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# The Influence of Leo Tolstoy's *What Is Art?* On David Foster Wallace's Literary Project

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## ABSTRACT

This article argues that Tolstoy's *What Is Art?* had a direct influence on David Foster Wallace's conception of literature, and most specifically that Wallace appropriated Tolstoy's discourse (down to most of its most specific details) to found his literary project. The article seeks to prove this by exhibiting the striking extent of Wallace's alignment with Tolstoy's beliefs, by retracing the multiple direct references to Tolstoy in Wallace's work, and by uncovering Wallace's annotations on his own copy of *What Is Art?* as further confirmation of what a careful comparative analysis of the works of the two authors makes manifest.

Everyone knows that Tolstoy placed truth highest of all the virtues.

Isaiah Berlin, "Tolstoy and Enlightenment."

## Introduction

In 1993, David Foster Wallace publicly defined his conception of literature and the ends of his literary project. He planned to reestablish the connection between literature, truth, and what is most important in our lives so that literature could retrieve its traditional role as a force of cultural criticism and as a means to respond to the predicaments of its time. In so doing, he invited interpretations that would seek in his work a philosophical exploration of our deepest beliefs and their existential and social consequences.

Here, we analyze Wallace's conception of literature in order to bring to light his fundamental belief in the inextricable connection among literature, philosophy, the truth, and the existential-social function of literature (its ability to address what is most essential in our lives). And we do so through the unveiling of the direct influence of Tolstoy's *What Is Art?* (1897)<sup>1</sup> on Wallace's entire literary project.

In a 1993 interview with Kennedy and Polk, Wallace called himself "the only 'postmodernist' you'll ever meet who absolutely worships Leo Tolstoy" (KP 19), explaining that he appreciated Tolstoy because Tolstoy believed that the eternal objective of art is "to communicate" and to "affect somebody, make somebody feel a certain way, allow them to enter into relationships with ideas and with characters that are not permitted within the cinctures of the ordinary verbal intercourse" (ibid. 18), and because he believed that art strives to do this for the good of its receiver who, through the experience of art and together with its author, can try "to learn how to be a human being, or to have good relationships, or decide whether or not there is a God, or decide whether there's such a thing as love, and whether it's redemptive" (ibid.).

This shows that Wallace recognized the fundamental principles of his writing in Tolstoy's conception of art, which fact constitutes only one of many proofs of the direct influence we want to unveil here. In another 1993 interview, Wallace cited Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* among the masterpieces that most influenced him (McCaffery 50), and in the 1996 interview with David Lipsky, he referred to Tolstoy as the paradigm of the traditional Realist author who had striven to represent the truth in his narratives (Lipsky 37–38). In this sense, Tolstoy had done exactly what Wallace was trying to do in the 1990s (the difference between Tolstoy and Wallace being that one-hundred years had passed and thus the contingencies of life had changed: the perception of the truth was different, and so was the ideal of the literary form capable of representing the truth).

All these explicit references to Tolstoy indicate Wallace's familiarity with the work of the great Russian author and the extent of the latter's influence, which is not to deny that there are elements of Tolstoy's thought that Wallace outright rejected. For example, while Wallace felt a life-long attraction to Christianity and had a strong sense of the existential consequences of the denial of God, he ultimately could never abandon the democratic spirit and the techno-scientific rationality he was born into. He thus could never overcome his final distrust of God. Tolstoy, instead, in Wallace's own words, was a "fundamentalist Russian Orthodox Christian" (KP 18) whose fundamentalism led to a strict and self-righteous moralist attitude that led Wallace to declare: "I'm not trying to line up behind Tolstoy" (McCaffery 26).

These disagreements, though, didn't stop Wallace from accepting the major tenets of Tolstoy's artistic thought: i.e. the ideal of art as a calling to the truth and to moral responsibility. If anything, that Wallace took the time to express both his agreements and disagreements with Tolstoy indicates the extent of Tolstoy's influence. But the real proof of Tolstoy's influence on Wallace's conception of literature resides in the evident alignment of Wallace's discourse with *WIA?*'s: Wallace's theses so openly recall Tolstoy's that it is truly striking that no other scholar has pointed this out before.<sup>2</sup>

In the following, we demonstrate that Tolstoy's thought influenced Wallace's entire literary project to its core and that we can rightfully interpret the relationship between Tolstoy and Wallace as one of *direct* influence. We can do this (1) because of the extent of the alignment of their discourses, and (2) because of Wallace's multiple direct references to *WIA?* throughout his work, the last and most direct of which appears in "Deciderization 2007 – A Special Report," one of Wallace's latest writings (which fact shows that Wallace never forgot *WIA?*), where he writes: "What exactly are the connections between literary aesthetics and moral value supposed to be? Whose moral values ought to get used in determining what those connections should be? Does anyone even read Tolstoy's 'What Is Art?' anymore" (311). Finally, we can do this (3) because we can now read Wallace's own heavily annotated copy of *WIA?* at the David Foster Wallace archive.<sup>3</sup>

## To Write Manifestos to Redeem Art

In his "*Introduction à l'analyse des manifestes*" (1980), Claude Abastado writes that, besides the difficulties in establishing a final definition of the "manifesto," we may say that "we call 'manifesto' all texts that fiercely take a position and institute a blatant injunctive relationship between an emitter and his listeners" ("*on nomme 'manifeste' tout texte qui prend violemment position et institue, entre un émetteur et ses allocutaires, une relation injonctive flagrante,*" 4, my translation). In *Machiavelli and Us* (1972–1986), Louis Althusser states that *The Prince* is a Manifesto because Machiavelli "mak[es] it serve as a means in the struggle he announces and engages" (23). In *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern* (1999), Janet Lyon argues that a "particular hortatory style" is perhaps "the only uniform convention among manifestos" (13) and that "the manifesto often fashions a foreshortened, impassioned, and highly selective history which chronicles the oppression leading to the present moment of crisis" (14). In *Legitimizing the Artist* (2003), Luca Somigli maintains that "the power sought by the manifesto writer is in the first instance that of responding to the authority and authoritativeness of the dominant discourse" and that "it is in this sense that the manifesto is always a 'self-declaration'" (37). In *Poetry of the Revolution* (2006), finally, Martin Puchner states that the basic convention of the

artistic-literary manifesto is “the act of declaring a new departure” (70), the act that unites all the *avant-gardes* and manifesto writers of the past two hundred years.<sup>4</sup>

