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Becoming Yourself: The Afterlife of Reception

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Becoming Yourself: The Afterlife of Reception

If there is one thing to be learned from David Foster Wallace, it is that cultural transmission is a tricky game.[1] This was a problem Wallace confronted as a literary professional, a university-based writer during what Mark McGurl has called the Program Era. But it was also a philosophical issue he grappled with on a deep level as he struggled to combat his own loneliness through writing. This fundamental concern with literature as a social, collaborative enterprise has also gained some popularity among scholars of contemporary American literature, particularly McGurl and James English: both critics explore the rules by which prestige or cultural distinction is awarded to authors (English; McGurl). Their approach requires a certain amount of empirical work, since these claims move beyond the individual experience of the text into forms of collective reading and cultural exchange influenced by social class, geographical location, education, ethnicity, and other factors. Yet McGurl and English's groundbreaking work is limited by the very forms of exclusivity they analyze: the protective bubble of creative writing programs in the academy and the elite economy of prestige surrounding literary prizes, respectively. To really study the problem of cultural transmission, we need to look beyond the symbolic markets of prestige to the real market, the site of mass literary consumption, where authors succeed or fail based on their ability to speak to that most diverse and complicated of readerships: the general public. Unless we study what I call the social lives of books, we make the mistake of keeping literature in the same ascetic laboratory that Wallace tried to break out of with his intense authorial focus on popular culture, mass media, and everyday life.

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1 A modified version of this essay will appear in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace: Critical and Creative Assessments*, forthcoming from the University of Iowa Press. I am grateful to the editors of the volume, Lee Konstantinou and Sam Cohen, the University of Iowa Press and the Stanford Literary Lab for allowing me to publish an extended version of my research here. I offer my thanks in particular to Franco Moretti and Lee Konstantinou for their generosity in reading several drafts of this work and greatly improving it through their deft and thoughtful editing.

Tracing the social lives of books in the sphere of popular consumption requires extensive empirical research and would probably be impossible to accomplish in any kind of complete way. Instead, what I will offer here is a case study or core sample of Wallace's cultural reception in particular areas of the literary marketplace drawn from a project exploring the changing nature of literary culture in the digital era. My larger argument is that millions of cultural consumers are now empowered to participate in previously closed literary conversations and to express forms of taste through their purchases and reviews of books. These traces of popular reading choices constitute a fresh perspective on elusive audience reactions to literature, one that reveals distinct networks of conversation that are transforming the relationships between writers and their readers, between the art of fiction and the market for books. Employing network analysis methodologies and 'distant reading' of book reviews, recommendations, and other digital traces of cultural distinction, I develop a new model for literary culture in America today. I will explain what this means in practical terms below, but I'd like to begin by offering three conjectures about Wallace that we can explore with empirical data, allowing us to make some grounded claims about Wallace's ongoing literary impact.

1) Wallace is different: unlike contemporaries such as Jonathan Franzen, Richard Powers, Jonathan Lethem, or Michael Chabon, Wallace employs a style wildly divergent from anyone else on the literary scene. He pioneered a radical new narrative voice so successfully that editors now complain about the endless pitches: "I'd like to do a David Foster Wallace take on _____" (Lipsky 320). As we will soon see, this uniqueness resulted in an oeuvre with a deep interiority to it, a cluster of texts that beckon readers almost invariably to read more Wallace, more of the "literary equivalent of cocaine" that they simply could not find anywhere else (Lipsky 157).

2) Wallace is postmodern, not just in his thematic and stylistic approaches to narrative but in a historical sense; his books speak to Pynchon, Barth, and DeLillo in a way that they rarely do to younger novelists. The pointedly difficult style of massive, occasionally antagonistic tomes like Gravity's Rainbow is magnified, footnoted, and distilled into Wallace's own particular blend of militant cultural critique and eloquent despair.

3) Wallace is integral. Despite being so frequently lost in the funhouse of postmodern prose experiments, his earnest narrative approach aspires to the unity of experience as we perceive it—the ways in which we stitch together mediated fragments and jumbled thoughts into coherent stories of ourselves. This individual, intellectual definition of the word has a collective parallel in the ways that Wallace's work encourages readers to work together on this project of integration. Wallace has been incredibly effective at uniting a diverse readership around his intense fictions of loss, addiction, and pervasive loneliness precisely because he enrolls each of them in the project of his fictional calculus, of approximating the area under the contemporary curve. Wallace's fear of loneliness was tempered by his faith in the potential of literature to bridge the gap between each of our consciousnesses. His iterative, splintered, capture-each-detail-under-the-curve-to-describe-the-curve approach has obviously succeeded with readers, who gladly do the work of completing the equation, responding to genuine honesty in his texts in spite of the postmodern distancing that makes such work necessary.

1. How to Read a Thousand Book Reviews

If these conjectures seem relatively timid for a piece of literary criticism, I hope they become a bit more compelling when I explain how I hope to prove them, or at least support them, empirically. I'll begin this argument with a set of simple observations intended to introduce my methodology and define key terms. My work is influenced by a number of scholars exploring literary production in its interaction with other systems. From Pierre Bourdieu I have adapted the grounding perspective that literary culture operates at the intersection of intellectual or symbolic status and the financial influences of capitalism (*The Field of Cultural Production*; *Distinction*; *The Rules of Art*). Whereas Bourdieu's analyses focus on the production and dissemination of cultural capital, John Guillory notes the fragility of capital as a metaphor for intellectual value, and Guillory's work on canon-formation has inspired my own close readings of clustering in the literary marketplace.[2] I am also indebted to English and McGurl for adapting sociological metrics and forms of description that shed light on literary systems as forms of material production; their arguments about the deeply social nature of authorial fame are, I believe, borne out by my results below. My research methodologies combine an attention to popular culture and new collaborative forms of production advanced by media scholars like Henry Jenkins with the distant reading and systemic perspective adopted by Franco Moretti. I use measures from network analysis to analyze my data, particularly those defining the formation and structure of groups.

The digital traces that I will analyze here are drawn from two primary datasets: First, networks of recommendations based on consumer purchases drawn from Amazon; second, a corpus of professional and consumer reviews of Wallace's books collected from nationally prestigious newspapers and magazines along with consumer reviews from Amazon. "Network" here refers to a limited set of nodes and edges, and I will be extracting three basic kinds of networks from this data.[3] The first charts out recommendations on Amazon by defining books as nodes and recommendations as edges or links that point from one text to another. The second visualizes co-occurrences in professional reviews of Wallace's work, defining author names and book titles as nodes and co-occurrences within the same paragraph as links. The third does the same co-occurrence work, but the starting point is user reviews from Amazon, not critics' reviews from periodicals. I generated these datasets and the attendant visualization files using a combination of Perl scripts (to gather and groom the data), a MySQL database (to store it), and the visualization tool yEd (to create the figures below). By studying these networks side by side, we can explore the two primary spheres of public literary action: conversation and consumption. "Conversation" roughly encompasses the cultural side of the equation, represented here by professional and non-professional readers' written reviews of books.

The decline of professional book reviewing and the familiar public sphere of literary profiles, blurbs, and other prestige-laden interactions has paralleled the rise of new digital public spaces. Websites like Amazon have succeeded not just by dint of cost-cutting effi-

2 For the relevant discussion on value in *Cultural Capital*, see pp. 325-340.

3 "Limited set" is an important term here—these networks of cultural influence are practically infinite, so the graphs here are subsets defined by reasonable artificial constraints. For example, my network of book recommendations on Amazon begins with *Infinite Jest* and follows links to three levels of depth.

ciency but because they have fostered new kinds of community around their products, and book reviewers on their sites often engage in dialog with other reviews, creating spaces where users can form micro-communities around particular products.[4] Like any public forum, the Amazon review ecology is susceptible to various forms of manipulation, from authors panning their rivals and praising themselves to publicists and other paid writers working to shift public opinion.[5] As the site has grown, it has developed its own semi-commercial hierarchy based on reviewer rankings, and a recent survey demonstrates that its top reviewers often receive free books and products that they usually feel compelled to review positively in order to maintain rank (Pinch and Kesler). The survey also indicates that the "Top 1,000" reviewers are 70% male and middle-aged, and 26% identify themselves as professional writers or educators (20-23). However, it is clear from my data that the vast majority of Wallace reviews studied here were not written by Top 1,000 reviewers, and I suspect demographics skew dramatically based on the author in question.[6] Taking these quasi-commercial influences into account (just as we do when we read reviews from for-profit newspapers), we can consider Amazon's growing digital ecology of voluntary contributions from readers as another cultural space inflected by the literary marketplace, and therefore an appealing object of study for the "consumption" half of the equation I described above. Amazon's recommendations allow us to observe the world's largest bookseller in its feedback loop with consumer desire and market influences. To be sure, the results are contingent and clearly manipulated to promote various publicity campaigns and authors. But by considering these recommendation networks over time, we can see how a significant number of readers are associating texts through their shopping carts, and thereby establishing patterns and networks of literary consumption.

Having laid out the assumptions underlying my methodology for Amazon recommendations, let me do the same for co-occurrences in book reviews. By extracting proper nouns from these documents instead of using a method like sentiment analysis or a broader linguistic study, I once again focus on cultural conversation as a kind of network. This approach screens out all but the proper nouns, the cultural "objects" of discussion, and identifies their linkages through a primitive definition of proximity. After experimentation, I chose to define these links on the paragraph level (as opposed to the sentence level or the entire review) for several reasons. First, because my scripts are not grammatically sophisticated enough to follow indirect references such as "this book" or "the author," the paragraph-level co-occurrence does a much better job of capturing the reviewer's intent. Second, I felt that as readers we tend to read reviews as narratives in their own right, and a reference to Dickens made in the first paragraph will fade in significance by the second and the third unless the reviewer alludes to it again explicitly. Paragraphs, then, served to focalize critical allusions to books and texts in a concrete way without getting bogged down in the complexities of parsing sentences or sentiment. This last point also needs expansion: my methodology makes no distinction between the critical evaluations "Wallace owes a debt to Shakespeare" and "Wallace and Shakespeare have nothing in common."

