

‘NEUROTIC AND OBSESSIVE’ BUT  
‘NOT TOO INTRANSIGENT OR DEFENSIVE’:

Editing David Foster Wallace

By Zac Farber

In December of 1993, David Foster Wallace printed three copies of a manuscript he had taken to calling the “longer thing” and gave one to his editor, Michael Pietsch, one to a woman he was trying to impress, and one to Steven Moore, a friend and the managing editor of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, whose edits and cuts Wallace wished to compare with Pietsch’s. The manuscript, which Little, Brown and Company would publish as *Infinite Jest* in 1996, was heavy (it required both of Moore’s hands to carry) and, Moore recalled, unruly:

It’s a mess—a patchwork of different fonts and point sizes, with numerous handwritten corrections/additions on most pages, and paginated in a nesting pattern (e.g., p. 22 is followed by 22A-J before resuming with p. 23, which is followed by 23A-D, etc). Much of it is single-spaced, and what footnotes existed at this stage appear at the bottom of pages. (Most of those in the published book were added later.) Several states of revision are present: some pages are early versions, heavily overwritten with changes, while others are clean final drafts. Throughout there are notes in the margins, reminders to fix something or other, adjustments to chronology (which seems to have given Wallace quite a bit of trouble), even a few drawings and doodles.<sup>1</sup>

Wallace followed some of Pietsch and Moore’s suggestions and cut about 40 pages from the first draft of the manuscript<sup>2</sup>, but before publication he added more than 200 pages of additional material, including an opening chapter that many critics have praised as the novel’s best and more than 100 pages of (often footnoted) endnotes.<sup>3</sup>

Editing Wallace could be demanding, and those who attempted it found themselves faced with the difficulty of correcting a man with a prodigious understanding of the byzantine syntactical and grammatical rules of the English language. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* named Wallace to its usage panel and *The Oxford American Writer’s Thesaurus* published his “word notes” commenting on

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<sup>1</sup> Moore, Steven. “The First Draft Version of Infinite Jest.” July 16, 2009. Thehowlingfantods.com.

<sup>2</sup> “Almost none of the ones I suggested, as it happens,” Moore wrote. Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Wallace followed these additions with another round of cuts.

usage rules. In an essay subtitled “Democracy, English, and the Wars over Usage” that Wallace wrote for *Harper’s* in 2001, he diagnosed himself as a “SNOOT,” an acronym standing for either “Sprachgefühl Necessitates Our Ongoing Tendancy” or “Syntax Nudniks of Our Time” (depending, he joked, “on whether or not you were one”).<sup>4</sup> His mother, Sally—“a Comp teacher [who wrote] remedial usage books and ... a SNOOT of the most rabid and intractable sort”—instilled in Wallace the type of grave respect for language that drove him, upon the discovery of solecisms in his students’ writing, to teach “a three-week Emergency Remedial Usage Unit, during which my demeanor is basically that of somebody, teaching HIV prevention to intravenous-drug users.”<sup>5</sup>

In short, Wallace had mastered the minutiae of the writing craft. Gerry Howard, the editor of his freshman novel, *The Broom of the System*, recalled receiving informal correspondence from Wallace. “His letters to me were just incredible, page after page,” he said. “Single-spaced, typed out, no typos, no grammatical mistakes.”<sup>6</sup> Ruth Reichl, who edited Wallace’s essay “Consider the Lobster” for *Gourmet Magazine* said she edited the essay “barely at all.” “I think he’s just used to having his stuff run as is,” she said. “But he argues over every comma. I mean—literally—every comma.”<sup>7</sup>

When placed against his shy, deferential demeanor, Wallace’s tendency to write well-reasoned screeds to his editors arguing against even the most niggling alterations to his writing became an item of amusement to editors. Glenn Kenny, who edited Wallace’s essays on David Lynch and the pornography industry for *Premiere Magazine*, recalled

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<sup>4</sup> Wallace, David Foster. “Tense Present: Democracy, English, and the Wars over Usage.” *Harper’s Magazine*. April 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Neyfakh, Leon. “Gerry Howard on Discovering, Editing, and Hatching David Foster Wallace: ‘He Was the First Person Who Ever Called Me “Mister.”’” *The New York Observer*. September 17, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Waters, Julia. “Ruth Reichl on David Foster Wallace and Magazines.” *Salon Magazine*. October 6, 2009.

