

“I did a nice thing”: David Foster Wallace and the Gift Economy

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I

The artist appeals to that part of our being which is a gift and not an acquisition—and, therefore, more permanently enduring. He speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation.

Joseph Conrad
Nigger of the Narcissus

WHILE DAVID FOSTER WALLACE ONLY BEGAN WRITING seriously halfway through his undergraduate career, he experienced success at an extremely young age, an outcome he would later regret. Initially a self-described “hard-core syntax weenie,” Wallace studied mathematical theory and modal logic at the University of Amherst until becoming exposed to avant-garde fiction, in particular Donald Barthelme’s “The Red Balloon.” Not until then, he admits, did he realize that those very special “clicks” one encounters in academia, described by a professor as “mathematical experiences,” were essentially “aesthetic in nature, an epiphany in Joyce’s original sense” (McCaffery 138). Ultimately, the work of fiction he submitted for

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his English honours thesis would later be published as *The Broom of the System*, a zany, Pynchonesque novel replete with clever pyrotechnics and allusions to Wittgenstein, from whom it receives its title.

However, as early as 1987, when he was obtaining his MFA at the University of Arizona, Wallace had grown ambivalent about the success and self-indulgent style of *The Broom of the System*. In 1993, he explained that the popularity of *The Broom of the System* mystified him, acknowledging, "there's a lot of stuff in that novel I'd like to reel back in and do better" (136). Much of his ambivalence involved the novel's penchant for what he identifies as narcissistic and egoistic writerly games that "deny" the essential fact that "the writer is over here with his agenda while the reader's over there ... This paradox is what makes good fiction sort of magical, I think." Wallace laments, "The paradox can't be resolved, but it can somehow be mediated—*re-mediated*" (137 emphasis added). This remediation takes the form of Wallace re-imagining art as not performative and self-indulgent but, rather, as a gift.

At the same time he was reconsidering his own approach to fiction, Wallace began to also re-evaluate his attitudes toward the metafictional and postmodern writers whose techniques had influenced his debut novel. These authors, including Donald Barthelme, Thomas Pynchon, Robert Coover, and John Barth, had attracted the younger Wallace with their works' ironic humour, erudition, formal sophistication, and aesthetic innovation. As he became more critical of his own work, though, as well as the culture at large, Wallace began to question the effectiveness of these methods in a society dominated by corporate interests, marketing brands, and political cynicism. Ultimately, as he told David Lipsky about his time in late-80s Arizona:

I was just really stuck about writing ... I didn't know whether I really loved to write or whether I'd just gotten some kind of excited about having some early success. The story at the end of *Curious* ["Westward the Course of Empire Goes Its Way"], which not a lot of people like, was really meant to be extremely sad. And to sort of be a kind of suicide note. And I think by the time I got to the end of that story, I figured I wasn't going to write anymore. (61)

In "Westward," Mark Nechtr, Wallace's alter-ego, observes "metafiction is untrue, as a lover. It cannot betray. It can only reveal. Itself is its only object. It's the act of a lonely solipsist's self-love." Conversely, the narrator reveals, Mark Nechtr "desires, some distant hard-earned day, to write

something that stabs you in the heart. That pierces you, makes you think you're going to die. Maybe it's called metalife. Or metafiction. Or realism. Or gfhrytytu. He doesn't know. He wonders who the hell really cares" (*Girl With Curious Hair* 332). If this story is a suicide note for a certain style, it also lays out an agenda or hope for resurrection in another kind of style, one that would soon come to be termed "The New Sincerity."¹

Wallace's most complete formulation of what this "new sincerity" might look like occurs in his 1991 essay "*E Unibus Pluram*," in what Marshall Boswell has described as "one of the most important pieces in [Wallace's] growing corpus of nonfiction" (9). In the rousing terminal passages of the essay, Wallace imagines a literary revolution, an aesthetic counterattack by a generation raised on metafictional games and postmodern irony. In so doing, he envisions that the

next real literary "rebels" in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels ... who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions and in U.S life ... These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Dead on the page. Too sincere ... that's why they'll be the next real rebels. (81)