4 I use the term "community" as a way of describing the ill-defined but occasionally powerful associations strangers can form online, a group that might fluctuate between what Guillory calls an "association" to an entity with a more explicit set of shared values and sense of belonging (34-5).

5 One public example of such behavior is British historian Orlando Figes (Lea and Taylor).

6 It is also worth noting that very few of these recommendations are "verified purchases," so there is no data on how many people who purchase books go on to review them, or whether those who review books ever bought the items in question.

Both are counted as links between the nodes Wallace and Shakespeare, and while a measurement of the emotional tenor of the link would be a fruitful avenue for future research, I believe both links are valid. Even when they are negatively enforced, such comparisons establish a connection in the reader's mind, putting Wallace in dialog in Shakespeare.[7]

These networks can often include hundreds or thousands of nodes and edges, so how can we interpret them? We can engage in a certain amount of close reading, for instance to see what texts are immediately associated with Wallace's oeuvre through recommendations and reviews. But we can also perform distant readings of these findings using metrics drawn from network analysis; one of the most useful and approachable of these is "prestige." Figure 1 introduces the data and the concept of prestige, which I use here both in its Bourdieu-inspired register[8] and in its network-analytic sense of describing nodes that are most central or significant within a network. There are various ways to define centrality, but the simplest is this: in recommendation networks, the more times a text is recommended "by" another text, the higher its prestige value.[9] In review networks, where the links (based on co-occurrences) have no directionality, it is even simpler: nodes with the most links are the most prestigious. Using these networks and prestige analysis, we can compare Wallace conversations and consumption to each other and to our critically grounded notions of his position in contemporary American literature. The value of this methodology is two-fold. First, my results here will allow us to trace the process of canonization for Wallace as he is integrated into a broader constellation of literary stars, offering some proof of his authorial success as well as a characterization of its nature.[10] Second, these results demonstrate the validity of the exercise: everyday readers do, in fact, contextualize Wallace differently from professional critics, and this revelation offers us another way to see the continued growth and evolution of Wallace the literary figure. The first step lies in exploring Wallace's distinct position in the literary marketplace.

7 I pursue this point through example on page 16.

8 In fact the term has evolved for Bourdieu as well, from its original sense as "specific consecration" distinct from capitalistic success (*The Field of Cultural Production* 38) to its more complex contemporary meaning in a world where "the boundary has never been as blurred between the experimental work and the *bestseller*" (*The Rules of Art* 347).

9 For an overview of prestige in network theory, see Wasserman and Faust (174-5).

10 Needless to say this essay is, in another way, also part of that process of canonization.

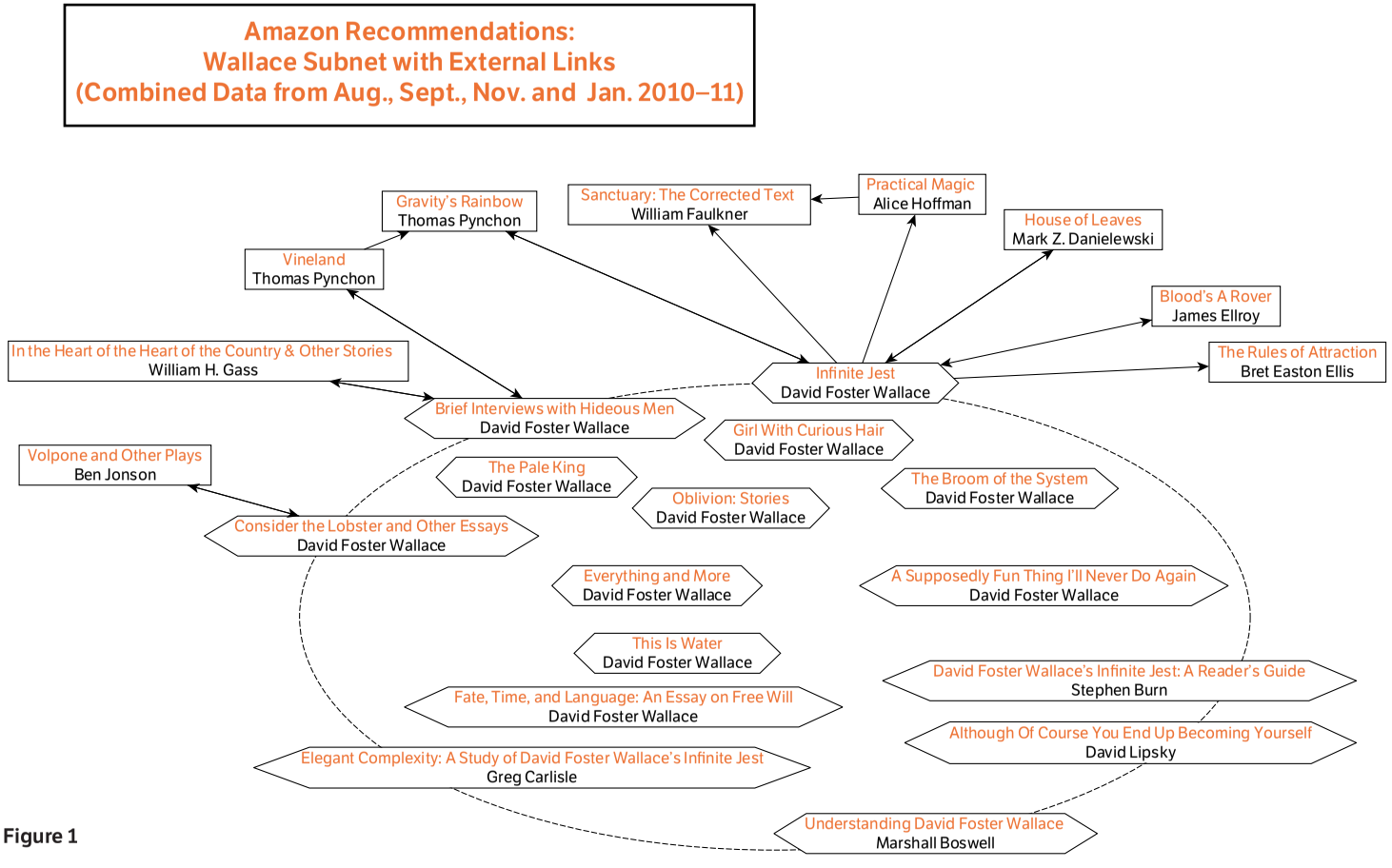
Amazon Recommendations:
Wallace Subnet with External Links
(Combined Data from Aug., Sept., Nov. and Jan. 2010–11)
Gravity's Rainbow
Thomas Pynchon
Sanctuary: The Corrected Text
William Faulkner
Practical Magic
Alice Hoffman
House of Leaves
Mark Z. Danielewski
Vineland
Thomas Pynchon
Blood's A Rover
James Ellroy
In the Heart of the Heart of the Country & Other Stories
William H. Gass
Infinite Jest
David Foster Wallace
The Rules of Attraction
Bret Easton Ellis
Brief Interviews with Hideous Men
David Foster Wallace
Girl With Curious Hair
David Foster Wallace
Volpone and Other Plays
Ben Jonson
The Pale King
David Foster Wallace
The Broom of the System
David Foster Wallace
Oblivion: Stories
David Foster Wallace
Consider the Lobster and Other Essays
David Foster Wallace
Everything and More
David Foster Wallace
A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again
David Foster Wallace
This Is Water
David Foster Wallace
David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest: A Reader's Guide
Stephen Burn
Fate, Time, and Language: An Essay on Free Will
David Foster Wallace
Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself
David Lipsky
Elegant Complexity: A Study of David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest
Greg Carlisle
Understanding David Foster Wallace
Marshall Boswell

