibid. 65) just as the Sartrean writers of the past wanted to destroy, demonstrate, and edify.

Wallace agrees with Sartre that literature is a critical negation *and* that critics have lost sight of the true meaning of art. In addition, Sartre’s social agenda in WIL? is to take aim at the bourgeoisie’s essential ethos of utilitarianism – “the justifying myth of this industrious and unproductive class was utilitarianism” (104). And utilitarianism is Wallace’s own great enemy, it is the origin of the pleasure principle that drives the culture of entertainment and empties our lives of value: “look at utilitarianism – that most

English of contributions to ethics – and you see a whole teleology predicated on the idea that the best human life is one that maximizes the pleasure-to-pain ratio” (McCaffery 34). Finally, Sartre chastises the writers of his time for bowing down to the demands of entertainment culture and doing so in bad faith, for fame and wealth. Likewise, Wallace denounces the writers of his time for “genuflecting to” (EUP 76) the ideals of entertainment culture in order to be liked. Also, both authors take aim at writers who aestheticize literature (i.e. empty it of values). And when Sartre writes that “the bourgeois writer and the ‘damned’ (*maudit*) writer moved on the same level” (WIL? 114), he even accuses the same writers who Tolstoy denounces in *What Is Art?* (1897), that other major influence on Wallace’s literary ideals. There is no doubt, then, that an extraordinary amount of WIL? returns in Wallace’s work.

The Writer’s Responsibility: (5) To Oppose Spectation and Enforce Individual Engagement

One of Wallace’s main goals was to overcome entertainment culture and force the audience to wake up out of its passiveness and *engage* with the world. In WIL?, Sartre had already tried to do this. He wrote that literature must be an appeal to the reader’s “pure freedom” (WIL? 56), an invitation to active collaboration from the writer to the reader. In this sense, he wrote WIL? because he thought that most literature of his time was not true art. He denounced that “the majority” of writers “furnish a whole arsenal of tricks to the reader who wants to go on sleeping quietly” (ibid. 77). These writers arouse emotions that “are foreseeable, manageable” (ibid.), because this guarantees for them a certain level of success. But these are not true artists because true art appeals to the reader’s freedom and thus forces him to engage and take responsibility. A true artist writes literature of commitment, and to do this he himself must be committed in the first place: “I shall say that a writer is committed when he tries to achieve the most lucid and the most complete consciousness of being embarked, that is, when he causes the commitment of immediate spontaneity to advance, for himself and others” (ibid.).

In reading the above, who’s familiar with Wallace’s work has already seen that Wallace’s discourse aligns perfectly with Sartre’s. Throughout his career, Wallace has stated repeatedly that true literature must force the reader to confront the human predicament and to take the responsibility of commitment upon himself, in collaboration with the author. In “*The Nature of the Fun*” (1998), he wrote that “writing fiction becomes a way to go deep inside yourself and illuminate precisely the stuff you don’t want to see or let anyone else see, and this stuff usually turs out (paradoxically) to be precisely the stuff all writers and readers share and respond to, feel. Fiction becomes a weird way to countenance yourself and to tell the truth instead of being a way to escape yourself” (198–199). This is why, for Wallace, it is literary art’s job “to make you uncomfortable, or to force you to work hard to access its pleasures, the same way that in real life true pleasure is usually a by-product of hard work and discomfort” (McCaffery 22). True art opposes the ideal of seduction and does not reward passive spectation because those divert the audience away from commitment with the world. True art is uneasy – “serious art makes people uncomfortable” (Jacob 153) –, it demands active responsibility on the part of the reader, it isn’t manageable and foreseeable, to use Sartrean terms. Finally, then, one of the essential goals of literature must be to shake the reader out of his quiet sleep: “a particular job of fiction is [...] to wake readers up” (Shechner 105). This is one of the reasons that brings Wallace to use avant-garde form. In the age of passive entertainment, one cannot write classical Realist fiction because “the classical Realist form is soothing, familiar, and anesthetic; it drops us right into spectation” (McCaffery 34). On the contrary, “if avant-garde stuff can do its job, it is tremendously difficult and not that accessible, and seduces the reader into making extraordinary efforts that he wouldn’t normally make. And that’s the kind of magic that really great art can do” (Lipsky 71). Literary form is a means to an end, and when Wallace writes *Infinite Jest* and sets down a text where “the narrative arrangement has to be done by the reader” and “the reader has to fight *through* the mediated voice presenting the material to you” (McCaffery 33), his goal is to pursue a thematic (existential, social) end. This is why Jonathan Franzen has called the book “a critique of ‘the culture of passive entertainment’” (Caro 54).