Following from these prescriptions the most persistent and idiosyncratic characteristic of David Foster Wallace's writing, evident in the breakthrough novel *Infinite Jest*, his justly celebrated narrative journalism, and his interviews and speeches, is its conviction that literature should be empathetic and selfless, generating meaning in the transactional space between writer and reader. In order to accomplish this objective, according to Wallace, the author must assume the responsibility to be generous and sincere, thus avoiding manipulating the reader the way the mass entertainment industry and advertising culture manipulates the consumer. He explains this responsibility at length in a famous riff to McCaffery, figuring these new paradigms of sincerity and the gift as a form of "love":

You've got to discipline yourself to talk out of the part of you that loves, loves what you're working on. Maybe that just plain loves ... The big distinction between good art and so-so art lies somewhere in the art's heart purpose, the agenda of the consciousness behind the text. It's got something to do with love

1 See Adam Kelly's "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction" and "Dialectic of Sincerity: Lionel Trilling and David Foster Wallace."

... It seems like one of the things really great fiction-writers do is *give* the readers something. (140)²

Even in the realm of the literary world, Wallace worried, this lack of genuine concern and respect for the consumer was becoming more prevalent, as commercial forces contaminated the aesthetic domain, reducing fiction to a kind of “trash.” In this situation, readers become less active participants in the creation of meaning and more similar to passive recipients, like spectators at the latest Hollywood blockbuster. Therefore, a new kind of generous and difficult fiction becomes necessary, he argues, to challenge, not placate, the reader. “If avant-garde stuff can do its job,” he explained to David Lipsky, “[it] 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 ... You teach the reader that he’s way smarter than he thought he was” (71).

In *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson conducts a sophisticated and compelling analysis of the contemporary conflation of state bureaucracy and big business, commerce, and art. Advancing Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of “The Culture Industry,” Jameson describes this new system with tenacity and vigour, stating that economics has swallowed culture, making art susceptible to and equivalent to commodified goods. Writing primarily about architecture, but all art production by extension, including fiction, Jameson asserts “what has happened today is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally” (4). This thesis operates as an implicit assumption throughout Wallace’s oeuvre.

A decade before Jameson’s *Postmodernism*, Lewis Hyde published *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*. While Hyde’s motive and approach certainly vary from Jameson’s, he concurs with Jameson’s analysis that this commercial exploitation of art is a uniquely modern phenomenon, writing in a passage that anticipates Wallace, “the exploitation of the arts which we find in the twentieth century is without precedent. The particular manner in which radio, television, the movies, and the recording industry have commercialized song and drama is wholly new ... *The more we allow such commodity art to define and control our gifts, the less gifted we will become, as individuals and as a society*” (158–59, emphasis added).

² For a compelling and provocative discussion about just how this purpose operates (and whether it is ultimately successful), see Holland.

Whereas Jameson's article diagnoses current trends from a historical, Marxist perspective, Hyde's perhaps more ambitious agenda attempts to provide a prognosis and solution to the problem of commercialized art. Basing his methodology in part on Marcel Mauss's *The Gift* (1925), Hyde uses anthropological studies, folk tales, ethnography, and explications of texts by authors such as Conrad, Whitman, and Pound to demonstrate ways through which artists can produce works of the kind imagined by Wallace, works that function as gifts, not commodities. This establishment of interactivity as central to the concept of the gift leads to Hyde's binary contrast between *eros* and *logos*, where he opposes "*eros* (the principle of attraction, union, involvement which binds together) to *logos* (reason and logic in general, the principle of differentiation in particular). The market economy is a manifestation of *logos*," while *eros* is a manifestation of the gift economy (introduction xx, note).