Tolstoy’s *WIA?* adheres to all the above definitions of the manifesto. Wallace’s “E Unibus Pluram” (1993) – together with all the adjunct writings that form Wallace’s manifesto – does too, and it does so precisely by consciously taking on the principles that drive Tolstoy’s writing: that is, first and foremost, the necessity to condemn the art of the time.<sup>5</sup>

In *WIA?*, Tolstoy’s denunciation is immediate: art has “become dull to all serious phenomena of life” (4). Tolstoy reiterates it throughout the entire text: “almost everything regarded as art, and good art, and the whole of art in our society, is not only not true and good art, nor the whole of art, it is not even art at all, but only a counterfeit of it” (113). Wallace makes Tolstoy’s driving necessity his own ever since the publication of “Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young” (1988), one of his earliest essays, where he writes that the “narrative art” of his time is “trash,” “*unreal, empty*” and strives “not to change or enlighten or broaden or reorient” (52–53) but only to entertain. Thus, like Tolstoy, Wallace comes to write his manifestos out of the necessity to condemn the art of his time (Tolstoy took on art in general, Wallace limited himself to literature and to some forays into cinema). Wallace’s “Fictional Futures” is, in essence, an early draft of EUP, and EUP is the manifesto where – just like Tolstoy in *WIA?* denounces the art of his time as dull and counterfeit – Wallace denounces the literature of his time as “extremely shallow,” “dead on the page” (EUP 81) and devoid of “a genuine socio-artistic agenda” (ibid. 51).

In both Tolstoy and Wallace, though, the driving necessity is not simply negative. Tolstoy condemns the art of his time in order to offer a way to redemption. He writes that art must become “good, useful art” (*WIA?* 8): art that is “true,” “serious,” and promotes “love among people” (ibid.). Wallace aligns with Tolstoy’s positive spirit too: this is why EUP ends with the famous pronouncement that “the next real literary ‘rebels’ [must] endorse and instantiate single entendre principles [...] with reference and conviction” (81). Wallace’s manifestos call for a literature of engagement that must recover its potential to act “as an anodyne against loneliness,” to “make people less lonely” (KP 16), and that must act as a force of empathy and love in the world: “the big distinction between good art and so-so art lies somewhere in the art’s heart’s purpose, the agenda of the consciousness behind the text. It’s got something to do with love. With having the discipline to talk out of the part of yourself that can love” (McCaffery 50).

Wallace, therefore, aligns with both facets of Tolstoy’s spirit: the negative (the condemnation of the art of the time) and the positive (the offer of redemptive art). Like Tolstoy, he establishes a sociology of art that exposes the predicaments of his time and art’s responsibilities therein. And like Tolstoy, he specifically condemns the literature of his time for being art for art’s sake and having no connections to what is most serious and real in our lives. Finally, like Tolstoy, he demands a literary return to truth and profound moral and human engagement. Tolstoy writes that this is the only possibility for the redemption and restoration of true art and literature. One hundred years later, Wallace follows in his footsteps and appropriates his reasoning down to its most specific details.

### The Condemnation of the Pleasure Principle and of Art for Art’s Sake

In *WIA?*, Tolstoy condemns art for art’s sake together with all the theories that see beauty and pleasure as the central aim of art. He makes an analogy between art- and food-consumption and writes that “just as people who think that the aim and purpose of food is pleasure cannot perceive the true meaning of eating, so people who think that the aim of art is pleasure cannot know its meaning and purpose, because they ascribe to an activity which has meaning in connection with other phenomena of life the false and exclusive aim of pleasure” (*WIA?* 35). For Tolstoy, the problem with the ideal of artistic pleasure is that it diverts art away from the truth, i.e. its connection with the other phenomena of life, what is most real and important in our lives. This is why he concludes (by maintaining the art-food analogy) that just as “people understand that the meaning of eating is the nourishment of the body only when they cease to consider pleasure the aim of this activity. So it is with art. People will

understand the meaning of art only when they cease to regard beauty – that is, pleasure – as the aim of this activity” (ibid.).

Wallace follows Tolstoy and criticizes his own time in the same terms. In the McCaffery interview, he says that today’s audience has “been raised to expect art to be 100% pleasurable and to make that pleasure effortless” (22), and he criticizes contemporary art precisely for spreading “the idea that one of the main goals of art is simply to *entertain*, give people sheer pleasure” (24). Throughout all the texts that compose his manifesto, Wallace links the ideal of artistic pleasure with the pervasiveness of infantilism and spectatorship that, to him, characterize contemporary Western-industrial society. And like Tolstoy, he argues that the ideal of pleasure deprives art of its true meaning – i.e. its connection with what is most real and important in our lives – and renders it “*unreal, empty.*”

In this sense, Tolstoy’s condemnation of art for art’s sake and its pleasure-ideal found Wallace’s entire literary project, with its denunciation of minimalism and metafiction and its call to the restoration of a literature that’s “about what it is to be a fucking *human being*” (ibid. 26) and that’s written “to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human” (ibid.) in this world.<sup>6</sup> Wallace follows Tolstoy even in making use of the art-food analogy to explain the grim consequences of the pleasure principle. He refers to this analogy in multiple interviews and essays (including EUP 37), the best-known instance of which is the interview with David Lipsky, where he takes candy as an example and says that it is “real pleasurable, but it doesn’t have any calories in it. There’s something really vital about food that candy’s missing, although to make up for what it’s missing, the pleasure of masticating and swallowing goes way up” (Lipsky 79). In other words, candy is the ultimate pleasure-giver, but it doesn’t fulfill the true purpose of food, and it will thus leave you empty. So it is with art: art made for pleasure doesn’t fulfill the true purpose of art and it is thus empty, it deprives us of what nourishes our lives.<sup>7</sup>

### Extending the Condemnation of the Pleasure Principle to the Social Scale

Wallace also appropriates from Tolstoy the extension of the criticism of the pleasure principle to Western-industrial society as a whole. In *WIA?*, Tolstoy retraces the history that brought to the social pervasiveness of the pleasure principle (of which art for art’s sake is but a consequence) and argues that “the Renaissance of science and art” (47) is responsible for “the denial of any religion” and “the recognition of its needlessness” (ibid.). For Tolstoy, the Renaissance founded a society of people who do “not believe in anything” (ibid.), do not know good and evil, and cannot have “any other standard for evaluating good and bad art than personal pleasure” (ibid. 48).