Form is a Means to a Thematic End

Sartre develops all of his artistic ideals in accordance with his fundamental belief that “the end of language is to communicate” (WIL? 36). This belief entails specific conceptions of literary form and of literature as a reader-writer conversation. Wallace follows Sartre: both authors conceive form as a means to an end and, as we have seen, they accuse the formalists and esthetes (those who treat form as an end in itself) of distorting the true meaning of literary art and emptying it of all meaning. About the critics and the purists, Sartre writes that “everything happens for them as if all literature were only a vast tautology and as if every new prose-writer had invented a new way of speaking only for the purpose of saying nothing” (ibid. 43). Likewise, Wallace indicts critics for treating literary history as one of “aesthetic theories out of the bazoo” (EUP 34) and writers who “treat formal ingenuity as an end in itself” (McCaffery 29) for losing all contact with reality. For Sartre, “we know very well that pure art and empty art are the same thing” (WIL? 41). For Wallace, pure art is “*unreal, empty*” (FFs 53), and “*effete*” (JFD 273), pervaded by a “thematic poverty” (ibid. 271) that is the result of our time’s elevation of “aesthetics to the level of ethics – maybe even metaphysics” (ibid. 271–272). We evaluate works “mainly for their formal ingenuity,” and so “presume as a matter of course that ‘serious’ literature will be distanced from real lived life” (ibid. 272).

In light of this criticism, both Sartre and Wallace propose a theory of form not as an end in itself but as a means to an end. Sartre writes that “there is nothing to be said about form in advance” (WIL? 39), that “it is a matter of knowing what one wants to write about [...]. And when one knows, then it remains to decide how one will write about it. Often the two choices are only one, but among good writers the second choice never precedes the first” (ibid. 40). Form is a means to an end, and the end is always content, and content is what you want to talk about with the reader because it’s true and important. Thus, the evolution of literature is always a necessary corollary to the evolution of society and, ultimately, of metaphysics: “the always new requirements of the social and the metaphysical involve the artist in finding a new language and new techniques” (ibid.).¹⁰

Wallace doesn’t define the meaning of form in terms as abstract as Sartre’s, but he describes the responsibilities of the writer in accordance with Sartre’s ideals, which he also *acts out* in his own work, through his postulation of the primacy of content and social and metaphysical commitment. In this sense, if Sartre writes that form is a means in service of content, Wallace states that all great writers in history “think of themselves as realists” (Paulson 129). By this, he means that, notwithstanding all the superficial formal differences throughout the evolution of literature, all great writers choose their literary form in service of the specific content that they think is true, important, and therefore worthy of representation.

In other words, form changes because the conception of the truth does. For example, Wallace opposes his avant-garde writing to Tolstoy traditional Realism not as a formal difference in itself but as a necessary corollary of the contrasting perceptions of truth and experience that separate the two writers and their respective ages. What was perceived as “experience,” “truth,” “meaning,” etc. in nineteenth-century Russia differs from what we perceive now in our twenty-first century Western-industrial society. Our whole interpretation of life is different, and this is why literature needs new forms to represent this new reality. Hence, why Wallace says that “experimental and avant-garde stuff can capture and talk about the way the world feels on our nerve endings, in a way that conventional realistic stuff can’t” (Lipsky 36). Traditional realism feels false *now* because “it imposes an order and sense and ease of interpretation on experience that’s never there in real life” (ibid. 37). But for Tolstoy it felt true, and Wallace understands why: “I imagine Leo getting up in the morning [...], sitting down in his *silent* room, overlooking some very well-tended gardens, pulling out his quill, and [...] in deep tranquility, recollecting emotion” (ibid. 37–38).