Figure 1

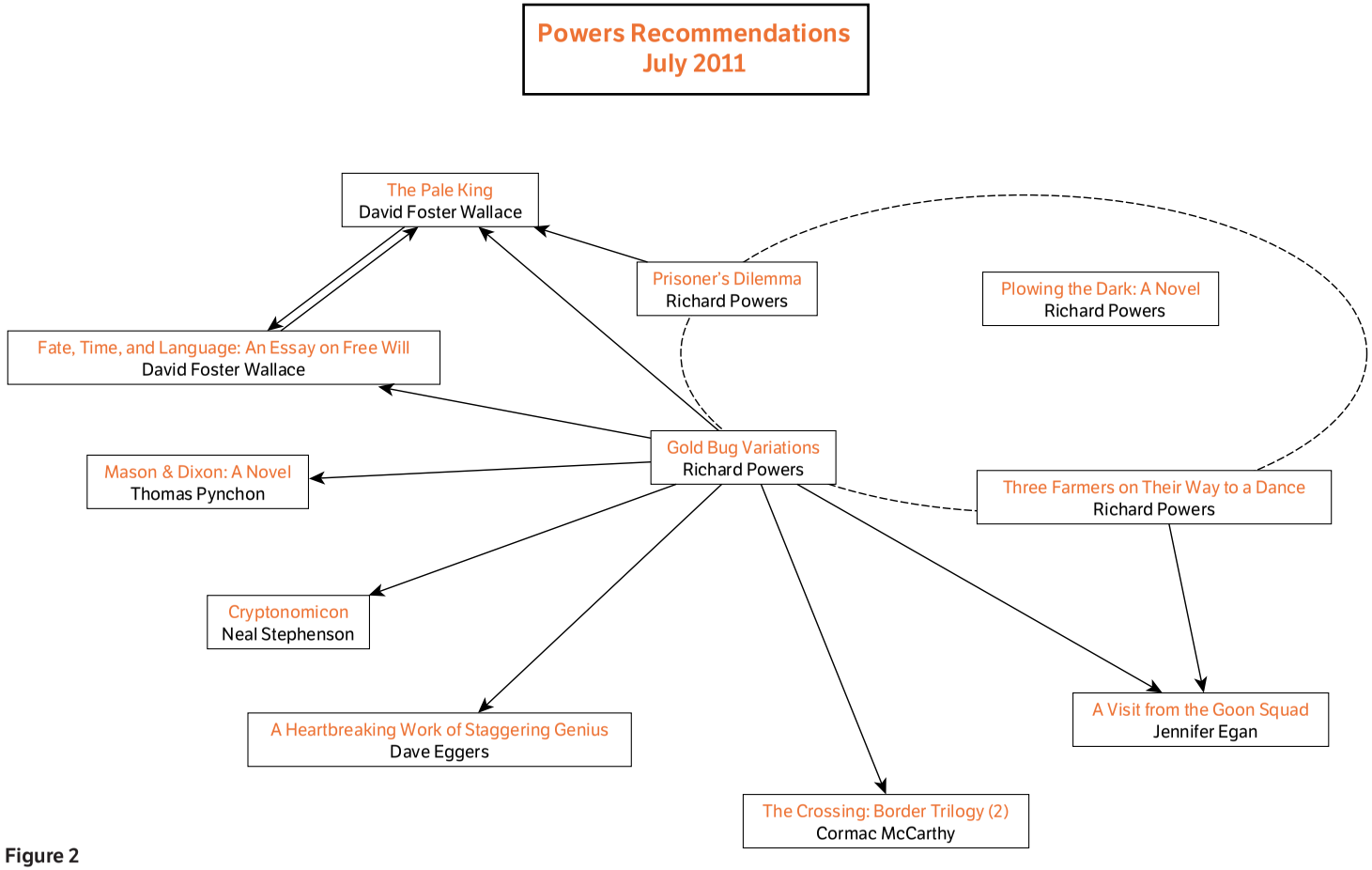
Powers Recommendations
July 2011
The Pale King
David Foster Wallace
Prisoner's Dilemma
Richard Powers
Plowing the Dark: A Novel
Richard Powers
Fate, Time, and Language: An Essay on Free Will
David Foster Wallace
Gold Bug Variations
Richard Powers
Mason & Dixon: A Novel
Thomas Pynchon
Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance
Richard Powers
Cryptonomicon
Neal Stephenson
A Visit from the Goon Squad
Jennifer Egan
A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius
Dave Eggers
The Crossing: Border Trilogy (2)
Cormac McCarthy

Figure 2

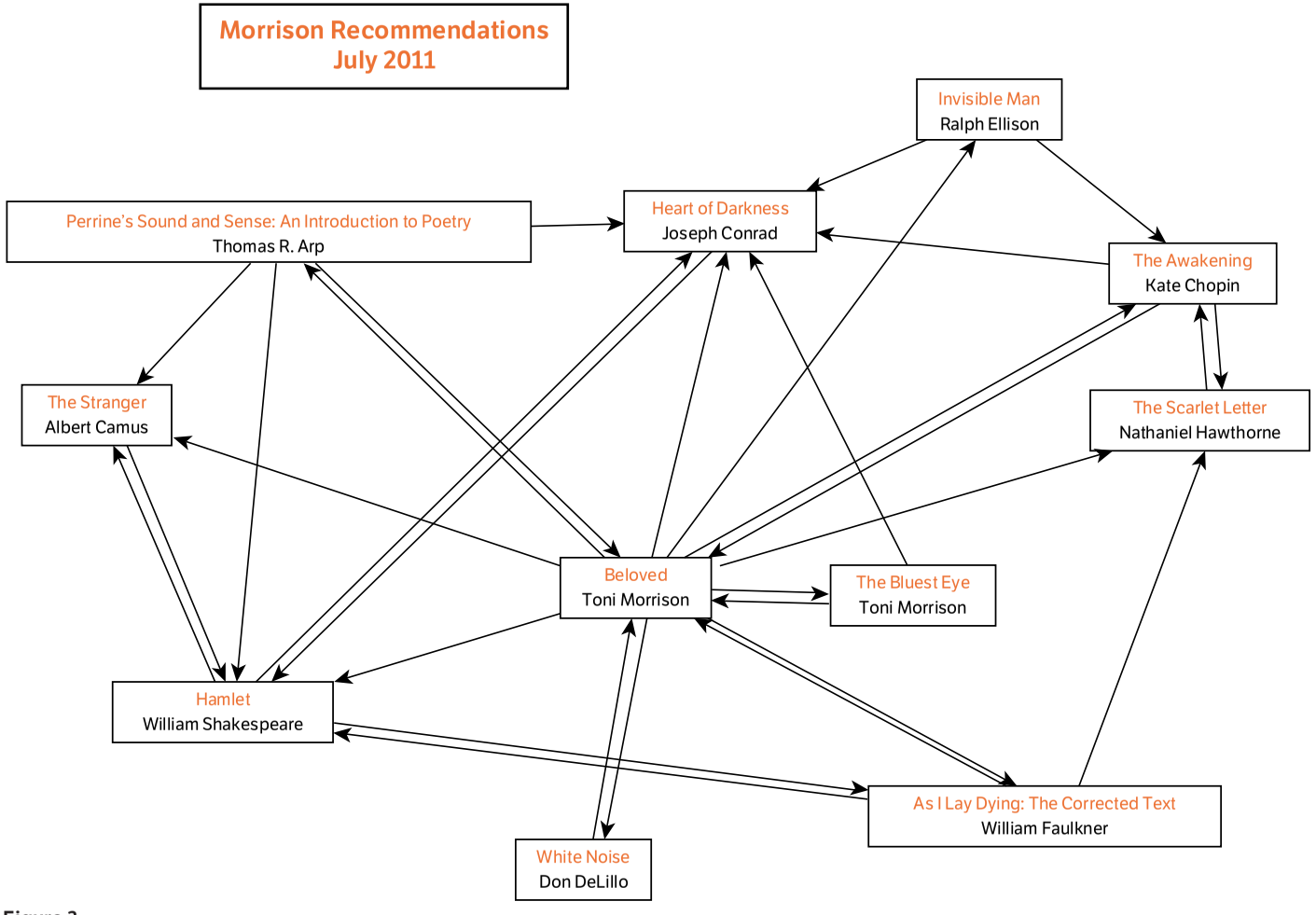
Morrison Recommendations
July 2011
Invisible Man
Ralph Ellison
Perrine's Sound and Sense: An Introduction to Poetry
Thomas R. Arp
Heart of Darkness
Joseph Conrad
The Awakening
Kate Chopin
The Stranger
Albert Camus
The Scarlet Letter
Nathaniel Hawthorne
Beloved
Toni Morrison
The Bluest Eye
Toni Morrison
Hamlet
William Shakespeare
As I Lay Dying: The Corrected Text
William Faulkner
White Noise
Don DeLillo

Figure 3

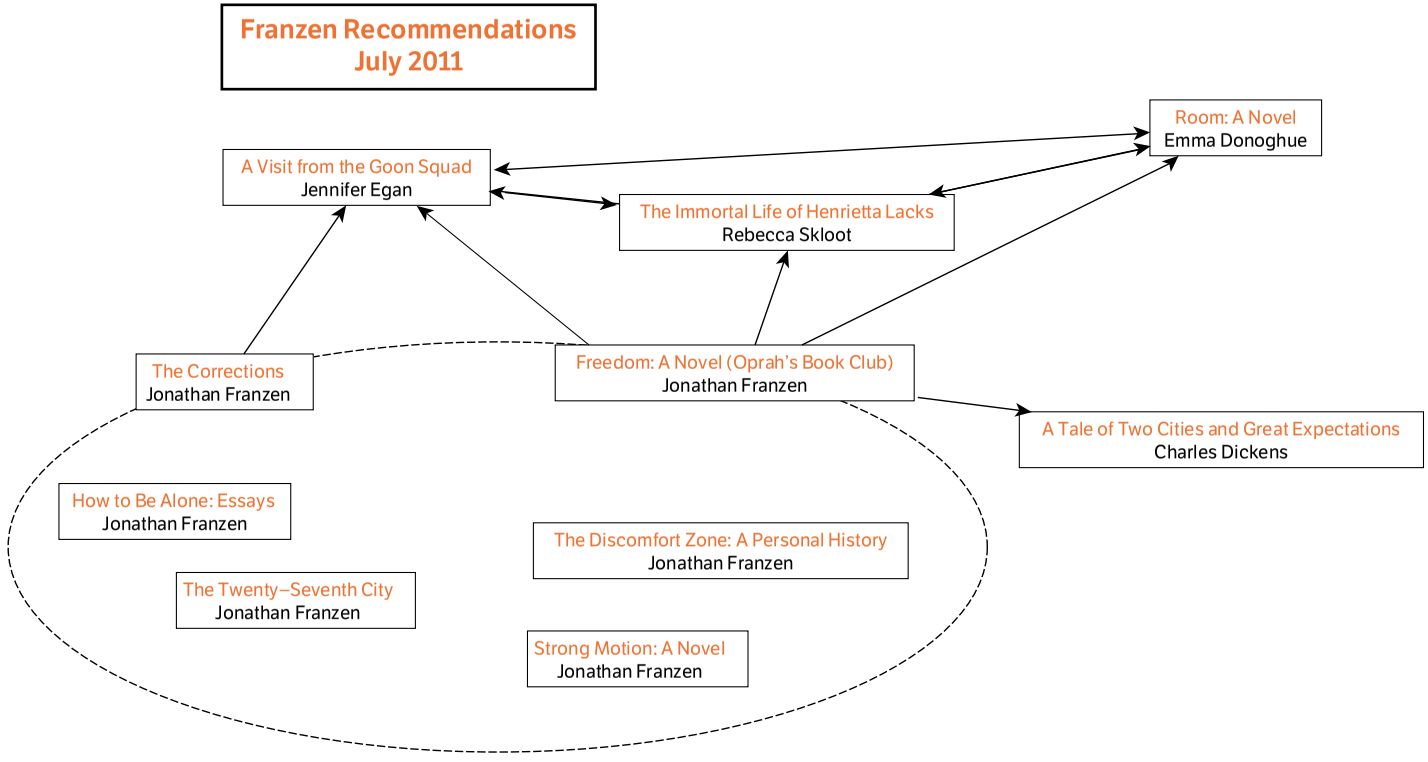
Franzen Recommendations
July 2011
Room: A Novel
Emma Donoghue
A Visit from the Goon Squad
Jennifer Egan
The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks
Rebecca Skloot
The Corrections
Jonathan Franzen
Freedom: A Novel (Oprah's Book Club)
Jonathan Franzen
A Tale of Two Cities and Great Expectations
Charles Dickens
How to Be Alone: Essays
Jonathan Franzen
The Discomfort Zone: A Personal History
Jonathan Franzen
The Twenty–Seventh City
Jonathan Franzen
Strong Motion: A Novel
Jonathan Franzen