Wallace’s criticism of contemporary society in EUP appropriates Tolstoy’s discourse both in its content and in the logical steps which the argument follows. Only the historical contingencies change. Tolstoy holds the Renaissance responsible for instituting a world without religion; Wallace denounces “postmodern irony” (EUP 41) for its destruction of all “guides for living” (ibid. 79) and its “ridicule” of all “*passé* expressions of value” (ibid. 63). Tolstoy condemns the rejection of religion because its consequence is a society where people cannot believe in anything; Wallace decries “irony’s aura” (ibid. 54) because of its ethos of “irreverent cynicism” (ibid. 36) and “blank indifference” (ibid. 63) and its derision of all values and beliefs. Tolstoy sees the pervasiveness of counterfeit art as the consequence of the denial of religion (i.e. of all values except personal pleasure); Wallace sees the proliferation of literature “doomed to shallowness” (ibid. 81) – i.e. literature whose “sole aim is, finally, to *wow*, to ensure that the reader is pleased” (ibid. 79) – as the consequence of our society’s debunking of all “conventional standards as hollow” (ibid. 62), which leaves us with a destructive ethos that can offer “no sources of insight of comparative worth, no guides to *why* and *how* to choose” (ibid. 75–76).

In other words, Wallace reformulates Tolstoy’s argument in precise detail. The argument denounces the contemporary ethos for its negation of all values except personal pleasure, it exposes the society as one where people cannot believe in anything and emptiness and cynicism reign, and it diagnoses art for art’s sake as yet another dire consequence of this destructive ethos. This is why art for art’s sake is deplorable, and why the connection between art and what is most true and important in

our lives must be reestablished. Tolstoy makes the argument in *WIA?*; Wallace appropriates it all throughout his own manifestos. Both authors see that the predicament is not in-itself artistic: art is a means to an end, not an end in itself. Thus, for Tolstoy, the real problem is that the culture of his time *divides* people, and for Wallace, the problem is the same: our ethos is the source of “great despair and stasis” (EUP 49) among people. As a result, both Tolstoy and Wallace conceptualize the redemption of art as a means to fight against isolation and nihilism: this is this hope that drives them.

Therefore, Wallace appropriates Tolstoy’s argument, reiterates it throughout his manifestos, and makes it the driving principle of his art. A few more examples. In the McCaffery interview, Wallace criticizes Western society for its utilitarianism, i.e. its “whole teleology predicated on the idea that that best human life is one that maximizes the pleasure-to-pain ratio” (23). In such a society, Wallace continues, “pleasure becomes a value, a teleological end in itself” (ibid.), and this constitutes a culture of childishness (facing what is real involves effort and suffering) and of “aesthetic childishness” (ibid.). To Mark Caro, Wallace describes our time as one where “sheer pleasure” is at an all-time high and yet we are “essentially miserable” (55). And to David Lipsky, he explains that the motive behind *Infinite Jest* (1996) was his desire to explore the contemporary “confusion of permissions, or this idea that pleasure and comfort are the, are really the ultimate goal and meaning of life. I think we’re starting to see a generation *die* . . . on the toxicity of that idea” (Lipsky 160) – which fact explains why *Infinite Jest* is centered around a movie so pleasurable that it is a weapon of mass destruction: people die alone, of dehydration and starvation, while watching it because they stop caring about anything else but the infinite pleasure it provides. Finally, Wallace’s most famous essay, “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again” (1997), is itself an exploration of these themes. The cruise ship is the embodiment of “the promise [. . .] not that you can experience great pleasure, but that you *will*” (267): the promise of the total fulfillment of “the Dissatisfied Infant part of me” (316) through the administration of infinite “pampering and passive pleasure” (ibid.). Here Wallace non-coincidentally finds the ship “unbearably sad” (261): he’s in “despair” and empathizes with the teenager who, some weeks before, had jumped off a similar Megaship.

These are only a few examples meant to indicate how these themes are ubiquitous in Wallace’s work and thus how Wallace made the argument of *WIA?* the prominent driving force of his entire literary project. Like Tolstoy, Wallace criticizes not only art but also the entire society for its endorsement of the pleasure principle, and he intends this criticism to culminate in the offer of an artistic redemption of the Tolstoyan kind.

### The Metaphysical Horizon, Where Everything Occurs in Relation to Everything Else

Yet, for both Tolstoy and Wallace after him, society does not represent the final dimension wherein everything acquires its meaning. If we leave aside the contrast between Tolstoy’s commitment to God and Wallace’s ultimate distrust in all absolute principles, it is evident that Wallace shares with Tolstoy the belief in the inextricable tie between the conception and practice of art and the entire infinite metaphysical horizon: the horizon that contains everything that has ever appeared, appears, and will appear, and wherein everything occurs. This means that, for both Tolstoy and Wallace, one cannot treat the question of artistic value as an independent question. Art is necessarily correlated with the history of ideas and of human practices, and with the specific conception of being that a people hold at a given time. This is why both Tolstoy and Wallace insist that artistic redemption will be achieved only by overcoming the ethos of their respective times.

Thus, in *WIA?* Tolstoy writes that “the appreciation of the merits of art [. . .] depends on people’s understanding of the meaning of life, on what they see as good and evil in life” (42), and that “the unbelief of the upper classes of the European world created a situation in which the activity of art [. . .] was replaced by an activity the aim of which was to afford the greatest pleasure to a certain group of people” (58). Wallace follows Tolstoy and writes that “people’s values and self-perception” (EUP 53) – in our case, our culture’s “congenital skepticism” (JFD 272) – define artistic creation and consumption. This is why he explores various philosophical discourses – even “of such aliens as Husserl,

Heidegger, Bakhtin, Lacan, Barthes, Poulet, Gadamer, de Man” (FFs 63) – to discover ideas on which to found the rebirth of “serious, real, conscientious, aware, ambitious art” (ibid. 68).