The Gift's particular value lies in its discussions of how certain rituals, folk practices, and religious customs embody this vital difference between *eros* and *logos*. Once this theoretical frame is introduced, Hyde effectively argues that the "erotic" qualities illuminated by anthropological and ethnographical transactions are relevant to art in such commercial contemporary contexts discussed by Jameson and distrusted by Wallace. He accomplishes this by transposing *eros* and *logos* into "the gift economy" and "the market economy," writing, "It is the assumption of this book that a work of art is a gift, not a commodity. Or, to state the modern case with more precision, that works of art exist simultaneously in two 'economies,' a market economy and a gift economy. Only one of these is essential, however: a work of art can survive without the market, but where there is no gift there is no art" (xi).

Hyde's work on gift theory, along with Mauss, has exercised a tremendous influence on contemporary novelists as diverse as Margaret Atwood, Jonathan Lethem, and Zadie Smith and on philosophers such as Derrida and Bataille.³ But perhaps the artist most influenced by Hyde is Wallace himself, who throughout his career earnestly engaged with the notion of the "erotic" relationship between the reader and the writer, one explored at length in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (see McAdams). As Wal-

³ See, for example, Derrida, *The Gift of Death*; Derrida, *Given Time. I. Counterfeit Money*; and Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, the latter providing an economic analysis of the gift (from a neo-Marxist perspective), while Derrida's treatment of the gift attempts to use it as a phenomenon to understand his unique notion of the other. Wallace, like his fellow novelists, tends to interpret the gift in a more aesthetic guise.

lace once said, echoing Hyde, “my personal belief is a lot of [art’s power] has to do with voice, and a feeling of intimacy between the writer and the reader. That sorta, given the atomization and loneliness of contemporary life—that’s our opening, that’s our *gift*” (Lipsky 72, emphasis added).⁴

According to Michael Martone, Wallace first read *The Gift* while the two of them were living in Syracuse in the early 1990s, when Wallace was just beginning to work on what would later be published as *Infinite Jest*. A fellow writer, Martone describes how he had been influenced by Hyde’s book and often used it in creative writing workshops he conducted. He explains that he gave the book to Wallace because Hyde had applied the gift ethos to substance recovery as well as art. As Martone explains, “David was taken by the book not simply because he, at the moment, was working on *Infinite Jest*, but also what the book had to say about competitive markets as opposed to collaborative enterprises and in what way is the artist isolated and part of a larger concern” (51).

By no means does Martone provide the only connection between Wallace’s and Hyde’s work. Wallace provided blurbs for two of Hyde’s books, *Trickster Makes the World* (1999) and the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *The Gift*, about which Wallace wrote, “No one who is invested in any kind of art can read *The Gift* and remain unchanged.” Wallace also invokes Hyde’s theories in a discussion about irony with David Wiley in 1997, admitting that “a certain amount of [my opinion] comes out of the work of this essayist named Lewis Hyde ... Hyde talks about irony after awhile becoming the sound of prisoners who enjoy their confinement” (interview). In fact, over time Hyde and Wallace developed a relationship that ultimately, Hyde, being a faculty member at Kenyon College presumes, resulted in Wallace delivering the 2005 Kenyon College commencement speech, published posthumously, with illustrations, as *This Is Water*.

When discussing the disconnection between the difficulty of his work and his oft-stated desire to connect with and form an “erotic” bond with the reader, Wallace frequently maintained that his primary motive was to give the reader something that passive spectation could not: a sense of her intelligence, or integrity, or just simply to remind her “what it feels like to be a fucking human being” (McCaffery 128). Five years later, Wallace would still stand by this statement, but in the interim he had developed a more exhaustive description of its historical background, strategic and tactical programs, and ultimate objectives. Where before he focused on

4 Compare Hyde, “the cardinal difference between gift and commodity exchange that the gift establishes a feeling, a bond between two people, while the sale of a commodity leaves no necessary connection” (72).

the writer's *love*, he now declared the importance of the reader working hard and overcoming difficulties to become smarter, more aware, and less lonely. The gift worked both ways, enticing the reader into having fun working very hard at something and having that difficulty create its own reward, be its own gift. As he explained his motivations in developing the particular aesthetic of *Infinite Jest* to David Lipsky in 1996, "I wanted to do something that was really *hard* and avant-garde, but that was fun enough that it forced the reader to do the work that was required ... if the writer does his job right, what he basically does is remind the reader of how smart the reader is" (41).

