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Just Look At That

A personal and rhetorical analysis of non-traditional Internet journalism.

By Wilson Platt

Advisor: Professor Hsu

A Term

Presented to the Faculty of the English Department

Vassar College

A note to the reader: What you are about to read is a personal and rhetorical analysis of a certain brand of writing that has manifested itself, mostly, in Internet journalism. The essay is intended to portray this form by not only discussing it, but embodying it as well. This piece was meant to be read on the Internet. So, if you hold a paper copy in your hand, it is important to understand that what you're holding is in fact incomplete. In the paper copy you miss the embedded hyperlinks and Grantland style side-notes that are so crucial to the imitation of this particular form of writing. With that said, the content does not differ, just the viewing experience. Enjoy.

Part 1

I was 21, laying on a motel bed struggling to ignore a paralyzing disappointment, when I had this idea. To be more precise, I was on a bed in a motel outside Charlotte,

NC, in the middle of a painfully mediocre road trip when I had this idea. And when I had this idea, I thought maybe it would change the world.

I was at home for the summer when Sarah had called to invite me on the journey from Dallas to our college in Poughkeepsie, NY¹. At home (in the emotional sense of the word, not the physical) I think we're our most comfortable, most optimistic, and when I got the invitation, and I couldn't imagine it not being special. Sure, Sarah and I had never really gotten along very well in large doses of time. And maybe we had entirely different outlooks on the world, and now that I'm thinking about it, dispositions too -- but that only cements the fact that everything would work out, right? That's just what happens on things like this, *it's crazy the things that bring people together*. I thought about it for a couple days, and finally said yes. 'Lets see, I'm 21... with the opportunity to go on a cross country roadtrip... why not?' If you've never been on a long road trip before I bet you would've said the same thing. If you have, well maybe you can see where this is going.

By the second stretch of four hours our car ride had boiled down to long stretches of silence after I gave up trying to make conversation. The rest of the trip was a lot of staring out the window. Which, I guess, wasn't really what I had in mind.

By the time we got to that motel in Charlotte I had decided that Sarah maybe hated me, but that didn't mean I couldn't enjoy the road trip, the sites and spectacles

¹Home being Seattle, not Dallas, just to be clear. Because if you're from Seattle you know anyone from seattle always needs to be very clear where they're from. But not because we're bragging. We're just proud. Psych we're bragging. I'm from Seattle and it's the best.

and new experiences, that went with it. It wasn't going to be special, sure, but it could still be really cool. So I was in a decent mood that night. My friend/roadtrip partner Sarah was in the shower and I was feeling incredibly grateful for a silence that didn't feel tense, when a friend texted me about an article that had just appeared on Grantland.com. *Best Song of the Millennium, Round 2: Results Released, Website Left in Flames*. I [read](#) it and loved it, and I told her so. The idea (a sports and pop culture comboness of march madness bracket inspired contest for best song of the millenium (since 2000)), the writing (funny, blatantly subjective, personal, and relatable), and most of all, the general feeling (everyone in the staff was involved with it, and everyone was outrageously passionate about the results) it was all just a perfect storm of what made this site so great for us. We got to talking² about the site as a whole, how all their authors had distinctly different voices and writing styles, and yet they all adhered to this sort of seemingly unspoken code: write to, the readers, directly to the readers, and write for the readers, but also for yourselves.

Which could mean a whole lot of things, but regardless of what it actually meant, I was in love with it. A year ago I used to read their father-site, ESPN.com, three, four, five, sometimes even ten times a day. That August night in Charlotte I realized that I was reading this sports and pop culture spinoff almost exclusively. It wasn't a change in interest, I still cared about the same genre (sports), it was just... once I read that kind of writing, whatever it was giving me, eventually ESPN seemed bland in comparison. It was like the feeling you get when you go do something again, because since the first time you

² 'Talking' I guess, because obviously we're texting.

did it was amazing and it just gets built up in your mind to the point that finally you go again and then you have that feeling of realization like ‘oh... this was just a confluence of events, by itself it’s not that cool’. It was kind of like that.