Wallace knows that the real difference between him and Tolstoy is a difference in the character of lived experience. If Tolstoy could live in deep tranquility, Wallace admits that “life seems to strobe on and off for me, and to barrage me with input” (ibid. 37). Wallace is an inhabitant of the twenty-first century, confused and overwhelmed by fragmentation and chaos: “my life and my self doesn’t feel like anything like a unified developed character in a linear narrative to me” (ibid. 39). This is

why he must write avant-garde literature and reject Realism (this is actually the third reason why. The first is the ontological rejection of absolute objectivity. The second is the opposition to spectation). Therefore, Wallace's formal choices are means to the end of representing the truth as he experiences it just as Tolstoy's traditional Realism was his means to the representation of the truth as he experienced it (and just as Sartre's own choices were his own means). In this sense, Wallace's conception of form as subservient to content and truth aligns perfectly with Sartre's. This subservience of form entails the primacy of social development and, first of all, of ontology. This is why, for Sartre and Wallace, a work of art is first and foremost a work that responds to its time and place, to the social predicaments and ultimately to our beliefs about the truth, because a society's structure depends on the specific fundamental beliefs about the nature of reality on which that society is founded.

Literature Must Establish Itself as a Conversation between Writer and Reader

The aim of literature is to establish a conversation between reader and writer wherein they can confront the truth. Sartre specifically writes that "it is not true that one writes for oneself" (WIL? 51) and that "the creative act is only an incomplete and abstract moment" (ibid.) until the reader participates in the production: "it is the joint effort of author and reader which brings upon the scene that concrete and imaginary object which is the work of the mind. There is no art except for and by others" (ibid. 51–52). The author's creative act is an appeal "to the reader's freedom to collaborate in the production of his work" (ibid. 54) and the experience of literature teaches that "both of us bear the responsibility for the universe" (ibid. 66). The writer must know that literature "can find its fulfilment only in reading" (ibid. 54) and that the reader himself creates the meaning of the work "in a continual exceeding of the written thing" (ibid. 53). Therefore, "reading is directed creation" (ibid.), and the imagination of the reader has a constitutive function. This is why literature truly is a communal endeavor: "the artist must entrust to another the job of carrying out what he has begun" (ibid.), knowing that "it is only through the consciousness of the reader" (ibid.) that the object can become a work of art.

Wallace places all of these ideals at the basis of his conception of literature, and he (like Sartre) writes his manifestos because he thinks that his contemporaries have forgotten that this is the true meaning of literature, and because he wants to reaffirm this meaning and call for a literary revolution. For Wallace, "a piece of fiction is a conversation" (Miller 62). In a true literary work "there's a relationship set up between the reader and the writer" (ibid.) whereby art acquires the power to "make me feel less lonely" (ibid.). In great works of literature, the reader feels "this sense of a conversation about loneliness" (Lipsky 68) that's produced as the work confronts his consciousness, and through this feeling he is redeemed when he comes to recognize himself in the work: "somebody at least for a moment feels about something or sees something the way that I do" (Miller 62). Wallace follows Sartre and believes that, in this process of redemption, the reader collaborates with the author in the creation of meaning. He states that "the reader's own life 'outside the story changes the story" (McCaffery 40), and that while "you could argue that it affects only 'her reaction to the story' or 'her take on the story'" (ibid.), the truth is that "these things *are* the story" (ibid.). Thus, in a work of literature, "language lives not just in but *through* the reader. The reader becomes God, for all textual purposes" (ibid.). And while Wallace attributes this teaching to "Barthian and Derridean poststructuralism" (ibid.), it is worth considering the possibility of Sartre's great influence even here. We have seen in how many respects Wallace's discourse follows Sartre's, and here Wallace even uses the same language, as both authors state that literature lives through the reader's consciousness. Most importantly, though, Wallace spent his career opposing the conclusions that poststructuralism derives from this understanding of language and the reader's role, and instead he affirmed the conclusions that Sartre derives from these same ideals. Poststructuralism affirms that the meaning of the text can never be fixed, it cannot refer, it lives through each individual reader, and therefore it can never mean in relation to the world and it can never be object of true human conversation, i.e. communion. Sartre agrees with the premises but comes to the opposite conclusions: since the text can never be fixed and it cannot refer, then it becomes the place wherein each individual

must commit to the responsibility of creating the meaning of the world, and since the text lives through each individual reader, then it becomes the place for linguistic intercourse and human communion, where meaning arises as a result of the shared effort of human beings in dialogue.