Aside from adopting Hyde's conviction that generous art should be "erotic," that is, open-ended, performative, and "anti-confluent," and declaring that the particular gift he wanted to give the reader was a sense of her awareness and intelligence, Wallace attempted to carve out a gift economy of his own that would avoid what he, writing in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* in 1988, described as essentially an exploitative and empty relationship between the reader and writer in contemporary commercial, or "trash," literature, flatly comparing the majority of contemporary writers with prostitutes:

A prostitute is someone who, in exchange for money, affords someone else the form and sensations that make intimacy between two people a valuable or meaningful human enterprise. The prostitute "gives" but—demanding nothing of comparable value in return—perverts the giving, helps render what is supposed to be a revelation a transaction. The writer of trash fiction, often with admirable craft, affords his customers a narrative structure and movements that *engage* the reader—titillates, repulses, excites, transports him—without demanding of him any of the intellectual or spiritual or *artistic* responses that render verbal intercourse between writer and reader as important. ("Future" 7)

As argued in "*E Unibus Pluram*," the environment in which Wallace and his contemporaries matured as a writers was one in which everything, including art, had been commodified by television, marketing, and co-option of formerly artistic techniques such as irony. "Irony and ridicule are terribly effective," he posits, "and that at the same time they are agents of great despair and stasis in U.S. culture, and that for aspiring fiction writers they pose especially terrible problems" (50–51). *The Gift* provided Wallace with a model to re-envision his own art as something that was sincere and not ironic, genuine and not market-driven, inspired by an agenda to

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make the jaded American consumer of television and televisual literature (what he calls “image fiction” in the essay) aware of her intelligence, a sensibility he inscribes in the final sentences of “Westward the Course of Empire Goes its Way”: “I want nothing from you. Lie back. Relax. Quality soil washes right out. Lie back. Open. Face directions. Look. Listen. Use ears I’d be proud to call our own. Listen to the silence behind the engines’ noise. Jesus, sweets, listens. Hear it? It’s a love song. For whom? You are loved” (373).

The following section offers a reading of three examples of Wallace’s writing that are especially concerned with gift-giving and consequently attempts to interpret them according to the perspective of gift theory. The first instance occurs in *Infinite Jest*, where it plays a brief but vital role in the narrative. The second involves a linked pair of stories in the collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, “The Devil is a Busy Man ” and “The Devil is a Busy Man [2].”⁵ Together, these narratives demonstrate how literature can be viewed as a “difficult gift” (to use Zadie Smith’s phrase),⁶ how it depicts and satirizes contemporary Americans’ distrust of selflessness and compassion, and the difficulty—discussed by Derrida—of giving anonymously without receiving credit for the giving, otherwise known as the Christian “double bind.”⁷

5 Wallace refers to both narratives as “The Devil is a Busy Man.” For the sake of clarity, I have inserted the bracket [2] into the second one in the collection, such that it reads “The Devil is a Busy Man [2]” or “The Devil [2].”

6 “We have to recognize that a difficult gift like *Brief Interviews* merits the equally difficult gifts of our close attention and effort” (Smith 261).

7 Double binds are a common trope in Wallace’s writing, especially, as Adam Kelly notes in “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction,” in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. “Wallace claimed,” Kelly writes, “in interview that ‘interesting and true stuff in my life seems to involve double-binds, where there is a decision between two alternatives, but neither is acceptable’ ... the logic of the double bind is evidently a basic structure in [Wallace’s] work” (139).

