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## **Brief Interviews with Liminality: The Case of David Foster Wallace**

**Abstract:** The beginning of the twenty first century can be described as a liminal period of discarding old interests and preoccupations in preparation for the arrival of something new. This feeling of standing on a threshold is also visible in literature where the growing impatience with the postmodern technique of formal play may result in the creation of a new kind of fiction. David Foster Wallace's collection of short stories *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999) is a critique of the postmodern society and its representative literary form which not only convincingly argues that the formula of metafiction has been exhausted but also points to a possible way out of the postmodern impasse and to a different kind of writing. This essay outlines the major points of the critique of metafiction as presented by Wallace and analyses his work as an example of "new" metafiction. The new form – which both embodies and departs from the "old" metafictional devices – may be best approached via reference to the mechanism of trauma, particularly to its compulsive desire to repeat the "painful" metafictional event.

*You are, unfortunately, a fiction writer. You are attempting a cycle of very short belletristic pieces, pieces which as it happens are not contes philosophiques and not vignettes or scenarios or allegories or fables, exactly, though neither are they really qualifiable as 'short stories' . . . How exactly the cycle's short pieces are supposed to work is hard to decide. Maybe say they are supposed to compose a certain sort of 'interrogation' of the person reading them, somehow. (Wallace, *Brief Interviews* 154)*

According to one of the most general, and therefore perhaps one of the most applicable definitions, postmodernism is "an art of criticism, with no message other than the need for continuous questioning" (Russel qtd. in Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism* 42). This need for questioning is essentially the desire for transgression, for probing and crossing the existing boundaries and extending the horizon of human activity and thought: whether seen, à la Jean-François Lyotard, as the collapse of metanarratives, the Baudrillardian culture of simulacra, or, in Frederick Jameson's terms, as the late capitalist culture of depthlessness, postmodernism indeed has to do with questioning and boundary

breaking where the difference between reality and simulation is blurred and destroyed, and where all the existing divisions collapse. The postmodern subject, like the space she inhabits, is a fragmented one, lost in time and space, a mere effect of linguistic play and ideological manipulation. This postmodern condition is reflected in new art forms, such as metafiction, described by Patricia Waugh as a tendency within the novel which, although almost as old as the novel itself, gains momentum in postmodernism (5). According to Waugh, by playing with and disturbing the established literary conventions and narrative techniques, this self-conscious fiction works to destabilize the boundary separating reality from fiction and to make the reader aware of the fact that reality, like fiction, is written/constructed (5–7). Mirroring the general postmodern practice of boundary crossing and generic confusion, in metafiction “the boundaries between art and life, language and metalanguage, and fiction and criticism are under philosophical attack” (Currie 18). The transgressive attacks may, however, lead to a feeling of exhaustion which, contrary to John Barth’s well-known statement which defines postmodernist literature as one of exhaustion (162), may be a cause for despair: unmasked as “empty signifiers” only, the postmodern subjects/writers may begin to feel a desire for something beyond the deconstructive gesture of metafictional questioning, for a new literary form which might better reflect the new sensibility.

David Foster Wallace is a contemporary American writer whose work, critically recognized as postmodern and metafictional, represents the struggle to exceed the limits of postmodernism and of its literary equivalent. At the time of his death in 2007, Wallace was the author of two novels, three collections of short stories and an unfinished novel, *The Pale King*, all of which employ the devices universally identified as metafictional: his debut novel, *The Broom of the System* (1987), interrogates the distance that separates reality from fiction by presenting a protagonist who suspects she is not real; the title of his 1996 novel, *Infinite Jest*, is an intertextual reference to Yorrick from William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and also the title of a film which in the novel kills its viewers; and the stories collected in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999) use such metafictional techniques as direct references to the reader, authorial interventions and heterogeneity of mostly popular genres, such as quizzes and interviews. At the same time, however, Wallace protested against being called a postmodern writer; in fact, he protested against being classified in any of the existing categories. In an interview with Charlie Rose in 1997, Wallace stated: “I do not consider myself a postmodernist; I don’t consider myself anything,” and openly expressed his dissatisfaction with postmodernism as such:

The problem is I think postmodernism has to a large extent run its course. The biggest thing for me that was interesting about postmodernism is that it was the first text that was highly self-conscious. Self-conscious of itself as text, self-conscious of the writer as persona, self-conscious about the effects that narrative had on readers. (Interview)

A tentative answer to the question why postmodernism has run its course may be reached through a reading of *Brief Interviews* as a self-conscious text – the textual quality pinpointed by Wallace as the key feature of postmodern literature, but used in the collection as the point of departure for a new, potentially post-metafictional kind of writing. The short stories attempt to critique the postmodern form by adopting the language of the form, therefore making it difficult to decide whether Wallace's book is a transgressive or liminal text and forcing the reader to speculate on the nature of transgression itself. Whatever the effect of the self-consciousness is, however, it seems to be directed no longer at the text itself, but rather at the reader, imagined here as not simply another textual artefact, but a living and feeling being whose corporeality has to be recovered from the layers of metafictional self-awareness.