Figure 4

2. Wallace is Different

Wallace was deeply attuned to his own commercial obligations and the material risks of authorship, airing his concerns about the subject a number of times to interviewers.[11] He also compared himself to his peers several times in print, but my analysis of Amazon recommendations below reveals how different he really was from others of his generation. The images that follow are based on the first ten things that are recommended by the "Customers Who Bought This Item Also Bought" panel on each book page, starting from *Infinite Jest* and fanning out from there to three levels of depth. These networks fluctuate over time, so Figure 1 is a synthesis of four different scans of Amazon recommendations conducted over a period from August 2010 to January 2011, showing only those texts that appeared consistently over this period.

The gray oval demarcates what I will call the Wallace subnet—an intricately interconnected zone of texts where buyers of one Wallace book are highly likely to purchase another. In fact on Amazon Wallace's recommendations almost invariably point browsers to more Wallace texts (including the criticism, reading guides and biographical material on the edge of the circle in Figure 1). This is very unusual. For comparison, consider a few contemporaries. As of July 2011, Richard Powers' *Gold Bug Variations* linked to seven external novels, including Wallace's *The Pale King* (Figure 2). Toni Morrison's *Beloved* linked to a very canonical nine external texts (Figure 3). Even Jonathan Franzen, a writer close to Wallace in both his life and literary concerns, linked to four non-Franzen texts in the same July "snapshot" (Figure 4). Powers and Morrison each exceed Wallace's cumulative six-month total with this single snapshot, and Franzen comes quite close as well. Franzen's count has been as high as nine by this measure, though in this snapshot he comes closest to matching Wallace's tight clustering of texts. Of these three control groups, the most striking is Morrison, a writer on a higher plane of critical acclaim. Her network here demonstrates how celebrated novels can enter into "super-canons" that transcend the authorship ties so closely associated with Wallace.[12] As a counter-example of a writer whose work quickly transcends the context of individual authorship, Morrison helps illustrate this simple point: Wallace is different.

Beyond the glaring absence of links, we can prove this point by taking a closer look at the external texts recommended from the Wallace subnet. These links reflect a cultural marketplace struggling to effectively contextualize Wallace. His idiosyncratic essays in *Consider the Lobster* were connected to V*olpone and Other Play*s by Ben Jonson in the August 2010 data, breaking the genre barrier and linking him to a historical period very different from his own. The connection may be inspired, drawing the two texts together into a synthetic analysis of satire and human observation: perhaps some summer school syllabus asked students to compare Wallace's "Big Red Sun" and Jonson's "Bartholemew Fair"

11 For instance, he brought up the subject of publishers' advance payments five times during his interview with David Lipsky (2, 14-15, 28, 110, 240-242).

12 My work on Morrison demonstrates how her fiction transcends an African American canonical space to connect to prominent works from other canonical groups (i.e. Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*) as well as a trans-historical "Great American Reading List" ranging from Hawthorne and Twain to Hemingway and Fitzgerald, not to mention Dostoyevsky and Joyce. "New Literary Cultures: Mapping The Digital Networks of Toni Morrison," forthcoming in *From Codex to Hypertext: Reading at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Anouk Lang (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012) .

as explorations of sexuality in public spectacles. Whatever the origins of this connection, it puts Wallace in rare company, underscoring both his distinction for being (linked to a highbrow, non-contemporary non-novel) and his cultural quirkiness (connecting him not to Shakespeare, for example, but a writer of second-order canonical status).

This combination of idiosyncrasy and non-standard links continues around the oval of the Wallace subnet as we consider the novels recommended from *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. This, perhaps Wallace's most avant-garde text, leads to classically postmodern writers William Gaddis and Thomas Pynchon. The link from one collection of innovative short stories to another is relatively unsurprising, though it invites browsers of the relatively mainstream Wallace to consider a text significantly farther down the long tail of literary obscurity. As with the Ben Jonson plays, the arrows pointing in towards Wallace here make more economic sense: Amazon's feedback loop with previous shoppers suggests that readers of renaissance satire or postmodern fiction might be sold on a young writer with similar things to offer. But the proposition is much harder to make in reverse, precisely because it involves a move from the relatively well-understood contemporary scene to the smaller market of the backlist, where editions can easily go out of print and the whole apparatus of professional reviews and interviews has much less sway. The arrows pointing out once again distinguish Wallace from his contemporaries, whom readers almost always link in more obvious ways to recent works and similar genre spaces.

The *Vineland* connection offers another kind of peculiarity, placing as it does one of Wallace's less approachable books in dialog with one of Pynchon's most approachable. In terms of thematic and temporal distance, this link makes much more taxonomic sense than the leap from Wallace to Jonson, but it also highlights the complex forces inflecting literary culture. *Vineland* seems to be connected to the wrong book here—its focus on media-saturated, television-steeped California life has a great deal in common with *Infinite Jest*. But once again the shopping carts have spoken, and its link with *Brief Interviews* is a double bond of mutual reinforcement. There are no direct mentions of *Vineland* in the customer reviews of *Brief Interviews of Hideous Men*, but Pynchon is a persistent presence. As one Amazon reviewer put it,

> Writers can be divided into two major types: poets and scientists. If poet-writers are your thing—guys like Henry Miller, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, or J.D. Salinger—stay away from this book. Wallace is a mad scientist, a manipulator of storytelling's double helix. Instead of going for the heart he opts for the brain. Some authors paint picures [sic]; this guy makes Rubik's cubes. He out-Pynchons Pynchon. (dgillz)

But why *Vineland*? As two relatively approachable books by postmodern authors, it's possible that this link represents the influence of college syllabi, where professors are often constrained to select authors' shorter works in order to cover more ground. One can easily imagine the "Introduction to Postwar American Fiction" course in which the two books would be assigned.

Far less mysterious are the links between *Vineland* and *Gravity's Rainbow* and the connection between the latter and *Infinite Jest*. These two books seem to have everything in common: sweeping encyclopedic novels widely regarded as their authors' major triumphs, they also address similar themes of individual agency, drug use, psychology and

technology with similar postmodern styles. I will discuss Wallace's larger relationship to Pynchon below in more detail, so for now let us focus instead on the other texts connected to *Infinite Jest*, which exist in surprising tension with one another. Wallace's magnum opus is the only node in his subnet to behave in what I would term a "normal" way, interacting extensively with books by other writers and contextualizing his work in larger historical and cultural zones. A preoccupation with genre writing also defines the rest of Infinite Jest's connections here, from Ellroy's postmodern crime fiction to Danielewski and Ellis's complex literary relationships with film. Indeed, perhaps the most surprising link of all here is Alice Hoffman's *Practical Magic*, a text that in other maps of this network immediately spirals off into a Hoffman universe with its own set of interior linkages among her novels, short stories, and young adult fiction. The novel that readers have aligned with *Infinite Jest* is *Practical Magic*, historical fiction with a magical twist that also brings it into dialog with Pynchon's often-fantastical *Gravity's Rainbow*. Yet this, too, is a strange book to put in contact with Wallace; its approachable style is more in line with Oprah's Book Club than Wallace's postmodernist cadre. The only strong connection seems to be through the thematic of film, a major subject for Wallace: *Practical Magic* is the only Hoffman novel to be adapted to the screen, in 1998. This would also explain its connection to *Sanctuary*, which was adapted as *The Story of Temple Drake* in 1933.

Wallace is different: this much we know for certain, based on his unusually introverted network and the unlikely ways in which that clump of texts does connect to outsiders. The rest, and in particular this speculative argument about the role of adaptation and the influence of film on literary production, is guesswork extrapolated from the data presented in Figure 1. The focus of his work, particularly *Infinite Jest*, on the relationship between film, television, and the individual is reflected not only in texts that address similar postmodern problems, such as *Vineland*, but on a meta-level with narratives of authors who grappled with the same problems in their lives. Cast in this light, Faulkner's *Sanctuary* acts as an anchor that has remained constant over the span of my analysis, grounding an evolving contextual Wallace canon of texts that illuminate the abusive, addictive relationships we have with media and the power those relationships wield over the production of literature itself.[13] Nevertheless the persistence of this theme reveals the significant point that Wallace is contextualized not just along genre lines but in very sophisticated ways, regardless of whether or not I am correct about the thematic details. In the next section I will build on another set of grounded observations to discuss the remarkable difference between this nuanced, wide-ranging contextualization of his work and the much more limited versions of postmodernism that professional reviewers employ to explain Wallace to their readers.