Tolstoy and Wallace believe that our conception of art depends on our most fundamental beliefs about the meaning of life. These are matters of epistemology, metaphysics, ontology, theology, and ethics from which art is inseparable. This is why Tolstoy denounces “Nietzsche and his followers, as well as the decadents and English aesthetes identical with them” (*WIA?* 144), and why he postulates that only the reaffirmation of the Christian ideal can save art. And this is why Wallace decries the contemporary ethos as the source of artistic emptiness, why he founds the redemption of a new literature on Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, why he writes *Girl with Curious Hair* (1989) as “a very traditionally moral book” (KP 19), and why he declares in *This Is Water* (2005) that “everybody worships. The only choice we get is *what* to worship” (100–101). What we worship defines our most fundamental beliefs about the meaning of life, and therefore our beliefs about art.<sup>8</sup>

### The Ethical Condemnation, Critique, and Necessary Eclipse of the Literature of Amusement

Here we find the most unforeseeable and nonetheless indisputable feature of *WIA?*’s direct influence on Wallace. As is well known, Wallace decried the literature of his time for its “morally vacant” nihilism (FFs 39), and he criticized postmodernist metafiction as the predominant contemporary form of the literature of amusement, postulating that metafiction’s own principles must lead to its necessary auto-destruction and thus to its overcoming and to the advent of a new literary era. Tolstoy had leveled these same exact criticisms at the literature of amusement of his time. Wallace appropriated Tolstoy’s arguments and adapted them to our era.

First, Wallace formulates a *social* ethical criticism of the minimalists and metafictionists of the 1980s and 1990s. He accuses writers like Mark Leyner and Bret Easton Ellis (exemplars, to him, of the fashionable literary fiction of the time) of “genuflecting to” (EUP 76) the ideals of the culture of entertainment and writing fiction that “panders shamelessly to the audience’s” (McCaffery 25) worst impulses. In *WIA?*, Tolstoy had already criticized Charles Baudelaire and Paul Verlaine in the exact same terms, decrying them as paradigms of the counterfeit art that bows to the pleasure principle: their success, for Tolstoy, had “only one explanation”: that is, “that art for the society in which these two versifiers are active is not a serious, important matter of life, but is merely an amusement” (71–72).

Second, Wallace formulates an *existential* ethical criticism of the minimalists and metafictionists. He blatantly states that “the only real point of that shit is ‘Like me, because I’m clever’” (McCaffery 29). In other words, the purpose of this so-called art is “showing the reader you’re smart or funny or talented or whatever, trying to be liked” (ibid. 50). Again, in *WIA?* Tolstoy had already criticized Baudelaire, Verlaine, and other artists of amusement in these exact terms by writing that these so-called artists “lose their sense of human dignity, they develop in themselves such a passion for public praise that they suffer permanently from unsatisfied vanity, inflated to a morbid degree in them, and they use all the powers of their soul to satisfy just this passion” (140).

Third, Wallace formulates a theoretical analysis of metafiction as the literature of amusement. In “Fictional Futures,” he writes that both metafiction and minimalism are “simple engines of self-reference” (65) and hence “primitive, crude” (ibid.), “*unreal, empty*” (ibid. 53) literary forms that are “deeply influenced by the aesthetic norms of mass entertainment” (ibid. 47). Then, in EUP, he describes metafiction as “literature unshackled from the cultural cinctures of mimetic narrative and free to plunge into reflexivity and self-conscious meditations on aboutness” (34). For Wallace, metafiction’s freedom from the world constitutes its essential emptiness, an emptiness that must render metafiction a form of amusement that is *subservient* to the culture of pleasure: “less a ‘response to’ televisual culture than a kind of abiding-in-TV” (ibid.). In this sense, metafiction has always been destined to such emptiness (and therefore to constitute itself as a literature of amusement) because its driving principle has always been “to treat formal ingenuity as an end in itself” (McCaffery 29), and thus to empty literature of all values except formal, esthetic pleasure. *Once again*, Tolstoy had already

theorized this in *WIA?*. He wrote that the poetry of Baudelaire and Verlaine is empty and shallow because it has no interest in “the real things” (72) (i.e. it is unshackled from mimesis), that this poetry is thus “filled with artificiality” and “forced originality” (ibid.) (i.e. it treats formal ingenuity as an end in itself), that this makes the essence of such poetry “the supplanting of morality by the concept of beauty” (ibid.), and that this exposes its authors not as artists but as “entertainers of the wealthy” (ibid. 140) (i.e. producers of a literature that is not a response to the culture of pleasure but an abiding-in-pleasure).

Fourth, Wallace theorizes the necessary auto-destruction of metafiction. As early as in “Fictional Futures,” he writes that minimalism and metafiction “seem already to have reached the Clang-Birdesque horizon of their own possibility” (65). He then fictionalizes this idea in the novella “*Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*” (1989), an allegory of the self-destruction of metafiction and its overcoming written in reference to John Barth, whose essay “The Literature of Exhaustion” (1967) and short story collection *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968) epitomize, for Wallace, the best that metafiction can achieve together with its most destructive consequences. Wallace would later tell interviewers that “Westward” was “my homage and also patricidal killing thing to Barth” (Lipsky 63), whose work was “the trumpet call of postmodern metafiction” (ibid.). In “Westward,” he would add, “I wanted to get the Armageddon-explosion, the goal metafiction’s always been about” (McCaffery 41). For Wallace, therefore, metafiction “gets empty and solipsistic real fast. It spirals in on itself” (ibid. 40) because of its abandonment of the real world, its empty formalism. Metafiction is destined to exhaust its possibilities because of its constitutive emptiness – “Metafiction’s real end has always been Armageddon. Art’s reflection on itself is terminal” (ibid. 30) – and it is this constitutive emptiness (pure formalism, infinite self-reflexivity) that destines metafiction to the mistaken conclusion that there is nothing new to say and that possibilities are exhausted. *And what is most striking is that even this theory was already presented by Tolstoy in WIA?, and through the exact same argumentative steps.* Tolstoy’s argument was that the poetry of Baudelaire and Verlaine – precisely because of its abandonment of “the real things” and its resulting “artificiality” and “forced originality” (i.e. its pure formalism) – “becomes boring with repetition” (72) and must therefore constantly “renew” and “innovate” its formal structure in order to survive. This process, though, must lead to auto-destruction because below the superficial formal “innovation” of this so-called art “the essence remains the same” (ibid.): that is, in the end, “its content, becoming ever more limited, finally reaches the point where artists [...] think that everything has already been said, and it is no longer possible to say anything new” (ibid.).

## The Redemption of Art as a Means to Human Communion

The core of Wallace’s esthetic enterprise is his call for the redemption of literature: literature must be an anodyne against loneliness, a means to human communion. Wallace appropriates *WIA?* even in instituting this ultimate end, and he models his conception of literature after Tolstoy’s down to many of its specific details.