Writing about postmodernism, Linda Hutcheon defends its claims by stating that “the new ideology of postmodernism may be that everything is ideological. But this does not lead to any intellectual or ideological impasse. What it does is to underlie the need for self-awareness” (“Poetics of Postmodernism” 211). It is this intellectual, ideological and literary impasse that *Brief Interviews* targets as the main problem with the postmodern impact on both literature and real life: the characters in Wallace's stories are highly self-conscious and aware of the conventions that govern the surrounding world, but instead of leading to self-revelation and self-improvement, perhaps even to a more ethical stance, this self-awareness immobilizes them, making them unable to begin any meaningful action or to establish any relationship. The effects of being too self-conscious and of knowing too well the social mechanisms are succinctly summarized in the story opening the collection entitled “A Radically Condensed History of Postindustrial Life”:

When they were introduced, he made a witticism, hoping to be liked. She laughed extremely hard, hoping to be liked. Then each drove home alone, staring straight ahead, with the very same twist to their faces.

The man who had introduced them didn't much like either of them, though he acted as if he did, anxious as he was to preserve good relations at all times. One never knew, after all, now did one now did one now did one. (0)

The fact that the story begins on page 0 turns it into a kind of meta-story which, like an epigraph, frames all the other narratives and delimits their thematic focus. Consequently, alienation, passivity, emptiness, senselessness and lostness return in various guises in all the stories, dominated by the major themes of loneliness and manipulation: shut in the prison-house of the social semiotic system, the characters can be roughly divided into those who attempt to rebel against the depersonalizing social machine and those who use their knowledge about its mechanisms for their own advantage. Numerous

representatives of the latter group are found in the four chapters of the collection which appear under the same title of "Brief Interviews with Hideous Men" and which document various instances of misogyny, male condescension and manipulation. The interviews are conducted with various men coming from different parts of the United States – Illinois, Iowa, Pennsylvania, Georgia, etc. – and cover the period from 1994 to 1998. This attempt at representativeness makes the interviews resemble a survey where the respondents' views are to exemplify a certain universal tendency or condition. As Wallace specifies, in America this condition is expressed through "a certain sadness" which manifests itself as "a kind of lostness" felt by "a generation that has an inheritance of absolutely nothing as far as meaningful moral values" are concerned (qtd. in Max 54). The interview form used in Wallace's book is fundamentally dialogical, and this invitation to the reader to participate in the making of the text is enhanced by the absence of questions: presented with the answers only, the reader is to supply the questions on their own and thus join the writer in the production of the text not only on the level of content but also on the level of empathy and moral judgment. It does not seem accidental that the interviewed subjects are men and the interviewer is female; interestingly, the authorial references to the reader in the collection envisage them as a "she," suggesting thus that the public for which Wallace writes is predominantly female, or feminized and thus "sensitized." The fact that women are deprived of the power to speak in the stories and that they are frequently victims of some traumatic experience is another example of the centrality of the ex-centric to postmodern texts, but it also directs the readers' attention to one of the most private of all spheres – the sexual relation – as representative of not only "the spiritual emptiness of heterosexual interaction in post-modern America" (Stein), but the emptiness of any social interaction whatsoever.

The stories of the "hideous men" circle around women as sexual objects, commodified, defined by and significant through their sexual value only. In the sexual conquest, every trick is allowed, including emotional blackmail, as is the case of one of the interviewed men who uses his deformed arm as a coy to seduce women. As he says, "[I]nside my head I don't call it the arm I call it the Asset" (*Brief Interviews* 82). Another justifies his sexual practices of bonding women by referring to the by-now popular knowledge of psychoanalysis which explains an adult's actions by his unhappy childhood and thus frees him from any moral responsibility: "[W]hat it is about is my desire symbolically to work out certain internal complexes consequent to my rather irregular childhood relations with my mother and twin sister" (104). Why the sexual relation is so important to the book's critical project might be explained by reference to Lacanian psychoanalysis, in which the love relation occupies a special place because of the role it plays in constituting the subject and in upholding the