Wallace follows Sartre and states that the writer's end must be to "reaffirm the idea of art being a living transaction between humans" (McCaffery 41) and to write works that "affect somebody, make somebody feel a certain way, allow them to enter into relationships with ideas and with characters" (KP 18) and with the authors himself. Literature must be an "anodyne against loneliness" (ibid. 16). It must remind the reader that "this process is a relationship between the writer's consciousness and her own, and that in order to be anything like a real human relationship, she's going to have to put in her share of the linguistic work" (McCaffery 34). These are Wallace's fundamental tenets, and Sartre influenced them way more than anyone has ever noticed.¹¹

Conclusions

Of course, there's much of Sartre that Wallace rejects. For one thing, he has no interest in Sartre's communism. But more importantly, Sartre claims to have no doubt that all objectivity is illusion both in WIL? and throughout his other writings, and since he thinks that literature must represent the truth of Existential ontology even in content, we can see his absolute denial of objectivity even in his literary reviews. In "John Dos Passos and 1919," he writes: "I regard Dos Passos as the greatest writer of our time" (103). Dos Passos represents pure human individuality in its truth of pure indeterminism without explanation and *this* is why, for Sartre, he is the greatest writer of our time. Likewise, in "Francois Mauriac and Freedom," Sartre praises Mauriac because he represents the truths of subjectivity and perspectivism: "a novel is an action related from various points of view. And M. Mauriac is well aware of this, having written, in *La Fin de la Nuit*, that '... the most conflicting judgments about a single person can be correct; it is a question of lighting, and no one light reveals more than another'" (15).

Wallace too affirms the subjectivity of life both in existential (I cannot know the contents of your mind, your pain) and ontological terms (science teaches that relativity is a fundamental law of nature), but he remains uncertain with regards to the truth-value of this affirmation and conscious of its great dangers (it may entail absolute solipsism). On the one hand, Wallace's rejection of traditional literary Realism is an affirmation of perspectivism (objectivity is impossible). On the other hand, Wallace was well aware of the dangers of the "idea of truth that as far as I can tell comes from Nietzsche, that all truth is perspectival" (Goldfarb 148), and in many ways he sought to reject it.¹²

Another fundamental divergence is that while Sartre affirms with absolute certainty that "the recognition of freedom by itself is joy" (WIL? 64), Wallace – while he too is an Existentialist who thinks that individual choice is the ultimate (see *This Is Water*) arbiter of meaning – is much more dubious and aware of the great dangers of free will. His writings are pervaded by the perception of the endless and bottomless despair that may lie within the idea of individual freedom (hence, e.g., why AA addicts in *Infinite Jest* find salvation in the renunciation of free will). Sartre's is an absolute apologetics of "the pride" and "the anguish of individuality (WIL? 88); Wallace instead always maintained a contradictory relationship with the concepts of free will, individuality, pride, and angst. On the one hand, he (like Sartre) thought that these concepts constitute both the essence of humanity and its only chance at redemption. On the other, he felt that they were the origin of unbearable despair.

These are significant differences between Sartre and Wallace, but they take nothing away from the recognition that, in light of all that we have seen above, the relationship between WIL? and Wallace's conception of literature manifests itself as almost surely one of direct influence, an influence so profound that it extends to multiple, specific fundamental ideals, both in content and in the logical structuring of that content. The alignment between Sartre and Wallace comprises the postulation of the primacy of ontology, the rejection of the possibility of objectivity (from which follow the rejections of traditional literary Realism and traditional mimesis), and the affirmations of a late-Wittgensteinian conception of language and of a resulting conception of literature as a means to existential and social commitment that entails the following set of artistic tenets and writerly

responsibilities: there is an opposition between true and false writing, form is a means to an end, literature is and must be a conversation between reader and writer, the writer must tell the truth, confront the reader's consciousness, write countercultural literature, oppose spectation, and enforce individual engagement on the part of the reader. The scope and detail of this affinity are evident, and they testify to the magnitude of Wallace's adherence to Existentialism and use of appropriation as a means to artistic creation. The fundamental tenets of Wallace's literary project follow Sartre's, and this constitutes only one of myriad instances of Wallace's cross-cultural, cross-linguistic, and cross-temporal artistic appropriations, on which we still have much more to learn.