13 Faulkner disingenuously claimed he wrote *Sanctuary* as an attempt to make money by appealing to the lowest common denominator of reader appetites ("Faulkner Was Wrong About 'Sanctuary'").

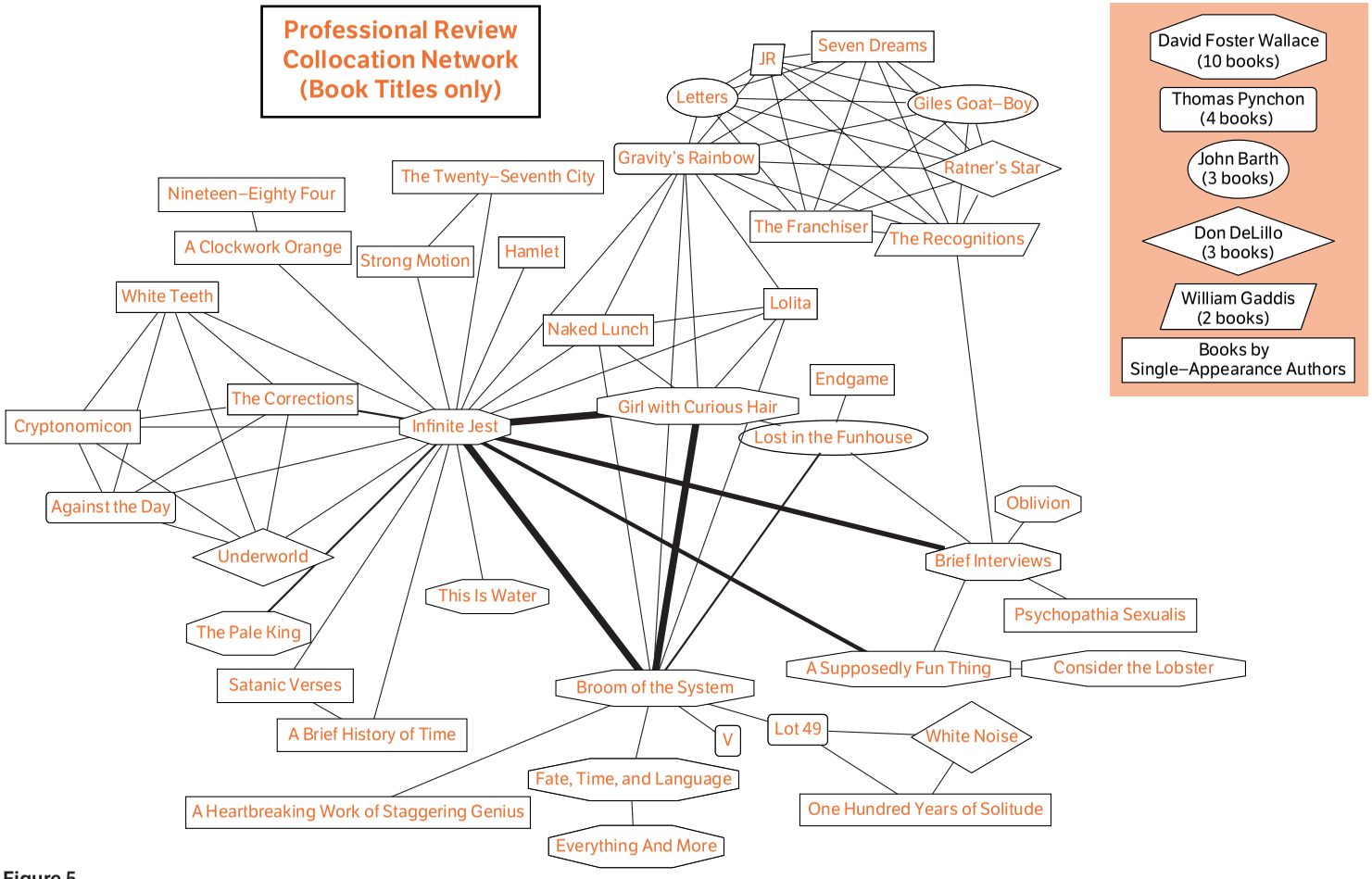
Professional Review
Collocation Network
(Book Titles only)
David Foster Wallace
(10 books)
Thomas Pynchon
(4 books)
John Barth
(3 books)
Don DeLillo
(3 books)
William Gaddis
(2 books)
Books by
Single–Appearance Authors
JR
Seven Dreams
Letters
Giles Goat–Boy
Gravity's Rainbow
Ratner's Star
The Twenty–Seventh City
Nineteen–Eighty Four
The Franchiser
The Recognitions
A Clockwork Orange
Strong Motion
Hamlet
White Teeth
Lolita
Naked Lunch
Endgame
The Corrections
Girl with Curious Hair
Cryptonomicon
Infinite Jest
Lost in the Funhouse
Oblivion
Against the Day
Underworld
Brief Interviews
This Is Water
Psychopathia Sexualis
The Pale King
A Supposedly Fun Thing
Consider the Lobster
Satanic Verses
Broom of the System
A Brief History of Time
Lot 49
White Noise
V
Fate, Time, and Language
A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius
One Hundred Years of Solitude
Everything And More

Figure 5

3. Wallace is Postmodern

Before most of us contemplate purchasing a novel we turn to reviews, and literary criticism continues to define Wallace's legacy through the publication of *Fate, Time, and Language* and *The Pale King* in 2010 and 2011, respectively.[14] These reviews impact sales of the latest title as well as the full body of work, adjusting the author's cultural position. This was an evaluative process that Wallace felt keenly, organized, as he described it in "E Pluribus Unam," by "the writerly generation that precedes us, reviews us, and designs our grad-school curricula" (*A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* 43). The interpretive dialog of author and critic seemed to haunt Wallace even at the early height of his fame, for instance in the way he kept returning to Sven Birkerts's review of *Infinite Jest* in the *Atlantic* over the course of his long interview with David Lipsky. Only when Birkerts had endorsed the novel did Wallace decree, "yeah, it felt done then" (253). The negative press cut just as deeply, especially Michiko Kakutani's mixed review in the *New York Times* (Lipsky 92).

Applying the same "distant reading" lens to professional reviews allows us to consider these interpretive acts as another body of work, a professional filter built up over years of book reviews and sustained critical engagements. In Figure 5, Wallace's books are connected to other texts through co-occurrences in professional reviews: book titles that appear together in the same paragraph of a particular review are linked, with multiple such co-occurrences indicated by thicker connecting lines. The peculiar connections we just observed in Amazon's recommendations networks are replaced here by a far more predictable set of canonical touchstones. Where Amazon opened strange pathways through Wallace, bridging Elizabethan drama and contemporary experimental fiction, the critics place him squarely in an intellectual tradition of Serious Young Men writing in the shadow of Serious Established Men.[15]

The temporal specificity of the diagram is striking: Wallace is linked primarily to those members of the "preceding writerly generation," the authors against whom he has been measured and contextualized throughout his career. In the eyes of professional reviewers, Wallace is triangulated between Pynchon, Barth, and DeLillo, postmodern not just stylistically but historically: nearly half of the books in Figure 5 not penned by Wallace himself were written before 1980. The historical and stylistic senses of the term are conflated here by critics who assign Wallace to a more abstract plane than his contemporaries, thereby distancing him from the present and once again emphasizing his difference by historicizing him with another generation of writers. This critical alignment with the past was often deliberate: Wallace felt his own literary conversation with Barth in *Girl with Curious Hair* was "simultaneously absolutely homicidal and a fawning homage," or exactly the kind of genetic relationship that orients the critical apparatus to literary history instead of the anxious present (Lipsky 226). Of course, even quick perusal of the reviews indicates that this interpretation is incomplete—Wallace's close attention to the heavily mediated present tense is widely recognized. But this fealty to literary history parallels the more imaginative market reactions we traced in Figure 1 that linked Wallace to some of the same postmodern authors as well as some older literary taproots, such as Jonson.

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14 This data was assembled before the publication of either of these texts, so the only "review" mentioning *The Pale King* included here is D. T. Max's *New Yorker* essay on Wallace.

15 This network is almost entirely male, with the exception of Zadie Smith (*White Teeth*). The persistent gender bias of literature perceived as "serious" is a deserving subject too complex to be taken on here.

DeLillo, Barth, Pynchon: of the three, one author truly dominates Wallace's contextual connections in this image, and his iconic novel acts as an anti-center, a competing nexus of prestige to Wallace's network. Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (connected to 14 books) is second only to *Infinite Jest* (17 books) in terms of prestige, and it works as a gateway to a relatively distinct subnet of classic high postmodernism. This cluster of encyclopedic novels is the result of a single paragraph in a *Chicago Tribune* review of *Infinite Jest* listing each of the texts in the subnet—Gaddis, Barth, Elkin, DeLillo, Vollmann—and concluding with the undisputed centerpiece:

> and especially Thomas Pynchon's magnificent reimagining of the Second World War as the defining event of this century's past and future ("Gravity's Rainbow")—all these daunting (and, to various degrees, brilliant) fictions underlie David Foster Wallace's blackly funny vision of America in the years just ahead. (Allen)

Allen's thoroughness might have exceeded that of his peers, but this critical frame is reiterated several times in Wallace's professional reviews, where his work is linked repeatedly to Pynchon's.[16] Throughout his career as a subject of professional book reviews, Wallace was described by and measured against *Gravity's Rainbow*, but that iconic comparison also sometimes led critics to places removed from Wallace himself, as the quote above implies through its almost overzealous delineation of a canon. The *Tribune* associates Wallace with "crowded, polyphonic, loose and baggy monsters of immediately previous postwar literary generations," but ultimately Pynchon "especially" is the yardstick against which his work is most consistently measured.