Wallace's "almost paradoxical" nature. "You knew he was speaking from a rock-solid position in terms of his beliefs and inclinations," Kenny said, "but by the same token he was in many ways deferential—it took some time for me to convince him that he did not have to call me Mr. Kenny, and that, in fact, it made me incredibly uncomfortable to be called Mr. Kenny."<sup>8</sup> Pietsch said he thought Wallace felt uncomfortable around authority figures and also insisted on addressing him by his surname. "I got him to come to my house for a cookout once," Pietsch said, "and he spent much of the time playing with my kids, who were 3 and 6 at the time."<sup>9</sup> This demureness was absent in his letters about his work, which were arch and confident. Pietsch saved Wallace's correspondence on *Infinite Jest*, and he shared some of Wallace's comments: "p. 52—This is one of my personal favorite Swiftian lines in the whole manuscript, which I will cut, you rotter"; "Pp. 327-330. Michael, have mercy. Pending an almost Horacianly persuasive rationale on your part, my canines are bared on this one"; and "Pp. 739-748. I've rewritten it—for about the 11th time—for clarity, but I bare teeth all the way back to the 2nd molar on cutting it."<sup>10</sup>

The challenge in editing Wallace, then, was the difficulty of wrangling his prose and narrative structure, which were often purposefully peripatetic and disjointed (in the best sense of the word), without disrupting the writing's pacing or diluting its effect, which Wallace intended as a numbing overload to the reader's faculties comparable to the overwhelming "constant monologue inside your own head."<sup>11</sup> In Wallace's novels,

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<sup>8</sup> Kipp, Jeremiah. "Looking for One Value but Nothing Comes my Way: An Interview with Film Critic Glenn Kenny about David Foster Wallace." *The House Next Door*. April 8, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Neyfakh, Leon. "Infinite Jest Editor Michael Pietsch of Little, Brown on David Foster Wallace." *The New York Observer*. September 19, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Pietsch, Michael. "Editing Infinite Jest." *Infinite Summer*. July 3, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> "David Foster Wallace on Life and Work." *Wall Street Journal*. September 19, 2008. (*Adapted from a commencement speech given by David Foster Wallace to the 2005 graduating class at Kenyon College.*)

reporting, and essays, his editors grappled with the difficulties of fitting his excesses to constraints. In his magazine pieces, this constraint manifested itself primarily through the finite space editors could allot in their pages, but editing constraints also included the limits on reader's attention and intelligence. Wallace's mid-career fascination with footnotes and endnotes<sup>12</sup> also led to editorial efforts, both in persuading Wallace to make cuts and, in one case, in creating a design solution to help him cultivate a visual representation of the fractured reality that he hoped his footnotes and endnotes would capture. While different editors' experiences varied, there is a consensus that David Wallace's best editor was David Wallace.

Wallace was less amenable to substantive editorial suggestions in his magazine pieces than in his novels, in which his plot strands could become maddeningly entangled and ran to the hundreds of thousands of words. In magazine pieces, he often felt that his pieces were neutered by space constraints. On the copyright page of *Consider the Lobster*, his second book of non-fiction essays, he enclosed a note that read, "The following pieces were published in edited, heavily edited, or (in at least one instance) bowdlerized form."<sup>13</sup> The "bowdlerized" piece, "Host," was about a right-wing radio personality, and Wallace was also frustrated by the abridgement of "Up, Simba," the story he wrote about John McCain's 2000 presidential campaign and, he insisted on publishing a web edition of his full article. Wallace found nonfiction and journalism to be somewhat facile—"there's a certain persona created, that's a little stupider and

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<sup>12</sup> His first novel and first short story collection held few footnotes, and after *Infinite Jest*, he sought to end his reliance on them. His concession to footnotes was restricted to *Infinite Jest*, *Consider the Lobster*, and *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, three works that, while not published consecutively, were written at roughly the same time. (*Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* contained only a couple stories reliant on footnotes.) N.B. The oddity of discussing footnotes in a footnote is acknowledged.