II

One must give without knowing, without knowledge or recognition, without *thanks*: without anything, or at least without any object.

Derrida, The Gift of Death

At the heart of the uniquely complex and highly-evolved organism represented by *Infinite Jest* exists a simple attempt of gift-giving of the film “cartridge” “Infinite Jest.” Unlike the lethal *samizdat* versions of the film, which become circulated in terrorist networks and used as attacks on American citizens addicted to pleasure and television, this cartridge was created within a simple economy of love, as a gift from a father to his son, Hal.

Like most of the characters in the novel, Hal suffers from depression and an infantile desire for substances, in his case, marijuana. This behaviour, the narrator(s) suggests, manifests because “he despises what he’s really lonely for: this hideous internal self, incontinent of sentiment and need, that pulses and writhes just under the hip mask, anhedonia” (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 694–95). To his father, James Incandena, it appears that Hal is succumbing to solipsism, to a kind of anhedonia that sacrifices communication, conversation, and social involvement in favour of the silence afforded by the periphery, as James Incandenza himself admits having “personally spent the vast bulk of his own former animate life⁸ as pretty much a figurant, furniture at the periphery of the very eyes closest to him, it turned out, and that it’s one heck of a crummy way to live” (835). This is one of few occasions in the novel, and may well be the only occasion where James himself discloses the reasons behind his suicide and what about his life made it such a “crummy way to live.”

Therefore, after James commits suicide, his wraith explains to Don Gately that the production of “Infinite Jest (V)” was intended neither for commercial, artistic, nor financial reasons—it was never released, and thus exists outside the market economy—but, rather, as a therapeutic intervention, a way to save his “own personal youngest offspring, a son, the one most like him, the one most marvelous and frightening to him, [from] becoming a figurant” (837). The wraith continues to document how he had perceived Hal as becoming increasingly hidden, mute, disappearing from

8 James Incandenza, or J.O.L., appears in the novel—at least those passages I’m concerned with—after committing suicide and is thus described as a ghost-like figure, a “*wraith*,” and thus discussed his life and his motivations about “Infinite Jest” with a sort of posthumous past-tense reverie that I’m not sure makes sense, as quoted, without this explanatory note.

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his very eyes; he suspected that his son may have been using substances. “Infinite Jest (V),” he explains, is the result of

Spen[ding] the whole sober last ninety days of [my] animate life working tirelessly to contrive a medium via which [I] and [Hal] could simply *converse*. To concoct something the gifted boy couldn’t simply master and move on from to a new plateau. Something the boy would love enough to induce him to open his mouth and *come out*—even if it was only to ask for more. Games hadn’t done it, professionals hadn’t done it, impersonation of professionals hadn’t done it. His last resort: *entertainment*. Make something so bloody compelling it would reverse thrust on a young self’s fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life. A magically entertaining toy to dangle at the infant still somewhere alive in the boy, to make its eyes light and toothless mouth open unconsciously, to laugh. To bring him “out of himself,” as they say ... The scholars and Foundations and disseminators never saw that his most serious idea was: *to entertain*. (838–39 emphasis added)

This question of “entertainment” complicates the status of “Infinite Jest (V)” as gift or, rather, perhaps a “distorted gift,” if that is a credible construction. For the cartridge exists outside of a market economy and thus is driven by no commodifiable forces such as those condemned by Jameson and Hyde. Its creation is inspired by a deep love for another and by a sincere attempt to help this other. Finally, “by concocting something the boy couldn’t simply master,” the *auteur* indicates an agreement with Wallace’s statements that he wants the audience to have to work hard, to become more aware, less lonely and solipsistic.