Notes

1. den Dulk explores Sartre's influence on Wallace in his essay "Good Faith and Sincerity: Sartrean Virtues of Self-Becoming in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*" (2014), in his major monograph *Existentialist Engagement in Wallace, Eggers and Foer: A Philosophical Analysis of Contemporary American Literature* (2015), and in his essay "David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* as Contemporary Core Text: Re-Evaluating Postmodernism and Existentialism" (2017). James Ryerson too mentions Sartre's influence on Wallace in his "Introduction" to *Fate, Time, and Language*, and Stefan; Hirt also addresses Sartre's influence on Wallace in *The Iron Bars of Freedom: David Foster Wallace and the Postmodern Self* (2008).
2. If one had to pick one text to call "Wallace's literary manifesto," that would certainly be "E Unibus Pluram." Critics in general consider EUP as the main text of the "1993 essay-interview nexus" that they say constitutes Wallace's manifesto (formed by EUP and the McCaffery interview). More properly, though, Wallace's manifesto should be understood as a system of multiple essays and interviews revolving around EUP (the core of the system) and including, at least, the essays "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young" (an early version of EUP), "The Empty Plenum" (where Wallace praises David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress* as a novel that obeys Wallace's dicta about what literature should be), "David Lynch Keeps His Head" (where Wallace describes Lynch as his cinematic equivalent), and "Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky" (where Wallace describes Dostoevsky as the paradigmatic example of the ideal writer), and the interviews with McCaffery, with Kennedy and Polk (also given in 1993, where Wallace sets down some of the foundations of his project) and with David Lipsky in *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself* (where Wallace expands on all the facets of his conception of literature and his literary project).
3. The French original reads: "Il a abandonné le rêve impossible de faire une peinture impartiale de la Société et de la condition humaine. L'homme est l'être vis-à-vis de qui aucun être ne peut garder l'impartialité, même Dieu. Car Dieu, s'il existait, serait, comme l'ont bien vu certains mystiques, en situation par rapport à l'homme. Et c'est aussi l'être qui ne peut même voir une situation sans la changer, car son regard fige, détruit, ou sculpte ou, comme fait l'éternité, change l'objet en lui-même. C'est à l'amour, à la haine, à la colère, à la crainte, à la joie, à l'indignation, à l'admiration, à l'espoir, au désespoir que l'homme et le monde se révèlent dans leur vérité" (Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, 28–29). Frechtman's English translation first appeared in the 1949 Philosophical Library's edition of WIL?. From then on it has been used in various re-editions of the text, and now appears in both the Routledge edition and in the Harvard UP edition that is the main reference here. This translation seems to be the only one available in English today, if not ever, and it is the only one I could find. Frechtman, though, commits a serious mistake in translating the above passage, which is why I had to present it with my own emendations and add this footnote. He translates the sentence that I present here as "And [man] is also the being [who] cannot even see a situation without changing it, for [his] ..." etc. as "And He is also the being Who cannot even see a situation without changing it, for His ..." This means that Frechtman confuses Sartre's discourse about man with Sartre's discourse about God, and thus condemns the entire English-reading world to commit the same error. Frechtman was fooled into this error by the fact that, in the midst of his discourse on man, Sartre inserts one single sentence with God as a subject ("Car Dieu, s'il existait, serait ...") only to then continue to speak about man by starting his next sentence with an implied subject ("Et c'est aussi l'être qui ..."). Frechtman misinterpreted the implied subject of this next sentence as God, but it is man (the only sentence where God is subject is where "God" appears explicitly, and this is also the only sentence that's written in the conditional tense: Sartre didn't believe in God). Frechtman's mistake is a serious one because it attributes all the characteristics of man's finitude to God. This makes it seem as if Sartre could conceive of such a finite "god" and consider it a viable concept. But Sartre wasn't such a naïve philosopher and knew very well that the concept of God is and must be a concept of an Absolute. Thus, Frechtman's translation gives a mistaken idea of Sartre's philosophy, and one that makes it seem inferior to what it actually is.
4. This is also why Sartre praises Alberto Giacometti: "Il a compris depuis longtemps que les artistes travaillent dans l'imaginaire et que nous ne créons que des trompe-l'œil" ("Les Peintures de Giacometti" 362); "He has long understood that artists work in the imagination and don't create anything but *trompe-l'œil*" (my translation).