*a. the conception of literature:* Wallace defines true literature as what “addresses the concern of and acts as an anodyne against loneliness” (KP 16). Literature is what “addresses and [aggravates] the loneliness that dominates people” (McCaffery 31) in order “to move people to countenance it” (ibid. 32), because only by countenancing loneliness can people hope to overcome it. This is why literature must constitute itself as a means to “human redemption” (ibid.): it must open the possibility of overcoming loneliness and attaining communion. Literature must be where “we can leap over th[e] wall” of self and overcome the “existential loneliness” that defines our lives in “the real world” (Miller 62). And if Tolstoy doesn’t *explicitly* insist on the concept of “existential loneliness,” it is nonetheless obvious that Wallace found direct inspiration in *WIA?*, given that its main message is that true art is a “means of communion” that “serves to unite people” (38) and an activity that “is based [...] on this capacity of people to be infected by the feelings of other people” (ibid.) and without which people would be “more divided and hostile” (ibid. 40).<sup>9</sup> Therefore, Tolstoy himself insists that true art is “one of the most necessary means of communication, without which mankind cannot live” (ibid. 41), and



Wallace follows in Tolstoy's footsteps when he establishes his own conception of literature. Further confirmation of this is the fact that Wallace postulates precisely the two levels of artistic communion that Tolstoy himself postulates, and he derives from them the same ethical responsibility of the author that Tolstoy does.

*b. the first level of human communion in literature:* for Wallace, "the first level" (Miller 62) of human communion in literature occurs through "mental or emotional intimacy with a character" (ibid.). This is the first means by which literature can achieve the overcoming of existential loneliness. The reader can leap over the wall of self because "a piece of fiction that's really true allows you to be intimate with [...] a world that resembles our own in enough emotional particulars so that the way different things must feel is carried out with us into the real world" (KP 16). For Wallace, this entails that "serious fiction's purpose is to give the reader, who like all of us is sort of marooned in her own skull, to give her imaginative access to other selves" (McCaffery 21–22), because "if a piece of fiction can allow us imaginatively to identify with characters' pain, we might then also more easily conceive of others identifying with our own. This is nourishing, redemptive; we become less alone inside" (ibid. 22). Tolstoy didn't explicitly theorize two different levels of communion in art, but he obviously did formulate a direct precedent of (and inspiration for) Wallace's "first level" when he wrote that "being infected by the feelings of another, which makes us rejoice over another's joy, grieve over another's grief, merge souls with another's, [...] constitutes the essence of art" (WIA 120) as a "means of communion" that "serves to unite people."<sup>10</sup>

*c. the second level of human communion in literature:* for Wallace, there's a second level in which literature is a means of human communion: "a piece of fiction is a conversation. There's a relationship set up between the reader and the writer" (Miller 62) that makes the reader "feel less lonely" (ibid.). True literature must, therefore, establish "a real full human relationship [...] between the writer's consciousness" (McCaffery 34) and the reader's. Through this relationship, the reader can feel "a kind of Ah-ha! Somebody at least for a moment feels about something or sees something the way that I do. [...] I feel unalone – intellectually, emotionally, spiritually. I feel human and unalone and that I'm in a deep, significant conversation with another consciousness" (Miller 62). For Wallace, this second level is the deepest level of human communion through art, and even here he found direct inspiration in WIA?, since Tolstoy articulates this principle in terms that Wallace's clearly recall. Tolstoy writes that "every work of art results in the one who receives it entering into a kind of communion with the one who produced or is producing the art, and with all those who, simultaneously with him, before him, or after him, have received or will receive the same artistic impression" (38). Tolstoy also specifies that the production of this communion is the essence of art and that an object "is not an object of art unless it calls up in a man that feeling, distinct from all other feelings, of joy, of spiritual union with another (the author) and with others (listeners or spectators) who perceive the same artistic work" (ibid. 121). In fact, this is one of the two aspects in which Wallace's direct appropriation of Tolstoy's discourse appears most striking (the other one being the denunciation of the literature of amusement and the postulation of the necessity of its auto-destruction). Tolstoy even explains the feelings that occur in the mind of the recipient of the true work of art in terms that Wallace's above-cited description of the second level of human communion in literature almost explicitly recalls. The passage is thus worth quoting at length:

The chief peculiarity of this feeling is that the perceiver merges with the artist to such a degree that it seems to him that the perceived object has been made, not by someone else, but by himself, and that everything expressed by the object is exactly what he has long been wanting to express. The effect of the true work of art is to abolish in the consciousness of the perceiver the distinction between himself and the artist. [...] It is this liberation of the person from his isolation from others, from his loneliness, this merging of the person with others, that constitutes the chief attractive force and property of art (ibid. 121).<sup>11</sup>

*d. the ethical responsibility of the author:* as is well known, Wallace derives from his conception of literature a specific ethical responsibility to which every author is subject if he wants to produce true literature. Every author, that is, must make the ethical commitment to *sincerity*. Only on the basis of

sincerity can all of the author's other ethical responsibilities – i.e. to produce communicative, other directed writing rather than expressive, solipsistic writing, “to talk out of the part of yourself that can love [and] give the reader something” (McCaffery 50), etc. – be founded. In his interview with Wallace, Steve Paulson says that EUP was written to instigate writers to “ditch irony in favor of sincerity” (Paulson 134), and most famously, in the essay “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction” (2010), Adam Kelly demonstrates that Wallace established a new ideal of “truth now associated with the possibility of a reconceived, and renewed, sincerity” (Kelly 146) – a conclusion that arises within “the widespread agreement [...] that David Foster Wallace affirmed and embodied sincerity as a crucial value in his life and work, perhaps even as that work's defining feature” (ibid. 131). That sincerity was one of Wallace's fundamental tenets is hence an uncontroversial matter, and even this most central of Wallace's ideals was already affirmed by Tolstoy in *WIA?*. Tolstoy, that is, had already written that works of art are such only if they are sincere and other-directed, and he had also specified that objects produced only to please audiences bear only deplorable results and constitute counterfeit art. In other words, for Tolstoy, art is true and communicative only when it is infected by the sincere feelings of the author: this is why he writes that “most of all the degree of infectiousness of art is increased by the degree of the artist's sincerity” (122) and that when the artist “does not himself feel what he wants to express, there is immediately a resistance, and then the most particular new feeling, the most artful technique, not only do not produce any impression, but become repellent” (ibid.). It is therefore clear that *WIA?* directly inspired Wallace to commit to the ideal of sincerity.<sup>12</sup>