<sup>13</sup> Wallace, David Foster. *Consider the Lobster*. Little, Brown and Company. 2006.

schmuckier than I am”—and he said they were mostly descriptive exercises, devoid of the challenges that his fiction brought him: “Welcome to my mind for 20 pages, see through my eyes, here’s pretty much all the French curls and crazy circles.”<sup>14</sup> This self-confidence could explain his rejections of editorial suggestions in that realm.

It speaks well of Wallace that for his novels, which were more personal and more important to him than his non-fiction, he sought out and accepted criticism and suggestions for improvement. This trusting stance was one he developed over time. Howard, who edited Wallace’s first novel, *The Broom of the System*, said that “he was very polite in ignoring me.”<sup>15</sup> Wallace was steadfast in defending stylistic choices. When his agent, Bonnie Nadell, tried to dissuade him from ending the novel mid-sentence, Wallace “proceeded to explain the entire Wittgensteinian philosophy behind why it was what it was.”<sup>16</sup> Howard was frustrated by Wallace’s “cute,” unsatisfying resolution of a scene with the potential for “a spectacular piece of comic vaudeville.” But, Howard said, Wallace told him that, “I was absolutely right in my suggestion and he knew that he really should do this, but here’s why he can’t. And won’t. And the explanation was so convoluted but so heartfelt that at the end I just said, ‘Oh, alright!’ This wasn’t something I was gonna win.”<sup>17</sup>

Wallace was in his early 20s and in his senior year at Amherst during the pre-publication of *The Broom of the System*,<sup>18</sup> and by the time he submitted his next novel,

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<sup>14</sup> Lipsky, David. “The Lost Years & Last Days of David Foster Wallace” *Rolling Stone*. October 20, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Neyfakh, “Gerry Howard on Discovering, Editing, and Hatching David Foster Wallace: ‘He Was the First Person Who Ever Called Me “Mister,”” op. cit.

<sup>16</sup> Neyfakh, “Remembering David Foster Wallace: ‘David Would Never Stop Caring’ Says Lifelong Agent,” op. cit.

<sup>17</sup> Neyfakh, “Gerry Howard on Discovering, Editing, and Hatching David Foster Wallace: ‘He Was the First Person Who Ever Called Me “Mister,”” op. cit.

<sup>18</sup> Howard remembered Wallace in that period as resembling “a newly hatched chick, you know? He didn’t have a lot of defenses. He seemed abashed by everything.” – Neyfakh, “Gerry Howard on Discovering,

*Infinite Jest*, for publication, he was in his 30s and more mature, having learned lessons from the celebrity that *The Broom of the System* brought him. Wallace (unorthodoxly<sup>19</sup>) gave Pietsch, his editor from *Infinite Jest* until the end of his career, the manuscript when the novel was about two-thirds completed. “David agreed,” Pietsch said, “that many passages could come out, no matter how beautiful, funny, brilliant or fascinating they were of themselves, simply because the novel did not absolutely require them.”<sup>20</sup> And Pietsch worked “to subject every section of the book to the brutal question: Can the book possibly live without this?”<sup>21</sup> The capitulation, even in principle, to this type of extensive editing marked a change for Wallace.

Wallace made many of the cuts that Pietsch suggested—about “250 manuscript pages,” according to Pietsch—and reworked large swaths to address some of the issues Pietsch had with “the Marathe/Steeply political colloquies and the Orin Incandenza football stories.”<sup>22</sup> But while Wallace was more receptive to suggestions, he preferred to take maverick positions on the structural shape of the novel. In response to Pietsch’s worries about the unresolved plot strings at the end of the novel, Wallace fired back a missive: “We know exactly what’s happening to Gately by end, about 50% of what’s happened to Hal, and little but hints about Orin. I can give you 5000 words of theoretico-structural argument for this, but let’s spare one another, shall we?”<sup>23</sup> Moore, the friend with whom Wallace shared his rough draft of *Infinite Jest*, documented a large number of changes that Wallace made to the final draft. Many of the changes serve to shroud and

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Editing, and Hatching David Foster Wallace: ‘He Was the First Person Who Ever Called Me “Mister,”’  
op. cit..