But that article, that shared moment of realizing how great it was and how great the site as a whole was, was, more than anything, everything I thought this road trip might be, *special*.

That night was the first time I thought to myself -- about the kind of writing going on at the site -- *wait... what is this?*

A week later I came back to school convinced that Grantland, and the kind of writing on the site, was entirely unique. *Revolutionary*. But in fact, it was far from it.

In the 1960’s traditional journalism became divided by what Tom Wolfe would eventually refer to, in his book of the same name, as ‘New Journalism’. A response to entrenched authority structures that limited commentary on ‘the soul of man’ to novelists (Wolfe, 152), the New Journalism³ challenged traditional journalism’s concepts of ‘objectivity’ and promoted different kind of experiential perspective. It relaxed levels of language and placed the author explicitly in the story as viewer. Exemplified in classics like George Plimpton’s *Paper Lion*, Hunter Thompson’s *Hell’s Angel’s*, Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* and more, this kind of new journalism was distinct in that it saw writers

³ Wolfe actually writes that he has ‘no idea who coined the term’, and that he’s ‘never even liked the term’, comparing it to other terms with New at the front and categorizing them as the ‘garbage barge’. So, you know, it makes perfect sense that he would name his book the same thing/he basically named his book ‘the garbage barge’ (152.)

apply fiction techniques⁴ to traditional reporting (Wolfe, 153).

But New Journalism was often met with hostility among traditional critics, and to Wolfe, it was a criticism that was reminiscent of the early reception to realistic novels in England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (159). He writes, “The very same objections that greeted the novel [...] were starting to greet the New Journalism. In each case the new form is seen as ‘superficial,’ ‘ephemeral,’ ‘mere entertainment,’ ‘morally irresponsible’” (159). Beyond that, critics like Pauline Kael argued that the New Journalism left the reader at an intellectual and emotional dead end, that it left readers, “not knowing how to feel about it except to be excited about it [...] it leaves them no basis at all for evaluating the material, and ultimately it simply means that the writing has to go from one charge to the next” (159). Wolfe disagreed, declaring that all the New Journalists he was aware of went above and beyond, sometimes even too far, in an effort to analyze and evaluate their material (159). He pointed to the similarities between the critiques now and the critiques of the early realistic novel as a way of showing how shortsighted they were (159). And, based on the popularity and influence of New Journalist writers during the period, and years after it ended, it seems like he was probably right. Regardless of criticism, for a little over ten years after Wolfe published his book on the subject, the New Journalism was a symbol of something different, a new kind of relationship between author, reader, and experience. It faded away in the early eighties, leaving a legacy but no concrete product (Boynton).

Now, thirty years after that, the idea of traditional journalism continues to be

⁴ Wolfe broke down these techniques into four particular sections, scene by scene construction, dialogue, the third person, and status details (158)

attacked in different ways. The pervasive use of the Internet has given way to a slew of amateur journalism — Facebook, blogs, Twitter⁵ etc., which are not only outlets for these amateurs, but also for readers. The result is an explosion in the sheer variety of writing the average user sees on a day to day basis while simultaneously fostering a change in our conception of both who is qualified to tell us ‘news’ and whose opinions matter.

Still, for a long time, the biggest internet journalism sites were just online versions, or models, of print publications (think nytimes.com, or early AOL’s similarity to newspapers), publications that very much stayed within these traditional journalistic tendencies. But as the popularity of these blogs and alternate forms of internet journalism have increased, the most popular web sites have shifted, with sites that have no print publication and a non-traditional voice and/or purpose and/or structure — like Gawker — now seeing over a hundred million unique visitors in a month (Jim Romanesko). These sites also have well paid writers that write in an entirely different way than ‘traditional’ forms mandate. And it’s this ‘different’ way that I was so drawn to. This is what I discovered when I returned back to my college and started researching more.