Of course, there are other postmodern texts all over the diagram. The books that share Pynchon's close alignment with Wallace tell another interesting story about their relative literary positions: *Naked Lunch, Lolita*, and *A Clockwork Orange* all connect directly to *Infinite Jest*, placing Wallace squarely within a tradition of writing that is both thematically and formally transgressive. Burroughs and Nabokov are also linked into a subnet of other Wallace fiction, suggesting their value as texts that reviewers have consistently referred to since the publication of Wallace's first novel, *The Broom of the System*. We can contrast this tight interweaving of novels with the more diffuse ways in which Wallace's non-fiction writing is treated: the cultural divide between fiction and non-fiction ends up enforced by professional reviews here, with *Consider the Lobster*, for example, associated only with its essayistic predecessor, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*. Remarkably, Wallace's postmodernity, and particularly his innovations as a stylist, are treated differently depending on genre. According to the critics, his essays and dispatches to magazines like *Harper's* set him apart, but his fiction draws him into comparison with Pynchon, Barth, and the rest.

When Wallace is considered in the context of his contemporaries, his work is still anchored to postmodern mainstays. In the small subnet to the left of *Infinite Jest* in Figure 5, reviewers engage younger writers but keep Pynchon and DeLillo's own most recent encyclopedic novels to hand: *Against the Day* and *Underworld.* Those other texts that are referenced bridge the gulf between "difficult" writing of the Pynchonian variety and more

16 The quote also marks another moment in the history of what Mark Grief, after James Wood, has called "big, ambitious novels" (Greif).

conventional literature: Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*, Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, and Neal Stephenson's *Cryptonomicon*. This subnet also depends on the comments of a single reviewer, and it's worth considering the retrospective Lev Grossman delivered in *Time* more closely:

> [I]t might be just as appropriate to deliver a eulogy for *Infinite Jest*—not to praise it but to bury it. After all, it did not win (nor was it a runner-up for) the National Book Award or the Pulitzer Prize or any other major award. It was hailed as the Novel of the Future, and in fact it kicked off a temporary revival of the maxi-novel, books like *Cryptonomicon* and *The Corrections* and *Underworld* and *White Teeth*. For a moment there, it felt as though novels simply had to get longer and longer to encompass the world's galloping complexity and interconnectedness. Then the fad faded. Now Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day* (1,085 pages) just seems self-indulgent and stuntish. (Grossman)

This small moment of critical action reveals both the power and the increasingly obvious limits of professional criticism. Grossman employs the list, that most artful and flexible tool for refining distinctions, and he uses it here to tar a major swath of fiction with the same brush. All of these authors are lumped together as "maxi-novel" acolytes trying to recapture the buzz of the ultimately unsuccessful *Infinite Jest*. The charge both draws these novels together in the reader's mind and establishes a chain of fading distinction: *Infinite Jest* inspired imitations, the worst of which is *Against the Day*. Of course my methodology ignores the leap Grossman makes in implying that *Underworld* and *White Teeth* were somehow causally connected to *Infinite Jest*, but I would argue this bug is also a feature: as consumers of criticism, we are trained to accept professional comparisons as valid whether or not they are positive (or legitimated).[17] They form a contextual background, just as the first novels a reviewer chooses to lump together in one analysis develop a mutual bond. Through paragraphs like the *Tribune* review and the one above, new subnets are born in the history of literary reception.

The larger diagram shows what we already know as literary consumers ourselves: Wallace's books continue to lead active social lives in spite of Grossman and other professional criticism. The most important part of a book review is usually not the critic's final verdict but the context and cultural logic used to get there, the work that Grossman shows here to prove his point about the "maxi-novel." The title of the piece and its hook as a 10th anniversary retrospective overshadow Grossman's argument. These professional reviews also come with limited shelf lives—the following week, *Time*'s book review slots were filled by other authors, and Grossman's status as a reviewer depends not on perfect judgment but consistency and timeliness. While few people will ever read his review again, except, ironically, as a blurb on a book jacket, thousands might continue to browse consumer reviews of *Infinite Jest* on Amazon, where the cultural logic of relevance is not ordered by temporality but by community.

17 This is another version of what Guillory calls the "synecdochic list which is the syllabus"—whether the syllabus positions two texts as antagonistic or complementary, they are nevertheless situated within the same cultural frame (34).

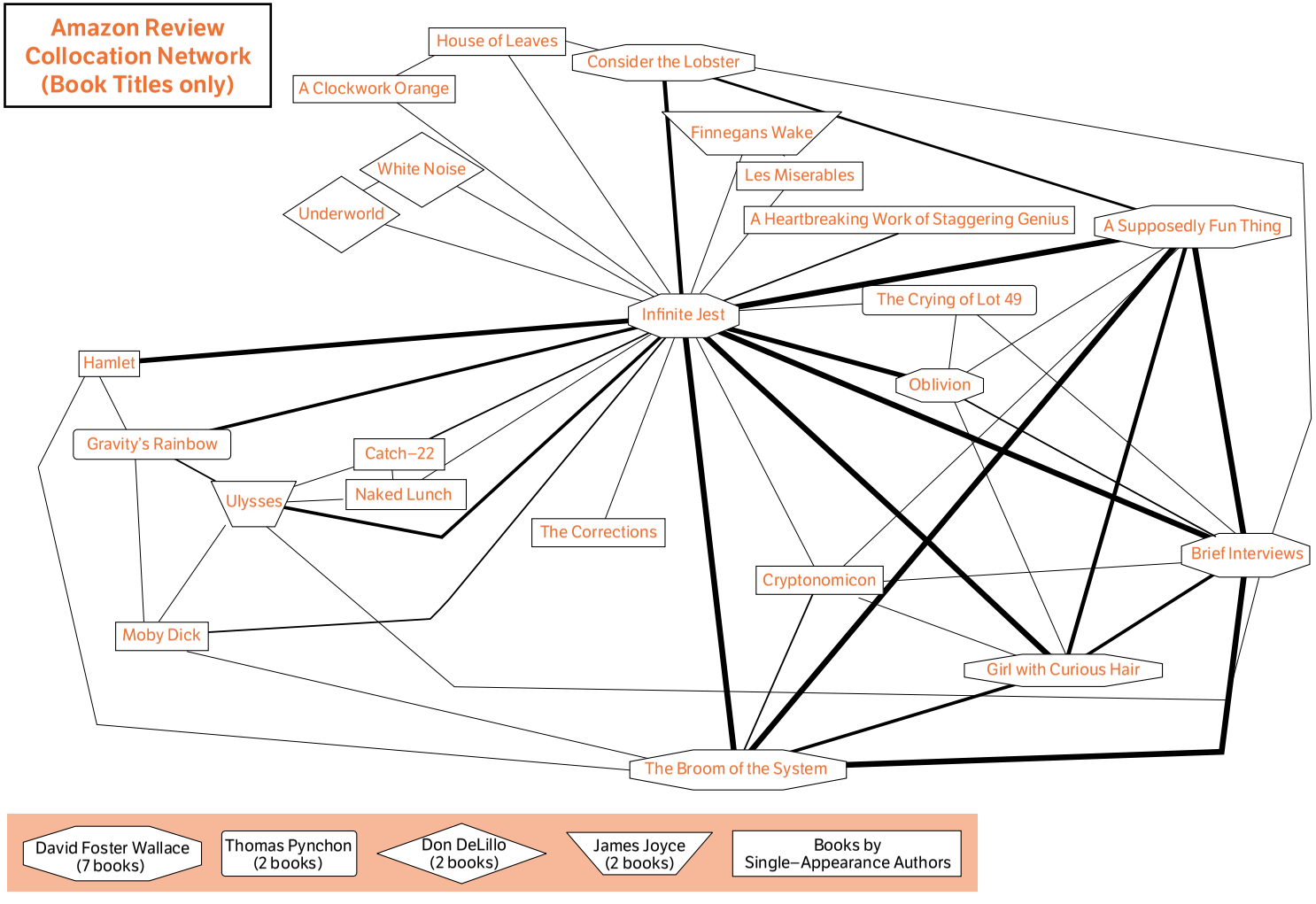
Amazon Review Collocation Network (Book Titles only)
House of Leaves
Consider the Lobster
A Clockwork Orange
Finnegans Wake
White Noise
Les Miserables
Underworld
A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius
A Supposedly Fun Thing
Infinite Jest
The Crying of Lot 49
Hamlet
Oblivion
Gravity's Rainbow
Catch–22
Ulysses
Naked Lunch
The Corrections
Brief Interviews
Cryptonomicon
Moby Dick
Girl with Curious Hair
The Broom of the System
David Foster Wallace (7 books)
Thomas Pynchon (2 books)
Don DeLillo (2 books)
James Joyce (2 books)
Books by Single–Appearance Authors

Figure 6

4. Wallace is Integral

At first glance, the same methodology of collocated nodes seems to have created a very similar network map for consumer reviews of Wallace's work on Amazon (Figure 6; here only books mentioned at least twice are shown). We see many of the same postmodern texts, but where the professional critics clearly peg Wallace as an acolyte in dialog with Pynchon, Barth, and DeLillo, his everyday readers are much more expansive with their comparisons, bringing *Ulysses, Moby Dick,* and even *Les Miserables* into the conversation. A wider canonical lens that compares Wallace's texts to what we might call Great Books or familiar literary touchstones supersedes those encyclopedic novels from the 1960s to the 1980s. At the same time, Wallace's distinction from his contemporaries is even more pronounced here, suggesting once again that readers see him more in the context of canonical American literature and less in light of his generational peers. This diagram reflects the extent to which Wallace inspired his readers to integrate his work into their literary lives, encouraging them to think of him not as a Generation X writer but as an aspiring member of a timeless cadre.