5. In “*Un nouveau mystique*,” Sartre adds that “*Les hommes ne sont point d’abord pour communiquer ensuite, mais la communication les constitue originellement dans leur être*” (152): “The existence of men does not precede their communication with one another; rather, communication constitutes their originary being” (my translation). This makes Sartre a Bakhtinian, like Wallace.
6. The influence of Lewis Hyde’s *The Gift* on Wallace is well known. Adam; Kelly exhibits it in “David Foster Wallace and New Sincerity Aesthetics: A Reply to Edward Jackson and Joel Nicholson-Roberts” (2017).
7. In “*Departure and Return*” Sartre delves deep into philosophy of language through the figure of Brice Parain, whom appears as a kind of French Wittgenstein. Sartre considers Parain’s own *Investigations* and writes that “Parain is concerned with language ‘as it is spoken,’ that is, he sees it as a link in a chain of concrete action” (136). One of the tenets of Parain’s philosophy is that “I am ‘*situated in language*’” (160), which is why one of Parain’s most fundamental concerns is what he “calls, in his *Essay on Human Wretchedness*, ‘the giddy feeling of an inexactitude in language’” (135).
8. It is no coincidence that, in his nonfiction, Wallace praises only literature of commitment, and that, in “*Rhetoric and the Math Melodrama*” (2000), he defines “literature” as the set of “what are really complex and essentially human dramas” (224). To make just one example, Wallace praises Zbigniew Herbert’s *Mr. Cogito* (1974) because it “grapples with the Big Questions of human existence” and “communicates an emotional urgency that postmodernism’s integument of irony renders facile and banal” (“*Mr. Cogito*” 121).
9. This is one of the reasons why Sartre founded *Les Temps modernes* with Simone de Beauvoir. In the introduction to the journal, Sartre writes that his aim is to argue against “the theoreticians of Art for Art’s Sake and of Realism” (*Introducing* 249), who have rendered the phrase “man of letters” disgusting. Sartre goes on to say that the committed writer must “embrace his era – tightly” (*ibid.* 252) because he’s implicated and compromised in his in-situatedness anyway, whatever he does, even in silence and retreat. This is an ontological axiom, and so are the ideas that “a person is nothing other than his freedom” (*ibid.* 264) and that man is “alone in bearing the burden of himself. In this sense, freedom might appear to be a curse; it is a curse. But it is also the sole source of human greatness” (*ibid.*). Even such short text displays the development of Sartre’s argument from his fundamental ontology through the resulting conception of literature to the condemnation of his time.
10. In “*On The Sound and the Fury: Time in the Work of Faulkner*,” Sartre makes it even more explicit: “a fictional technique always relates back to the novelist’s metaphysics” (84). About Faulkner, he concludes: “I like his art, but I do not believe in his metaphysics. A closed future is still a future” (93). In addition, in “*Camus’ The Outsider*,” he explains Camus’ formal choices as an example of metaphysical grounding: “A nineteenth-century naturalist would have written ‘A bridge spanned the river.’ M. Camus will have none of this anthropomorphism. He says ‘Over the river was a bridge.’ This object thus immediately betrays its passiveness. It is *there* before us, plain and undifferentiated” (42).
11. For Wallace, this ability to merge the author and reader is one of the main traits of a great literary writer. Non-coincidentally, in “*Borges on the Couch*” (2004), he praises Borges because “Borges collapses reader and writer into a new kind of aesthetic agent, one who makes stories out of stories, one for whom reading is essentially – consciously – a creative act” (293–294).
12. Wallace’s work is wide, complex, and, in many cases, contradictory, and it is impossible to unpack it in all its nuance here. But in fact, the same is true for Sartre’s. We have seen that Sartre defends his own version of perspectivism, and he comes very close (much closer than Wallace) to the explicit affirmation of the “*relativisme total*” he refers to in “*Denis de Rougemont: L’amour et l’occident*” (60). But then what to make of the fact that Sartre too defends his truth (the truth of *Being and Nothingness*) as the absolute truth? When Sartre affirms the reality of human freedom, for example, he certainly doesn’t mean to say that determinism and fatalism may be possible from some other perspectives.

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Notes on Contributor

Paolo Pitari is a PhD candidate in American Studies at Ca’ Foscari University of Venice and Ludwig Maximilians Universität München. His research focuses on David Foster Wallace and the problem of free will.

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