However, like the writers of trash fictions described by Wallace in “Fictional Futures,” “Infinite Jest (V)” “*engages* the [viewer]—titillates, repulses, excites, transports him—without demanding of him any of the intellectual or spiritual or *artistic* responses that render verbal intercourse between writer and reader as important” (7). For this reason it fails to function as a gift in Wallace’s special sense because it doesn’t respect the intelligence or awareness of the viewer or demand hard work or attention—like alcohol or drugs, the cartridge demands nothing in return. It is not a gift because it is not difficult, an insight the narrative pushes by juxtaposing the weakness of those who succumb to the “lethal entertainment” to the persistent courage of recovering substance abusers working hard to accept the difficult “gift” of sobriety, an unsexy gift requiring daily diligence.

Before considering if the same can be said of Wallace and *Infinite Jest* the novel (quite distinct from the cartridge within the novel), I'll briefly analyze a slightly different treatment of gifts in "The Devil is a Busy Man" and "The Devil is a Busy Man [2]." These short stories—extremely short by Wallace's standards—appear in the collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*.

In "The Devil is a Busy Man" an unidentified narrator with hickish diction recalls a boyhood memory of how difficult a time his "Daddy" had giving away items he found in the machine shed or the cellar, "shit like a couch or a freezer or an old tiller" (70). Daddy, the narrator describes, would post an ad in the local paper to announce that he was giving away the item for free, which he was always unable to do because folks would be "skittery about it too and their faces all closed up like at cards and they'd walk around the thing and poke it with their toe and go Where'd you all get it at what's the matter with it how come you want rid of it so bad" (70). Finally, this behaviour frustrates the father so much that he starts putting some "fool price" on the items: "Some fool price next to nothing. Old Harrow with Some Teeth A Little Rusted \$5. JCPenney Sleepersofa Green and Yellow \$10 and like that" (70). Consequently, "folks" start arriving in droves from town and from other towns, eager to make a deal: "their eyes were different [...] Ticked to get an old harrow for next to nothing" (71).

This story, or microfiction, operates without a narrative, or characterization, or plot. In fact, it functions more as a narrative essay or dream-study than a typical piece of Wallacian fiction, a short-form hybrid he characterized as "creepy little allegorical tableaux" in describing Jerzy Kosinski's *Steps* ("Overlooked"). It also resembles the Kafka parables Wallace enjoyed so much (see "Some Remarks"). What it does provide, like much of Wallace's satire, is a skewed and caricatured representation of something that's so obvious most Americans have become unaware of it.

In the modern American market economy, consumers have learned not only to distrust marketers and advertisers but also to distrust those who state that they want to give something away "for free." For example, "free" magazine subscriptions with little asterisked contingencies that before long start billing one's accounts or, like in "Devil ..." an old JCPenney Sleepersofa someone "gives" that just happens to have bed bugs. The gift economy, Wallace suggests, has been compromised by the market economy: in these times, if you want to give something away as a gift, you're better off attaching an economic value to it, however nominal, to avoid suspicion of trickery.

“Devil [2]” explores the age-old religious question of how to be good without feeling good about feeling good. Unlike “The Devil,” “The Devil [2]” employs a narrative style more common to Wallace readers, with a narrator who is hypereducated and linguistically precise, writing in recursive, highly self-conscious sentences that, in their pursuit of absolute precision, impede the reader’s ability to enter into the text, thus requiring diligence, awareness, and hard work.

“Three weeks ago I did a nice thing for someone,” the story begins. “I can not say more than this, or it will empty what I did of any of its true, ultimate value” (*Brief* 190). The narrator attempts to remain nameless because confessing to his role would “infect the motivation for the act—meaning, in other words, that part of my motivation for it would be, not generosity, but desiring gratitude, affection, and approval towards me to result” (190). Finally, however, the recipient of the gift learns beyond a doubt that the narrator was indeed the benefactor and asks him to please confirm this.