In prestige terms Wallace plays a much more prominent role, in part because of the strong links among his own books. In Figure 6, two of the top four nodes in the network were by other authors (by decreasing prestige rank: *Infinite Jest*, *Gravity's Rainbow*, *The Broom of the System, The Recognitions*), and they were all novels. Amazon reviewers, by contrast, are much more interested in Wallace (their top four: *Infinite Jest*, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* and *The Broom of the System*). Even though consumer reviews are much more closely tied to their subjects via paratext (the surrounding Amazon layouts are always intended to draw the eye back to the book title and cover image), their authors mention Wallace's books far more often than professional reviewers did. This reinforces the evidence we saw in Amazon recommendations—Wallace leads on to more Wallace for most readers—but this network is distinct from both the purchase-driven recommendation network, where Wallace was a very distinct subnet, and the professional review network, where he mingled with the postmodernists. There is a balance here between a strong affinity to Wallace in his own right and a diverse contextual network suggesting that readers are working to interpret him on a broader plane. More adventurous than professional critics, these readers cross genre boundaries and compare his fiction and non-fiction alike to an idiosyncratic constellation of literature, drawing together a group of writers who generally share Wallace's concern with capturing the fragmentary nature of contemporary human experience.

As we have already seen, books are associated together in reviews for many reasons. Using some excerpts from Amazon reviews to support my case, I argue here that Wallace establishes a particular kind of challenge-based relationship with many of his readers. The data bears out the dual inflections of *integral* that I began with: the advancement of individual consciousness and the formation of a social or group affinity. The productive difficulty that Wallace creates for his readers has its roots in the postmodern, but everyday readers interpret it as a form of realism instead of a literary exercise, taking his style as a window onto the contemporary. His work is "integral," then, because it presents conflicting, non-linear narratives and then asks readers to stitch those elements into a multidimensional whole. As one reviewer puts it:

> I for one like the fact that he doesn't feel the need to spell everything out for the reader and makes one mull over his story and possibly even go back and piece together little fragments of seemingly inconsequential lines of dialogue and ambiguous scenes…I for one like things that remind me that I have a brain and force me to exercise this wonderful organ. Infinite Jest is quite a workout for the brain indeed. (Dr. Gonzo)

For some readers, Wallace's influence on the brain offers an explicit stance against the kind of interpretation practiced by the professionals: "Ignore the literary critics and meta-reviews—just indulge in this dystopian world of tennis, drugs, and television that shines the harsh light on how ridiculous we all are. Your brain will expand and your heart will open to the world—it's that kind of a book" (sternj). Amazon reviewers discuss individual experiences, but they are also addressing a very specific audience, a community that has formed around Wallace's work and is distinctly amateur, not caught up in the professional literary game.

This network reveals how Wallace's readers pursue the "workout for the brain," how they exhort each other and, at times, explicitly seek to inform one another's reading. "[Wallace's] concerns are political, spiritual, cultural, and—to me, at least—deeply personal… like *Ulysses* [*Infinite Jest*] becomes more accessible, touching, and funny as you grow accustomed to it" ("The Greatest American Novel"). Reviewers frequently draw in other canonical texts either to establish a literary connection with their peers or to mark his inferiority with a familiar yardstick. The best argument for this integral impulse is the way in which Wallace's Amazon readers consistently connect his work, particularly *Infinite Jest*, to *Hamlet*. Linking Hal Incandenza to Prince Hamlet highlights Wallace's metaphysical, epistemological, and canonical aspirations as an artist, his desire to interpret the burdens of mortality with an intense focus on language. Consider this reading narrative:

> Then, as I sat looking dully at the last page of the book, it ocurred [sic] to me. This is the last page, but not the end of the story. I had read the story's conclusion a month before, when I first began reading the book. So I went back and started reading again, and my jaw dropped open in awe of the true genius of this book. Sentences that had seemed insignificant or inconsequential when I first began reading were infused with new meaning, providing me with the conclusion to the story, cleverly hinted at by the books [sic] title, which refers to the graveyard scene in *Hamlet*. ("Thinking About Infinity")

This reviewer shares a personal integrative experience, and in doing so offers that experience to others, glossing *Infinite Jest*'s title and explaining his own path to discovering "the true genius of this book."

Hamlet haunts *Infinite Jest* from its title to its anti-heroes, but is rarely mentioned by credentialed book reviewers, for whom it is a relatively superficial feature of a complex novel with inconclusive plots set in a bizarre near-future world, all of which need to be described and contextualized with the book's postmodern antecedents. Everyday readers, however, put *Hamlet* into service as a narratological skeleton key that promises to unlock a basic structure and purpose to *Infinite Jest*'s disjointed storylines: "Modern (post-modern) Hamlet. In structure as well as theme" (Gimpel the Fool). Readers identify Wallace's references to the play, quoting the "infinite jest" line, identifying Hal's debt to Hamlet and at times

making sophisticated arguments about the two: "We are all dying to give our lives away to something, maybe.' That dangling Hamlet-like doubt—that 'maybe'—calls into question not the quest but its effects—the consequences of surrendering oneself, of being swept away that await the wandering souls at the end of their journey" (Marfin).

Interpretations like these are generative, producing a genuine literary dialog among reviewers as they do the "work," integrating Wallace into a community and establishing boundaries and classifications of distinction. As both a subtext in need of glossing and a literary comparison, *Hamlet* works as an intertextual space that allows Wallace readers to create new forms of conversation. Another *Infinite Jest* reviewer, Jake Wilson, adopts a more pedagogical route, the kind of opening one might imagine in a college lecture: "In the opening two words of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (from which *Infinite Jest* derives its title) Bernardo cries Who's there? having seen the ghost of a tragedy; and Wallace answers in the first two words of this epic novel—I am" (Wilson). Wilson moves from this instructive tone into a gradually more intimate voice, closing with "Rest In Peace, DFW—you accomplished more with this one book than most writers ever even imagine." The line is both more poignant and commercial because of Wilson's sign-off in the review, where he offers a link to his own self-published novel. Effectively, Wilson has turned the review into a dialog with both the Shakespearean past and the literary present, creating a particular kind of public intimacy in the process as he contributes to a wider *Infinite Jest* conversation and builds his own link to Wallace.

These readers often embrace the emotional side of this interpretive work in ways that critics never would, and in doing so become characters themselves at the heart of critical comparisons: "It's not that I dislike long or annotated books (I'd just finished the Northwestern University's heavily annotated *Moby Dick* and loved it!), but this almost pointless tome pained me to read in a way not felt since being assigned *The Yearling* in school" ("The Fine Line Between Genius and Inanity (Sic.)."). Wallace is academic in a bad way, reminding the reader of a hated school assignment, yet the review hastens to assure us that *Infinite Jest*'s obviously learned qualities—its length and intimidating footnotes—did not color the decision. Wallace's novel is ranked against Melville's and found wanting, but like *Time*'s Grossman, the reviewer still places them on the same list, and in both cases the reader is confronted with the fact of the comparison as well as its tone. A parenthetical reference establishes Wallace's categorical link to Melville and the perceived difference between the two, once again literally, grammatically writing the reader into the critical act of distinction. This reviewer closes on another intensely personal note: "One Amazon.com reviewer mentioned breaking Wallace's legs. That seems an extreem [sic] and somewhat excessive exercise. I would limit my ministrations to his writing hand."

Such deep involvement becomes familiar, a kind of cliché:

> It's like reading Melville's *Moby Dick*, Joyce's *Ulysses* or Pychon's [sic] *Gravity's Rainbow*. If you are a serious contemporary/postmodern/whatever reader or writer you must read it. Whatever time it takes. Homework. Don't skip the footnotes. You will not regret it. You'll laugh/cry/it will become you/etc. *Infinite Jest* is the book I recommend when I am talking to people who REALLY READ BOOKS" (Roberti).

Here the integral, educational impulse is met head-on: "Homework. Don't skip the footnotes." The breezy, slash-concatenated lists belie the earnest imperatives of the review and its elevation of Wallace into a pantheon of encyclopedic novelists. Once again the reviewer is in the middle of the process of integration, calling on others to join the ranks of those who "REALLY READ BOOKS." The lines of reference connecting books in Figure 6 exemplify this process of public criticism as it has played out over hundreds of Amazon reviews. In a very real sense, it shows the work of everyday readers as they interpret Wallace and pull him into contact with a popular literary sphere.

To summarize, Wallace occupies a unique position in contemporary literature. His is a distinct literary brand, a *different* author whose style and quirkiness quickly set him apart from his peers in the marketplace. His writing earned critical acclaim for the skill with which he engaged the *postmodern*, though his success among professional reviewers proved only a part of the enthusiastic popular reception that spawned groups like the collective reading and discussion website Infinite Summer. He was *integral* in three ways, encouraging his readers to reconstruct the real through his fragmentary prose, getting them to share that experience collectively, and making his own integral leap, leading readers to feel they have "spen[t] time inside his beautiful poetry of a brain" (sternj). These three keywords are all ultimately questions of style, and Wallace was unflagging in his efforts to make his writing a transparent reflection of the perceived contemporary as well as a finely polished instrument for reflecting the styles of others.