*e. the final aim of literature:* as we have seen, the central message of *WIA?* is that the true artist produces works in order to provide “a means of human communion” for the people, so that they become less “divided and hostile.” In this sense, Tolstoy wrote *WIA?* as a call to artistic redemption: a redemption intended as the reaffirmation of the original meaning of art, which entailed the denunciation of the so-called art of his time. A century later, Wallace appropriated both the content and the logic of Tolstoy's argument, and on them, he established his own literary project. Like Tolstoy's, the central message of Wallace's manifestos is that the true artist produces works in order to truly “affect people” (KP 16), to “make people less lonely” (ibid), and to illuminate how “we as human beings still have the capacity for joy, charity, genuine connections” (McCaffery 27). Wallace himself thus structured his entire literary project as a call to artistic redemption: a redemption founded upon the wish to “reaffirm the idea of art being a living transaction between humans” (ibid. 41), and one that entailed the denunciation of the so-called art of his time – a so-called art that is, in truth, mere entertainment, a product of the negation of all values except personal pleasure (like Baudelaire's and Verlaine's was to Tolstoy). All of these ideas and their structure had already composed the fundamental argument of *WIA?*, and this justifies the claim that Wallace appropriated Tolstoy's work, adjusted it so that it could function as a response to the predicaments of our time, and rendered it the foundation of his entire literary project.

### Aspects of Tolstoy's Discourse that Wallace Rejected

First, as we have mentioned, while Wallace felt a life-long attraction to Christianity and, above all, to the ideal of worship, in the end, he could never overcome his distrust toward all absolutes. Ultimately, he couldn't believe in any absolute truth except maybe a scientific one (if there are any), and therefore he couldn't truly believe in God, which is why he rejected Tolstoy's fundamentalist Christianity together with his Christian ideal of art.<sup>13</sup>

Second, Tolstoy conveyed his ideals through a strict, fanatic, self-righteous, moralist attitude that Wallace – a contemporary artist of secular and democratic ideology – found despicable. Tolstoy, for example, called all those connected with the art of amusement “people who stand at the lowest level of moral development” (*WIA?* 35). Wallace disregarded this attitude, and while he criticized the structure of society, entertainment, and art, he almost always avoided judging individuals, and his general attitude was that of identifying the forces that have brought to the affirmation of the social and artistic structures that he considered empty and dangerous, not that of insulting those who think and act

otherwise. In this sense, in “David Lynch Keeps His Head” (1995), Wallace praises Lynch because his art considers evil by “diagnosing it without the comfortable carapace of disapproval” (“DL” 204). This is what makes Lynch’s art “redemptive” (ibid. 191): its denial of the “black-and-white ethics” (ibid. 205) with which we try to delude ourselves into thinking that we are just good and the other is just evil. This is also why Wallace ultimately chose Dostoevsky over Tolstoy as his true literary idol. As Wallace writes in “Joseph Frank’s Dostoevsky” (1996): “you need only to compare the protagonists’ final conversions in Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilych* and FMD’s *Crime and Punishment* in order to appreciate Dostoevsky’s ability to be moral without being moralistic” (269).

Third, Tolstoy believed that the final aim of true art is the attainment of the unity of all people under Christian brotherhood. He thought that this could be achieved only through the highest degree of “the infectiousness of art” (*WIA?* 120), which means that the best works of art should change a recipient’s mind “without any effort on his own part” (ibid.) because this is the only way art can spread the Christian message universally. Wallace fought against this ideal throughout his career, on account of the specific social and artistic predicaments of our time. To him, one of the most dangerous features of our culture was precisely its promotion of “high-dose spectatorship” (*EUP* 57); that is, the kind of pleasure that “engages without demanding” (ibid. 37), that infects the receiver without any effort on his own part. For Wallace, the exploitation of our “willingness to be pleased” (ibid. 44) turns us into childish adults, unwilling to take responsibility. And ultimately, it empties our lives of meaning until we fall into bottomless despair. Therefore, true literary art must be the opposite of infectious and effortless: it must be engaging but also demanding and “uneasy” (*McCaffery* 33). It must remind the reader that, if she wants to establish a real full human relationship with the author, “she’s going to have to put in her share of the linguistic work” (ibid. 34). For Wallace, therefore, in order to respond to the predicaments of our time, literature must “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” (ibid. 22). If literature does this, it will also “teach the reader that he’s way smarter than he thought he was” (*Lipsky* 71).<sup>14</sup>

### Wallace’s Divergence from John Gardner’s Moral Didacticism

In line with his rejection of Tolstoy’s fanatic, moralist attitude, Wallace also dismisses what he defines as the “moral didacticism” (*Kennedy and Polk* 18) of John Gardner’s *On Moral Fiction* (1978) – that other contemporary, American moral call to literary redemption inspired by Tolstoy’s *What Is Art?*. In this sense, when Wallace states “I’m not trying to line up behind Tolstoy or Gardner” (*McCaffery* 26), he means precisely that he wants to reject the self-righteousness that inheres to the idea “that it’s fiction’s duty to edify or teach, or to make us good little Christians or Republicans” (ibid.). That Gardner inherits the self-righteous moral absolutism of Tolstoy is evident as you move through his argument, which begins with the idea that “true art instructs,” and then specifies that only art that teaches to be “unselfish, helpful, kind, and noble-hearted” is true art, while every other kind must be dismissed. Toward the end of the book, Gardner even explicitly states that “this notion of the artist as better than other people is irritating, I admit,” but that it’s nonetheless true.

This is the moral arrogance from which Wallace wants to distance himself, because he wants the triumph of what, in “Authority and American Usage” (1999), he calls “a true Democratic Spirit” (*AAU* 72), over the self-righteous absolutism that Tolstoy and Gardner embody. Wallace knows that the artist is not better than other people at all, that he has no right to say what’s Right or Wrong as if it were Godly Law, and that so he has nothing to teach, and no instructions, because he isn’t superior to anyone else. The only thing that literary fiction can and must teach, for Wallace, is precisely that we’re all equally fallible and in need of help, and that we’re all in this together, not alone, and so we should have serious conversations about it, and about the truth. What true literary art must do is to offer a means for conversation, so that we feel less alone inside, and we begin to face the truth about ourselves, together.