coherence of the social symbolic field. “Sexuality is the domain in which we get most close to the intimacy of another human being” (Žižek, *Lacan*) and therefore it is also the meta-level at which the prevailing emptiness of postmodern human relations is most visible. The collection represents objectification and lack of reciprocity as the most damaging and universal results of the postmodern condition: we know what the other person desires, but, instead of sacrificing our interests for the sake of the other, we self-consciously use the other’s desire for our own ends to narcissistically uphold our uncritically idealized image of ourselves. As one interviewee in *Brief Interviews* explains:

[T]oday’s postfeminist era is also today’s postmodern era, in which supposedly everybody now knows everything about what’s really going on underneath all the semiotic codes and cultural conventions, and everybody supposedly knows what paradigms everybody is operating out of, and so we’re all as individuals held to be far more responsible for our sexuality, since everything we do is now unprecedentedly conscious and informed. (229)

Yet, as the collection shows, self-knowledge does not equal responsibility: we know the rules, we know the pseudo-scientific, politically correct “lingo” (as the hideous men are fond of repeating), and we know how not to be seduced by images, but we still nevertheless copy them. In this respect, Wallace’s characters seem very similar to the postmodern cynic described by a contemporary Lacanian critic, Slavoj Žižek, who warns us that the cynical attitude of critical detachment from the ideological machine is, in fact, itself a product of ideology:

[W]e are victims of authority precisely when we think we have duped it: the cynical distance is empty, our true place is in the ritual of obeying – or, as Kurt Vonnegut put it in his *Mother Night*: “We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be.” (*Enjoy Your Symptom!* xxiii)

The protagonists of *Brief Interviews* know that they pretend, but they either do not know that they have become what they pretend to be or, if they do, they cannot find a way out. Again, the fact that interpersonal relations are presented in the collection as emptied of emotions and love seems important in the context of Lacan’s statement that “he whom I suppose to know I love” (“God” 139), which binds love with revelation: it is the beloved who is taken to know the truth about the other and, if love disappears from the relation, so does the ontological support of the lover.

The theme of the desire to express the truth about oneself and the impossibility of doing so is the crucial recurring motif in the collection. In “On His Deathbed, Holding Your Hand, the Acclaimed New Young Off-Broadway Playwright’s Father Begs a Boon,” we encounter a dying man who decides to reveal the terrifying truth about himself, to confess that the relation with his son which has defined him for others is based on hatred, not on love, and to demand to be seen not as a father but as a man:

Why does no one tell you? Why do all regard it as a blessed event? There seems to be almost a conspiracy to keep you in the dark. Why does no one take you aside and tell you what is coming? Why not tell you the truth? . . . That you are expected now to give up everything and not only to receive no thanks but to expect none? . . . that you will have no more life that is *yours*? . . . That your failure to cast yourself away and change everything and be delirious with joy at – that this will be judged. Not just as a quote unquote parent but as a man. Your human worth. (256–57)

As the title of the story indicates, the man's desperate attempts at self-revelation fail and the paternal role continues to define him even after his death. The impossibility of breaking through the linguistic wall of social roles and conventions is also presented in "The Depressed Person," which documents tedious and futile attempts of a woman to communicate her pain to her friends: "The depressed person was in terrible and unceasing emotional pain, and the impossibility of sharing or articulating this pain was itself a component of the pain and a contributing factor in its essential horror" (37). The knowledge of the impossibility of articulating the pain becomes the source of pain and necessitates recourse to other stories through which the depressed person's situation may be made clear to others:

[T]he depressed person instead described circumstances, both past and ongoing, which were somehow related to the pain, to its etiology and cause, hoping at least to be able to express to others something of the pain's context, its – as it were – shape and texture. (37)

The depressed person is thus caught in a vicious circle of unsuccessful endeavours to express herself, leading to the situation where the impossibility of speaking the truth and the simultaneous desire to do so become a defining feature of her personality and the reason for her alienation:

[S]he attempted to describe how painful and frightening it was not to feel able to articulate the chronic depression's excruciating pain itself but to have to resort to recounting examples that probably sounded, she always took care to acknowledge, dreary or self-pitying or like one of those people who are narcissistically obsessed with their "painful childhoods" and "painful lives" and wallow in their burdens and insist on recounting them at tiresome length to friends who are trying to be supportive and nurturing, and bore them and repel them. (38)