5. Style and Literary Afterlives

I'd like to close by recasting my definition of integral and considering more deeply the question of style. Over four hundred readers have found *Infinite Jest* sufficiently energizing to write a review of the novel on Amazon, and their verdict emphatically positions the book in a transhistorical American context that encompasses postmodernism and expands beyond it, considering Wallace as a singular stylist, crafter of literary puzzles, and "genius." This work of engaged reception inspires many readers to cultivate new kinds of awareness and to share it with a community. In the end, the strange canon that they construct around Wallace, from Victor Hugo to Joseph Heller, is a testament to his success in sustaining reading engagement and inspiring emotional investment. To call Wallace's fiction "integral," then, only makes sense in the context of this public readership, which performs the actual work of building his infinite jests into a wider system of cultural meaning.[18] This is the leap that so concerned Wallace himself, the transition from individual to group, from monad to collective, not just in the abstract but in his particular case as a writer and a human being. His self-questioning entertainments demand challenging acts of reading and interpretation, but they also lead readers to consider the boundaries of personal agency, perception, and mediation that define our cultural landscape. We have caught glimpses of Wallace reflected in the connections readers have made in the graphs above, but what are the literary tools by which Wallace inspires and perhaps directs this kind of readerly work?

18 Wallace approaches this claim explicitly in *The Pale King* when he claims "the various ways some of the forthcoming §s have had to be distorted, depersonalized, polyphonized, or otherwise jazzed up…[have] ended up being integral to the book's whole project" (*The Pale King* 72).

The source of the networks we have explored above is Wallace's prose itself as interpreted through the medium of hundreds of intermediary readers. If we follow these empirically grounded signs back into the actual fiction, we move back into the subjective space of literary critique. Since these data offer conclusions which I think are best interpreted as stylistic claims, it is worth considering how Wallace evokes writers like Shakespeare, Pynchon and Joyce (to name his most frequent links in professional and Amazon networks). Neither group of reviewers makes a habit of supporting their claims with direct textual evidence, so while stylistic traits are often identified in these reviews (i.e. Wallace's semantically fraught, Pynchonesque character names), it is up to me to select some exemplary passages. I offer the following linkages not as evidence of the same empirical status as aggregated reviews, but as interpretive possibilities.

Reviewers frequently discuss *Infinite Jest* and *Hamlet* together through the focal point of Hal Incandenza. Taking the lead from the review quoted above that suggested *Infinite Jest*'s opening line answered *Hamlet*'s opening question, I draw the following passage from Hal's dramatic failure to communicate with his interviewers at the University of Arizona. Like Hamlet, he struggles with existential questions but cannot make himself understood. The entire dialog abruptly puts readers in the position of evaluating unreliable narrators, forced to rationalize radically different versions of the same event, beginning the work of reading that will be asked of them throughout the novel to come.

> But it transcends the mechanics. I'm not a machine. I feel and believe. I have opinions. Some of them are interesting. I could, if you'd let me, talk and talk. Let's talk about anything....I'm not just a creātus, manufactured, conditioned, bred for a function....I am not what you see and hear. (12-3)

Wallace channels Hamlet's existential dread into a vignette even more pointedly focused on language and perceptions of madness than Shakespeare's original. This juxtaposition of speech and interior monolog further muddies the epistemological waters at the very outset, when a reader most needs to get her bearings in this new fictional world.

Attention to language also drives readers to interpret Wallace's fondness for Pynchon. They point to his scientific and especially mathematical jargon, his obvious thrill in recondite vocabulary and his fondness for bizarre and comic names: James Orin Incandenza Sr.; Office of Unspecified Services; Organization of North American Nations; Reeves Mainwaring. There is one comic set-piece at the heart of *Infinite Jest*, a fan favorite that clearly seems to echo some of Pynchon's more extravagant humorous interludes in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Wallace forges this connection through the acronyms and political satire of Eschaton, a game where players simulate nuclear war by lobbing tennis balls:

> Warheads can be launched independently or packed into an intricately knotted athletic supporter designed to open out in midflight and release Multiple Independent Reentry Vehicles—MIRVS. MIRVs, being a profligate use of a Combatant's available megatonnage, tend to get used only if a game of Eschaton metastasizes from a controlled set of Spasm Exchanges—SPASEX—to an all-out apocalyptic series of punishing Strikes Against Civilian Populations—SACPOP. (324)

This Pynchonesque comedic style inspires something beyond mere devotion in Wallace's readers. As Matt Earp relates on the Infinite Summer website, his stage adaptation

of *Infinite Jest* featured Eschaton prominently in a very serious, Wallace-like engagement with the absurd:

> My genius props designer not only makes tennis balls drop from the ceiling during Eschaton, but makes it snow in the theater later in the play, and a lot of other magic....The whole cast shows up at 6AM to liberate the bleachers from a block of snow, bleachers that eventually become the audience seats....The staff hated us. The audience loved us, both those who've read the book and those that haven't. We finish the play. We have a ridiculous cast party, one of the stage runners singes her eyebrows off on a flaming 151 shot, and we burn the set plans outside in the snow. (Earp)

The intensity of these interactions reflects the tight scrutiny that Wallace imposed on contemporary cognitive experience. As Dave Eggers outlined in his introduction to *Infinite Jest*: "Wallace is a different sort of madman...heading ever-inward" (xiii). Much of the novel addressed the moments at which this intense interiority broke radically with the exterior world, when the life of the mind and the experiences of the body diverged completely, as in Hal's disastrous interview at the opening of the novel. In *The Pale King* Wallace's fondness for the absurd extends itself more clearly to the supernatural, and novelist Tom McCarthy saw another connective thread holding Wallace and Pynchon together in his review:

> There's a lot of Pynchon in *The Pale King*, in fact: the I.R.S.'s deployment of agents gifted with psychic powers, its harnessing of the occult for political ends, surely owe something to the White Visitation research facility in *Gravity's Rainbow*. (McCarthy)[19]

These stylistic experiments at the edge of self-perception reached their greatest height in *The Pale King*, when Wallace moved beyond distraction to the fundamental modern discontent of boredom. Here is Lane Dean, a mind in a fugue state experiencing "the sensation of a great type of hole or emptiness falling through him and continuing to fall and never hitting the floor" (*The Pale King* 378). The psychological intensity of this style combines the kinetic energy of Joyce's "Aeolus" chapter with the inescapable interiority of Proust. In a chapter first excerpted in *The New Yorker*, Dean ricochets between reality, a beach visualization exercise designed to combat boredom, and thoughts of suicide:

> The rubber made the pinkie's tip all damp and pale beneath it. Unable to sit still at home, unable to look at anything for more than a second or two. The beach now had solid cement instead of sand and the water was gray and barely moved, just quivered a little, like Jell-O that's almost set. Unbidden came ways to kill himself with Jell-O. Lane Dean tried to control the rate of his heartbeat. He wondered if with enough practice and concentration you could stop your heart at will the same way you hold your breath—like this right here. (*The Pale King* 380)

As Wallace's editor noted, this new kind of impossibility that Wallace sought to decode was "the task that is almost the opposite of how fiction works...leaving out the things that are not of much interest" (Max 57). Here Wallace aims for a direct narration reminiscent of *Ulysses*. But where Daedalus and Bloom's interior monologues were constantly inter-

19 This review and most other reviews on *The Pale King* were not included in my statistical analysis, though McCarthy follows form here by going on to link Wallace to Melville as well as Pynchon.

rupted by the bustle of urban Dublin, Dean Jr. struggles with relentless boredom—the almost purely interior cacophony of a mind edrowning in its own stupefaction.

A more direct comparison might be to certain passages of *Infinite Jest*, a novel readers are far more likely to link to Joyce. Those who mention Joyce in their reviews often do so as a basic yardstick of twentieth century fiction, but when the reference is more pointed, they see Wallace using wordplay, narrative puzzles and stream-of-consciousness reminiscent of *Ulysses*. The novel's most Joycean main character must be Don Gately, with his interior monologs, struggles with addiction and peregrinations around the Boston area:

> Gately, who's been on live-in Staff here four months now, believes Charlotte Treat's devotion to needlepoint is suspect. All those needles. In and out of all that thin sterile-white cotton stretched drum-tight in its round frame. The needle makes a kind of thud and squeak when it goes in the cloth. It's not much like the soundless pop and slide of a real cook-and-shoot. But still. She takes such great care. (275)

The synaesthetic attendance to sound, sight and visceral perception are all Joycean hallmarks, drawn together here around Wallace's driving theme of addiction. Like Leopold Bloom, Gately's mental journeys always lead us back to the question of the self in the world, to the meniscus of language and experience.

The handful of examples in this section by no means constitute a definitive stylistic cartography, but rather a set of thumbnail sketches that trace moments where Wallace seems to inflect his style to encourage comparison. If Wallace the literary figure lives on, growing and changing, in these book reviews, shadows of Shakespeare, Pynchon and Joyce thrive with him. As literary afterlives flourish, they begin to merge together into new kinds of transhistorical lists: the canon, the syllabus and the homage. *Ulysses*, as Joyce intended, will always be read with a copy of *The Odyssey* on the shelf, just as *White Teeth* will never leave *Howard's End* entirely behind. Wallace's debts to the authors in his literary networks are less explicit, and the connections drawn between them by readers tend to be general claims about stylistic connection. The ongoing conversations of reception will continue to pull Wallace into the company of writers beyond his contemporary sphere, from the postmodernists to Ben Jonson.

But of course the observer changes everything, and Wallace's position in these constellations will continue to evolve. As he delightedly gawped at the Illinois State Fair in 1994, Wallace shared his idiomatic delight at the complexity of his experience: "This could be integral" (*A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* 102). The curve of artistic fame that stretched forward from that moment to the present does not yet adequately define "Wallace" the literary figure. His role as pith-helmeted anthropological reporter on our culture of infinite connection is just entering its third act. Wallace is special for this dedication to objectively capturing the subjective, which comes to the same thing as his unflinching efforts to address the loneliness of mediation. We will remember Wallace because his fiction lays bare the philosophical foundations of cultural attention, encouraging his audience to rethink their most basic literary acts: reading, contextualizing, enjoying, and judging. As we practice these exercises for the reader on his own body of work, we define new forms of literary culture that amplify and consecrate the voice of the audience. Each review and rating is an act of collective critical trust and another shared experience in which we, and Wallace, become ourselves.

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