But, again, Wallace’s rejection of Tolstoy and Gardner is only partial, confined to the problem of moral absolutism. When Wallace states that “I’d agree with Gardner to the extent that he has the

sense to be parroting Tolstoy – if you edit out the heavenly Christian stuff” (KP 19), he means to say exactly what we’ve tried to show throughout this piece: in a nutshell, that Wallace’s artistic credo is Tolstoy’s credo (and Gardner’s), but with the heavenly Christian stuff (the moral absolutism) edited out. Therefore, for Wallace, Gardner is Tolstoy’s parrot, and his general view is retrograde, because he hasn’t edited out the mortal absolutism that is today unacceptable. But it’s nonetheless important, for Wallace, to reiterate that there’s a deep sense in which “both of them [Tolstoy and Gardner] are right: what fiction and poetry are doing is what they have been trying to do for two thousand years: affect somebody” (ibid. 18). *This* is what Wallace finds worthy in Tolstoy and Gardner, and what he thinks is needed in our times. In *this* sense, Wallace also aligns with Gardner, and agrees with him that their generation’s literature and criticism have become trivial and false, that literature ought to go back to the ethical commitment of writers like Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, that the mere formalism of genres like the 80s metafiction speaks of the emptiness, cynicism, nihilism, and despair of our capitalist society, and that it’s necessary for literary art to recover belief, value, a concern for what makes us human, a social commitment, and most importantly a high sense of duty to the truth.

## Conclusions

Wallace conceived literature as an anodyne against loneliness and a means of human communion. He theorized this communion as structured in two levels of emotional intimacy: the reader’s relationship with the artistic world he encounters and the relationship between reader and author. From this conception on literature, he derived a specific ideal of the ethical responsibility of the author, founded upon the principles of sincerity and other-directedness. Today, we can affirm that Tolstoy’s *WIA?* directly influenced Wallace’s conception – so much so that Wallace’s discourse can be called an appropriation of Tolstoy’s – in light of the correspondence between the contents of the two discourses *and, above all, between their lines of reasoning*. The direct references to Tolstoy that are scattered throughout Wallace’s work (from his earliest to his latest writings) and the presence of Wallace’s own heavily annotated copy of *WIA?* at the HRC constitute further proof of the value of this interpretation. In 1993, Wallace told McCaffery that “the only stuff a writer can get from an artistic ancestor is a certain set of aesthetic values and beliefs” (McCaffery 49). In saying this, he may have thought of Tolstoy. A large set of Wallace’s esthetic values and beliefs are derived from *WIA?* through a process of direct conceptual appropriation. “Appropriation,” here, is intended as entirely devoid of negative connotations; it is, rather, the positive consequence of Wallace’s possession of “the historical sense” that T.S. Eliot presents in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), the historical sense that “involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence,” and which “compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer [...] has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order” (85).

Of course, that Wallace appropriated Tolstoy’s discourse doesn’t mean that he didn’t conceive of many (or all) of his ideas before reading *WIA?*, nor that he couldn’t have conceived them without it. What we have discovered here testifies only to the historical fact of the direct influence of *WIA?* on Wallace’s conception of literature. The discovery is interesting in-itself in relation to the study of the history of ideas, but it also offers cause for reflection on broader issues. How is it that an author like Tolstoy – whose historical and cultural environment were in so many ways so different from Wallace’s – influenced a contemporary author so directly and on so fundamental matters? Does this perhaps say something about the timelessness and universality of our core human and artistic concerns? Does it say something about the presence of a cultural structure that underlines the whole of modernity? To conclude, one must not forget that Wallace’s appropriation of Tolstoy’s discourse contains explicit rejections of some of Tolstoy’s ideas. In this sense, the relationship between *WIA?* and Wallace’s discourse is one of the direct appropriation with rectifications contrived by an author of contemporary, secular, and democratic spirit for a time when all gods and absolutes are treated with suspicion, a time when people struggle, more than ever before, in their hanging between,

on the one hand, their belief in the falsity of all absolutes and their awareness of the horrors of the past and, on the other hand, their perception of the horrors of nihilism.<sup>15</sup>