<sup>19</sup> “I protested that without the whole story it would be impossible to know what ultimately mattered,”  
Pietsch said. – Pietsch, op. cit.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Max, D.T. “The Unfinished.” *The New Yorker*. March 9, 2009.

<sup>23</sup> Max, op. cit.

soften meanings, in a way that does not quite remove anything from the text but shifts the burden of parsing onto the reader. For example, “the novel’s gentle note that Orin ‘had already drawn idle little sideways 8’s on the postcoital flanks of a dozen B.U. coeds’ replaces the MS’s coarser ‘had already gone about penetrating a huge cross-section of BU’s incoming freshmen.’”<sup>24</sup> Other changes seem to reveal instances where Wallace simply thought of an improvement: “Queer Tony” becomes “Poor Tony”; Wallace favors the acronym of “prettiest girl of all time” to the phrase itself; Charles Tavis imitates Pierre Trudeau, not Richard Nixon; the “Year of the Twinkie” becomes the “Year of the Whopper.”<sup>25</sup> While Pietsch and Moore’s suggestions informed some of these changes, Wallace’s agonizing over nugatory choices—e.g., the naming of characters, places, years, etc.—in a 1079-page book reveals Wallace’s vice-like grip on authorial prerogative.

Wallace also rejected Pietsch’s qualms with the inclusion of endnotes. Pietsch preferred the easier to read footnotes. But Wallace said that endnotes let him

make the primary-text an easier read while at once 1) allowing a discursive, authorial intrusive style w/o Finneganzing the story, 2) mimic the information-flood and data-triage I expect’d be an even bigger part of US life 15 years hence. 3) have a lot more technical/medical verisimilitude 4) allow/make the reader go literally physically ‘back and forth’ in a way that perhaps cutely mimics some of the story’s thematic concerns ... 5) feel emotionally like I’m satisfying your request for compression of text without sacrificing enormous amounts of stuff.”<sup>26</sup>

He later told Charlie Rose that

There is a way, it seems to me, that reality is fractured right now. ... The difficulty about writing about that reality is that text is very linear, it’s very unified. I am constantly on the lookout for ways to fracture the text that aren’t totally disoriented. You can take the lines and jumble them up, and that’s nicely fractured, but nobody’s going to read it.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Moore, op. cit.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Max, op. cit.

<sup>27</sup> “David Foster Wallace.” *Charlie Rose*. March 27, 1997.



Whether Pietsch was convinced by this rationale or just thought Wallace had an unhealthy footnote fetish,<sup>28</sup> he eventually acquiesced. But although published version contained almost 100 of pages of endnotes, Pietsch persuaded Wallace to cut hundreds more. When Marie Mundaca designed the interior of *Consider the Lobster*, she helped Wallace capture the type of fractured reality he had sought elsewhere to capture with footnotes and endnotes. To layout “Host,” “Wallace’s idea was to have leaders and labels, like a diagram,” she said. “He wanted something that looked like hypertext rollovers that were immediate and at hand.”<sup>29</sup> Wallace took interest in the intricacies of book design and would call Mundaca for “very intense discussions regarding the semiotics of the leaders (the lines going from the text to the boxes) and the tics and the line width of the boxes and the ampersands.”<sup>30</sup>

Over his career, Wallace developed a respect for editors and their work that was somewhat lacking in his relationships with early editors. In winter of 2008, a couple months after Wallace hanged himself in the furnished garage where he did most of his writing, Karen Green, his wife, and Nadell, his agent, brought themselves to enter his workshop. They found a neat pile of the manuscript for a novel he had been working on for the past eight years. Nadell said, “Karen clearly felt that it was there for us to find.”<sup>31</sup>

In his last hours, Wallace entrusted his unfinished novel to someone else.

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<sup>28</sup> “Wallace put a strikeout through Mary’s name on his tattoo and an asterisk under the heart; farther down he added another asterisk and Karen’s name, turning his arm into a living footnote.” – Max, op. cit.

<sup>29</sup> Mundaca, Marie. “The Influence of Anxiety: Wading In.” *Hipster Bookclub*. June 2009.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Thompson, Bob. “New Yorker Publishes Part Of Unfinished Wallace Novel.” *The Washington Post*. March 2, 2009.