The depressed person's experience and desire are essentially those of the writer who, like Wallace, wants to make himself understood but repeatedly fails to do so, imprisoned by the formal limits of writing, and who therefore has no choice but to endlessly and tediously repeat himself.<sup>1</sup> In the 1997 interview, Wallace explained what may be called repetitive nature of his writing in the following way: "I have this problem of thinking that I haven't made myself clear

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<sup>1</sup> Wallace himself suffered from severe depression which finally led to his suicide in 2007.

or that the argument hasn't been sufficiently hammered down so I make the same point five, six, seven times" (Interview). In *Brief Interviews*, the desire "to make [himself] clear" results in a kind of repetition compulsion visible not only on the level of themes, characters or content, but also in the very titles of the short stories, four of which are entitled "Brief Interviews with Hideous Men" and three "Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders." The repeated titles perform a twofold function: by questioning the authenticity and uniqueness of the pieces, they fracture the text, reminding us of the arbitrary authorial choice and the "porousness" of all stories, but at the same time they point to a certain underlying structure or continuity in the arrangement of the text as a whole. On the one hand, in order to reflect adequately the reality in which we live, any contemporary text must mirror the postmodern collapse of boundaries. As Wallace states:

It seems to me that reality is fractured right now, at least the reality that I live in. The difficulty about writing about that reality is that text is very linear and unified and you, I anyway, am constantly on the look out for ways that fracture the text that are totally disoriented. (Interview)

On the other hand, however, the text must also display a certain unity in order to demonstrate what Wallace calls "some sort of weird ambient *sameness* in different kinds of human relationships" (*Brief Interviews* 156), the "queer nameless ambient urgent interhuman sameness" (157). To discover what this sameness consists in, what it actually is and how to transcribe it into fiction seems to be the major aim of Wallace's project.

Commenting on the self-reflexive techniques of postmodern texts which grant everything the status of a text only and their impact on our notion of reality, Slavoj Žižek states that

instead of conferring on these gestures a kind of Brechtian dignity . . . one should rather denounce them for what they are: the exact opposite of what they claim to be – *escapes from the Real, desperate attempts to avoid the real of the illusion itself, the Real that emerges in the guise of an illusory spectacle.* (Lacan)

This attempt to refuse the existence of the Real is what *Brief Interviews* accuses metafiction of: leading us to the emptiness that lies at the heart of all stories – fictional, social, individual – metafiction replaces its danger with the optimism of an illusion of omnipotence, whether of the writer or the reader. Thus, instead of reality as text, it gives us reality as play, and that is whence the transgressive quality of the new form emerges: in insisting on the importance of remembering about the physicality of the reader and writer, and therefore on the closeness of the meaningless Real which defines our "sameness," it strives to remind us of the source of all stories, of the destructive illusion of control they give, and of the responsibility involved in their creation.

The compulsion to repeat which structures the stories originates in the need to re-live or re-tell a certain traumatic experience so as to domesticate it and devoid it of its disturbing potential. The stories from *Brief Interviews* frequently refer to traumatic events which are portrayed as, paradoxically, the only means of making a meaningful contact with another human being. For the hideous men of the interviews, it is only when a woman reveals some traumatic ordeal from her past, such as gang-rape or torture by a serial killer, that she stops being simply a “sexual object” and becomes a “person.” Thus, trauma seems to be presented as the ultimate, genuine experience, in fact the only experience that forces us to move beyond the sphere of words and signs into the real world of objects and beings. As one of the men puts it, “[H]ave it [a traumatic event] happen and you get a real taste of the Dark Side. Not just the *idea* of darkness, the genuine Dark Side” (121), the genuine reality. In the postmodern world, trauma performs the cathartic function of confronting us with “what we really are,” of making us aware of what we are made of and thus liberating us to choose, to re-construct our identity. Having experienced trauma, we will “always deep-down know it’s always a choice, that it’s you that is making yourself up second by second every second from now on” (123). It is as if, by talking about the trauma without having to actually experience it, we come close to the truly transgressive experience, to the Real beyond language, yet without the danger of losing ourselves in it. The Real, after all, can only be glimpsed and then turned into a story. That is another reason why the stories of the trauma are not to be trusted, not only because they are narrated by the “hideous men,” but because their telling makes us question the identities of the victim and the offender (so much so that we end up suspecting that the story-tellers themselves are the actual rapists and serial killers). There is a trauma involved, certainly, but it does not come from the hideous men’s stories, but from the stories of the men telling the stories. What is represented as traumatic in Wallace’s book is the postmodern subject, inhabiting the postmodern depersonalized world of missed encounters and narcissistic desires, where the “need for constant questioning” has lost sight of its object – the human being hidden behind many layers of narrative fictions – and of the emptiness behind all stories, of the silent void which necessitates recourse to ever more stories.