## Notes

1. Hereafter *WIA?*.
2. In *Global Wallace: David Foster Wallace and World Literature* (2016), Lucas Thompson dedicates a chapter to Tolstoy's influence on Wallace, but he focuses on the relationship between *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* and "Good Old Neon."; Thompson does refer to *WIA?*'s clear influence on Wallace, but he doesn't explore it at length and thus doesn't illuminate its extent. He also limits Tolstoy's influence to Wallace's early period, which idea here we reject, recalling – among other things – that; Wallace referred to *WIA?* in "Deciderization 2007," one of his latest writings.
3. When I realized the extent of *WIA?*'s direct influence on Wallace I didn't know of the existence of the copy at the archive. My research at the Harry Ransom Center (HRC) only *confirmed* what I thought textual analysis shows in-itself. Thus, references to the copy will function only as secondary confirmations provided by the archival proof and will, therefore, all be unveiled in footnotes.
4. I owe these references to my colleague Luca Cortesi's PhD thesis "*La nechudožestvennaja proza di Velimir Chlebnikov: forme dichiarative, saggi, dialoghi*" ("The Non-Fictional Prose of Velimir Khlebnikov: Declarative Forms, Essays, Dialogues," my translation).
5. "E Unibus Pluram" (hereafter, EUP) is certainly Wallace's main literary manifesto. Critics usually consider it as the main text of "the 1993 essay-interview nexus" (EUP plus the McCaffery interview) that they hold to constitute Wallace's manifesto. Here, we argue that Wallace's manifesto should rather be understood as a system of multiple essays and interviews. The system revolves around EUP and includes, *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, Kennedy and Polk, and David Lipsky.
6. Wallace's copy of *WIA?* available at the HRC is the 1978 Bobbs-Merrill first edition. Vincent Thomas opens the introduction by writing that *WIA?* "remains one of the most vigorous attacks upon formalism and the doctrine of art for art's sake ever written" (vii). He explains that Tolstoy had written it to fight against "the dehumanization of art," its "depreciation of subject matter," and "the 'divorce of art from life' that were to become more and more dominant features of 'modern art' in the twentieth century" (ibid.). Wallace underlines all of these passages, together with the vast majority of p. 49 (from "The inaccuracy of all these definitions" to "receive the same artistic impression"), where Tolstoy argues that the goal of true art is not pleasure but the betterment of human life through the establishment of communication between people. Here, Wallace brackets the sentence wherein Tolstoy says that the value of art resides in the "purpose it may serve in the life of man and of humanity," and he draws a star next to it. The star was Wallace's particular marking for what was of the greatest importance to him, and he seldom used it (there are three stars in his copy of *WIA?*). There is no doubt that he found inspiration here.
7. In his copy of *WIA?*, Wallace underlines both the introductory passage (page x) where Thomas explains Tolstoy's art-food analogy (here Wallace annotates "Art & Food") and virtually the entire last six paragraphs of chapter four (from "In order to define any human activity ..." to the end of the chapter, 45–47), *where all of Tolstoy's above-cited passages appear*. Here, Wallace again writes (in big characters) "Art & Food," and frames it with a square (46). Finally, he underlines the full last paragraph of chapter sixteen, where Tolstoy describes true art as "real, important, necessary spiritual food" (159). All of this constitutes further proof that Wallace appropriated the art-food analogy directly from Tolstoy.
8. Our social ideals themselves depend on our metaphysical ideals, which is why in his copy of *WIA?* Wallace fully underlines all of Tolstoy's above-cited passages (i.e. all that we have quoted here in both sections 4. and 5.). Also, Wallace strongly marks the passage "The estimation of the value of art (i.e., of the feelings it transmits) depends on men's perception of the meaning of life, depends on what they consider to be the good and the evil of life. And what is good and what is evil is defined by what are termed religions" (54), and he draws a star next to it, also adding the annotations "morality" and "'Religion' = Wisdom about good & evil." On pages 59–60, Wallace also finds the philosophical explanation of the nihilism that affects our time and to which his art seeks to respond. Here, he underlines "In reality these people believed in nothing, just as the Romans of the first century of our era believed in nothing" (59) and he writes "1980's upper-class nihilism. Nietzschean invention in face of inability to worship – worship evil" on top of the page. Then, he also fully underlines the long passage "No longer able to believe in the Church religion, whose falsehood they had detected, and incapable of accepting true Christian teaching, which denounced their whole manner of life, these rich and powerful people, stranded without any religious conception of life, involuntarily returned to that pagan view of things which places life's meaning in personal enjoyment. And then took place among the upper classes what is called the 'Renaissance of science and art,' and which was really not only

a denial of every religion, but also an assertion that religion is unnecessary” (59–60), and he draws a third and final star next to it. Finally, he underlines the equally long passage “And so these people remained without any religious view of life. And, having none, they could have no standard wherewith to estimate what was good and what was bad art but that of personal enjoyment. And, having acknowledged their criterion of what was good to be pleasure, i.e., beauty, these people of the upper classes of European society went back in their comprehension of art to the gross conception of the primitive Greeks which Plato had already condemned. And conformably to this understanding of life, a theory of art was formulated” (p. 60), and next to this he annotates “Neat – Eerie applications. Today it’s not Church Christianity but Science as Meaning that’s been debunked – and we’ve nothing to replace it.”

9. Wallace underlines most of page 50 of his copy of *WIA?*, where the above-cited passages appear. Most notably, he underlines the passage “it is upon this capacity of man to receive another man’s expression of feeling and experience those feelings himself that the activity of art is based,” and next to it he writes two annotations, “Art as Empathy” and “Schopenhauer’s Basis of Morality.” Finally, on page 149 Wallace underlines “art, all art, has this characteristic, that it unites people,” and he circles “unites people” for emphasis.
10. Wallace’s conception of the reader’s empathy with the characters is a direct consequence of Tolstoy’s discourse. Here, though, there is a substantial difference between the two authors: Tolstoy was a nineteenth-century Realist who had unshaken faith in literature’s ability to represent the truth, Wallace was an end-of-the-twentieth-century avant-gardist who was too aware of postmodernism and deconstruction not to doubt literature’s ability to represent the truth. This is why he specifies that emotional intimacy with characters “is a delusion or a contrivance that’s set up through art by the writer” (Miller 62).
11. Wallace will always believe that this ability to merge artist and perceiver is the essence of true art. Non-coincidentally, in the essay “Borges on the Couch” (2004), he praises Borges because he “collapses reader and writer into a new kind of aesthetic agent” (293).
12. In his copy of *WIA?*, Wallace underlines “central to Tolstoy’s view are the notions of ‘infection’ and ‘sincerity’” (xiii), and he later annotates “Feeling must be real” (50). *WIA?* also clearly inspired Wallace to make his own the distinction between expressive and communicative writing. In a passage of the introduction, Wallace underlines that, for Tolstoy, “language is not merely the external manifestation (expression) of an internal psychological state, but the *communication* of it from one mind to another” (xiii).
13. This rejection was necessary especially considering Tolstoy’s zealotry, the highest exemplar of which is the following affirmation: “people who do not recognize Christianity in its true sense [...] invent various sorts of philosophical and aesthetic theories for themselves which conceal from them the meaninglessness and depravity of their lives” (*WIA?* 125).
14. In his copy of *WIA?*, Wallace annotates where Tolstoy writes that a true work of art is composed in language that is “understood by all” (96). He circles the word “all” and writes “So trash” next to it. Wallace’s work is in direct opposition to this ideal, and hence his literature requires of its readers the following tasks, as Wallace told Donahue: “keeping track of enormous amounts of information’ [...], ‘being required to pay attention to some of the strategies that regular entertainment uses’ and ‘having certain formulaic expectations that go along with reading commercial stuff fucked with. Not just disdained. Fucked with” (Donahue 71–72).
15. In his copy of *WIA?*, Wallace underlines a passage of the introduction where Thomas writes that “while there is no denying that Tolstoy’s theory is one-sided and, in some respects, even fanatical, it is, when seen in broad outline, a coherent and plausible alternative to other equally one-sided and fanatical views, which are fashionable today, and for which it may suggest needed qualifications and corrections” (vii). In this sense, we may say that Wallace’s “appropriation with rectifications” of *WIA?* attempts to answer Thomas’s call and to establish a discourse that avoids the faults of both opposite fanatical views, Tolstoy’s and today’s nihilism’s.

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