At this point, the narrator admits, “I was almost dying with temptation ... Like the forces of darkness, evil, and hopelessness in the world at large itself, the temptation of this frequently can overwhelm resistance” (191). As the conversation continues, the narrator, while trying to resist this temptation, confesses to making subtle remarks and hints that, in a “fatal instant,” was “interpreted by the person as an indirect hint from me that I was, despite my prior denials, indeed the individual responsible for this generous, nice act” (192). The brief story or parable ends with the narrator in despair, since he had revealed himself to have

An unconscious and, seemingly, natural, automatic ability to both deceive myself and other people, which, on the “motivational level,” not only completely emptied the generous thing I tried to do of any true value, and caused me to fail, again, in my attempts to sincerely be what someone would classify as truly a “nice” or “good” person, but, despairingly, cast me in a light to myself which could only be classified as “dark,” “evil,” or “beyond hope of ever sincerely becoming good.” (193)

“Devil [2]” laments the impulse to ruin generous acts by desiring credit and payment for them and suggests that falling prey to this double bind is perhaps inevitable. Derrida, likewise, argues in *The Gift of Death* that even if the person never tells, the fact that he or she feels better about himself or herself is reciprocal payment, and thus the generosity of the gift or generous act is obviated. Only in the case of death, as his famous discussion of “The Binding of Isaac” illustrates, can there be a true “gift,”

or “*donnee*,” to use the French term. During an explication of Baudelaire’s “The Pagan School,” Derrida states that,

In the salary promised in heaven by the Father who sees in secret and will pay it back, “The Pagan School” always unmasks a sort of sublime and secret calculation, that of him who seeks “to win paradise economically,” as the narrator of “Counterfeit Money” puts it. The moment the gift, however generous it be, is infected with the slightest hint of calculation, the moment it takes account of knowledge or recognition, it falls within the ambit of an economy: it exchanges, in short it gives counterfeit money, since it gives in exchange for payment. Even if it gives “true” money, the alteration of the gift into a form of calculation immediately destroys the value of the very thing that is given; it destroys as if from the inside. The money may keep its value but it is no longer given as such. Once it is tied to remuneration, its it counterfeit because it is mercenary and mercantile. (112)

Wallace, I believe, agreed with this Derridean pronouncement and lamented that, even while he attempted to produce works that operate within the gift economy, the fact that they were contracted, edited, published, and advertised by multi-billion dollar companies ultimately complicated the desire to remain pure. In 2006, he responded to an interviewer’s question about whether “any pure art free of commercial or propaganda value exists,” by conceding that he was suspicious of the word “pure” and stated that it was perhaps too high a standard. He explained this further by invoking the example of his wife, Karen Green, a successful painter and visual artist. “My wife,” he said, “is a fantastic artist and painter but she doesn’t attempt to sell her work for a great deal of money ... mainly she gives them as gifts to people” (Karmodie). Wallace then juxtaposes this with his own art, which requires the whole commercial apparatus he distrusts to exist in any published sense in the first place. In another instance of a paradox or double blind, he admits,

It may be the only way in America to produce pure art would be to remove oneself from the public sphere and produce art only as gifts where there is no money involved and no attempt at publication or publicity involved. The problem is that if everyone does that, there’s no public arts here. So it all becomes a kind of paradox I spent a lot of the last years thinking about. (Karmodie)

Both Wallace's statements regarding his fiction and his fiction itself exposes his passionate conviction in establishing a genuine, "erotic" relationship with the reader by composing art within a gift economy. Realizing, along with Jameson and Hyde, that the modern "late capitalist" or "postindustrial" market economy complicates the concept of "pure" art, he develops a highly sophisticated set of strategies and tactics to challenge commercial forces and at least approach purity by confronting readers with difficult, but rewarding, texts that are *for us*. As Tim Jacobs writes:

Subtle touches signify much in Wallace's discourse of love. David Foster Wallace's primary concern was for the reader. While he knew every literary technique and stratagem, had a mind that computers might envy, had read everything, and was a linguistic and philosophical titan—"obscenely well-educated," he said of himself—his greatest strength as a writer was simply that he *loved*.

In this way, *Infinite Jest* the novel succeeds as a gift, whereas "Infinite Jest" the cartridge fails.

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