To describe postmodernism as a kind of trauma and the postmodern subject as lost seems risky and naïve, especially to those equipped with the know-how of postmodern criticism, and to identify the goal of the new mode of fiction as recovering the living human being perhaps even more so. Nevertheless, the desire to recover the reader, the flesh-and-blood being, is clearly expressed in Wallace’s statement that he wants “to author things that both restructure worlds and make living people feel stuff” (qtd. in Max 48) and made even clearer in the metacommentaries included in *Brief Interviews*. “Octet,” the medial short story



that originally was to comprise eight “pop quizzes” but ended up with the structure of “2+(2(1)) pieces” (*Brief Interviews* 154), contains extensive footnotes in which the writer strives to explain his critical stand. The use of the popular and dialogical form of quizzes, where the reader is invited to express her opinion or to solve a problem, is a metafictional device, just like the footnotes, Wallace’s favourite form,<sup>2</sup> whose length significantly exceeds that of the text proper, undermining thus the conventional textual hierarchy and drawing the reader’s attention to the text as not only an artefact, but also a never fully completed one. The footnotes are, essentially, also quizzes, where the writer asks for the reader’s advice on how to write, describes the various problems he had with arranging the text and even includes the sections that had to be removed from the main text. This metafictional procedure, we are told, is not to be seen as metafictional as it comes from a writer who is “at least aware that metacommentary is now lame and old news and can’t of itself salvage anything more” (*Brief Interviews* 159) and who knows that “flirting with metafictional self-reference . . . might come off lame and tired and facile, and also runs the risk of compromising the queer *urgency* about whatever it is you feel you want the pieces to interrogate in whoever’s reading them” (146–47). The use of metafictional devices is risky because “by no means do you want a reader to come away thinking that the cycle is just a cute formal exercise in interrogative structure and S.O.P. metatext” (147), but it is also inevitable: like the characters described in the stories, the writer is also shut in the prison-house of meta-conventions. Similarly to postmodernism, metafiction has run its course; it has become conventional, too stiffly codified, too familiar and therefore no longer able to interrogate anything with any genuine urgency. In fact, “things have come to such a pass the belletristic fiction is now considered *safe* and *innocuous*” (157). What Wallace condemns metafiction for is what the stories’ characters are criticized for: too preoccupied with the rules that govern social interaction, they lose sight of the interaction itself and thus miss any real encounter.

In literature, the metafictional preoccupation with form and play has deprived fiction of its revolutionary potential and turned it into just another instance of art for art’s sake. But perhaps the greatest problem with the “postelever metaformal hooley” (*Brief Interviews* 151) is that it has become a terrifyingly narcissistic procedure whose aim of “puncturing the realist wall” has been exchanged for the master show of authorial condescension, uncannily similar to the patronizing tone of the hideous men’s monologues. Metafiction is no longer about breaking boundaries and making the reader “feel things,” but about

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<sup>2</sup> As Wallace confessed: “The footnotes are very, very addictive. It’s like almost having a second voice in your head” (Interview).

the dramatist himself coming onstage from the wings and reminding you that what's going on is artificial and that the artificer is him (the dramatist) and but that he's at least respectful enough of you as reader/audience to be honest about the fact that he's back there pulling the strings, an 'honesty' which personally you've always had the feeling is actually a highly rhetorical sham-honesty that's designed to get you to like him and approve of him (i.e., the 'meta'-type writer) and feel flattered that he apparently thinks you're enough of a grownup to handle being reminded that what you're in the middle of is artificial (like you didn't know that already, like you needed to be reminded of it over and over again as if you were a myopic child who couldn't see what was right in front of you). (147)

Unlike the "meta-type writer," whose powerlessness and being lost in the text is by now unmasked as merely a pretence, the footnoted author should reject "the tired 'Hey-look-at-me-looking-at-you-looking-at-me' agenda of tired old S.O.P." (*Brief Interviews* 153), openly admit his powerlessness and seek advice in the reader. It is a risky gesture, not only because he will have to approach her with "completely naked helpless pathetic sincerity" (154), but mostly because personal contact is one of the few remaining taboos: "In fact one of the very last few interpersonal taboos we have is this kind of obscenely naked direct interrogation of somebody else. It looks pathetic and desperate. That's how it will look to the reader" (154). The interrogation is risky because, as Wallace insists, it is directed not to some abstract ideal reader, but to a being very much alive who, reaching for a book to get some rest after work, may find the questioning too obtrusive and too real:

You should *not* deploy this tactic until you've soberly considered what it might cost. Because if you go ahead and do it (i.e., ask her straight out), this whole 'interrogation' thing won't be an innocuous formal belletristic device anymore. It'll be real. You'll be bothering her, the same way a solicitor who calls on the telephone just as you're sitting down to unwind over a good dinner is bothering you. (157)

However risky the interrogation may be, it is still worth making because of the "weird urgency" the author feels to deliver the message of some "weird sameness" which repeatedly appears in different kinds of human relationships and which Wallace describes as

some nameless but inescapable 'price' that all human beings are faced with having to pay at some point if they ever want truly to be with another person instead of just using that person somehow, a weird and nameless but apparently unavoidable 'price' that can actually sometimes equal death itself, or at least usually equals your giving up something (either a thing or a person or a precious long-held 'feeling' or some certain idea of yourself and your own virtue/worth/identity) whose loss will feel, in a true and urgent way, like a kind of death. (155–56)

The "nameless but inescapable price" that has to be paid in order to enter any social relation might be seen as the illusion of mastery and self-control, of

totality and self-possession that must be foregone with the entrance into the social space of language and other people. Lacan claims that subjectivity is socially constructed because it is through encountering other human beings that one forms and re-forms the idea of who one is ("Mirror Stage" 405–09). Consequently, what one is depends on how one is reflected from an other's position and the refusal to recognize this dependence equals a death of sorts. Postmodernism and metafiction echo the Lacanian image of the subject as socially constructed, but the appearance of the narcissistic "meta-author" who orchestrates the arrangements and creations of "realities" – or of the protagonists of *Brief Interviews* whose self-consciousness deludes them into believing in the power of self-creation – runs the danger of refusing to reflect the other as a subject and thus of not constructing any "real" intersubjective world. Perhaps that is why Wallace writes of the "redemptive urgency [he]'d wanted the octet to convey" (*Brief Interviews* 151), pointing thus to some sinful transgression of rules that needs to be redeemed and that may have been performed by the octet's metafictional predecessors. And perhaps, to refer to the Lacanian logic of the constitutive other again, the metafictional sin may be precisely that of the end of continuous self-questioning: rebelling against various meta-narratives, it has turned itself into a "hideous" meta-form which refuses to reflect the gaze of the other, of the writer and of the reader, and therefore ultimately becomes a dead-form.

Declaring its redemptive break with metafiction, *Brief Interviews* nevertheless employs an abundance of metafictional devices. It uses a heterogeneity of forms and genres, disturbs textual conventions in a number of ways, and repeatedly breaks the boundaries between art and reality, fiction and criticism, writing and painting. Like the "old" metafiction, it ushers the author into the text, shattering the illusion of objectivity, and tries to resurrect him as a fleshy being, not much unlike the reader, as a moral authority whose task is to supply the lost generation with meaningful values (Wallace qtd. in Max 54). The "new" author is actually

more like a reader, in other words, down here quivering in the mud of the trench with the rest of us, instead of a *Writer*, whom we imagine to be clean and dry and radiant of command presence and unwavering conviction as he coordinates the whole campaign from back at some gleaming abstract Olympian HQ. (*Brief Interviews* 160)

Perhaps it is at this moment that the "new" metafiction can be fully related to trauma which, according to Cathy Caruth, is not only

a repeated suffering of the event, but it is also a continual leaving of its site. . . . To listen to the crisis of a trauma . . . is not only to listen for the event, but to hear in the testimony the survivor's departure from it. (qtd. in Bruhm 273)

In this sense, then, the new metafiction is a post-traumatic kind of writing: it repeats the postmodern metafictional event, turns it into a story, and gives testimony to it so as to eventually depart from it. The goal of these two types of writing is essentially the same: to make the reader aware of the textual nature of reality; but the new writing does so in a more urgent, and therefore perhaps more “authentic” and responsible, way. Whether the new form is indeed new enough and whether it manages to contain the urgency of its message remains, as always, an open question. In Wallace’s words, “again, this will be for you to decide. Nobody’s going to hold your hand” (*Brief Interviews* 159).

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