Since that night in the Charlotte motel, three traits have consistently jumped out at me from within the larger search: the conflation of academic or discipline specific language and tone with the conversational or colloquial, the inclusion of personal narrative mixed with larger traditional journalistic themes and stories, and our connection or relationship as readers to the author. One of the places we see this kind of

⁵ Which, if you’ve been hiding under the proverbial rock, is now a legitimate news source.

writing on Grantland, but truth be told Grantland is only one raindrop in a storm of sites that overlap each other in a myriad of ways, all of which reflect an evolution of everything that's been going on since the New Journalism -- particularly in regards to subjectivity, authorial presence in the story, and the relationship between who is qualified to comment on 'the soul of man, the profound emotions, the eternal mysteries, and so forth and so on' as Wolfe called it (159).

So is this kind of internet journalism -- which we have yet to truly delineate -- just New Journalism revived? Yes and no. Like New Journalism, this kind of writing faces the same questions, of vanity, validity, and ephemeral-ness, questions of importance and superficiality, that the realistic novel faced more than two hundred years ago.

It would be helpful to give it a name, something like N3w Journalism⁶ to clarify what we're even talking about, but the truth is the amount of writing being produced on a daily basis is so large, with trends flying by so swiftly, that it's hard to draw any sort of hard lines around what it is that I'm talking about. There are many pieces that use parts of this, but not others. So how many do you need to use to count? In the end, maybe it doesn't matter. What I have to offer is my personal experience with it, an in depth look into the three traits previously mentioned, and I an explain of *how* this writing does what it does, for me at least. From there, the rest is up to you.

At the end of the road trip Sarah dropped me off with all my bags on the sidewalk

⁶ I know what you're thinking, but unfortunately the name 'New New Journalism' was already [taken](#).

outside my dorm. I had gone into it thinking that we'd make this incredible connection, that, even if it didn't last, maybe something would happen occasionally to trigger our memories, and we'd meet eyes for a moment and remember in the way two people do when they've shared a special experience.

But what does *special* really mean? When you say, 'that was a special experience', what does that really mean? Maybe it means 'that was something that affects my sense of self', or maybe it means, 'that was something that affects my life in a lasting way.' My friend Eliot has a story about going to a college party at 15 with his best friend, convinced they were about to have a sexual coming of age. In the end, they were too scared to talk to a single girl that night. Instead they had an incredible time meeting frat boys and going to a Lupe Fiasco concert. Instead of coming of age, it reminded them that they were still kids, and they loved it. Although it wasn't special in the way they expected it to be, special it still was.

Standing on the sidewalk I watched Sarah drive away. I wasn't actually sure when the next time we'd speak again. A week, two weeks? I didn't know. But I couldn't help but get the feeling that while the road trip was not special in any sense, this kind of writing, for me, was.

Part 2

When I was a freshman in college I used to sit in a dingy basement of a dorm and do homework. Coming down the stairs, a door lead to a small sparse room with ugly

carpeting, pockmarked white walls with a too bright light shining over, a broken tv, and a couch upholstered in a distinctly ‘this is very out of date and almost certainly conceals unspeakable griminess’ way. And while the room had hints of [Saw](#) to it, it was my inspirational sanctuary where homework was concerned. One night, after I’d settled down with a thick packet to read, I came to the slow, sinking realization that I’d been reading the same three sentences over and over again for five minutes. To my right Kelly Harrington, my best friend at this point, was mouthing chinese words and reminding me of a toddler trying to walk for the first time — completely awkward, a little bit funny, but full of determination. I, feeling all the awkwardness and none of the determination, wondered why it had taken me an hour to read all of eight pages of something that, earlier that afternoon, had me bursting with excitement.

The packet -- Fairclough’s essay on critical discourse analysis -- is about how dominant forms of culture and politics are reproduced in language. In theory it’s absolutely, positively fascinating. And yet, watching Kelly dutifully practice her Chinese, I realized this packet of pages was thoroughly defeating me⁷. I wanted to be into it. But after trying to battle my way through the discussion of a ‘realist social ontology’ and the distinction between ‘discourse’ and ‘semiosis’, I just wore down I guess. I couldn’t do it. And I realized I had no idea what to do.

Kelly looked up and asked me what was up. I told her what I was reading, venting that it seemed overly complicated and academic and was dumb⁸. Kelly has a wonderful

⁷ Seriously, [check](#) it out and skip to the top of the second page. For a first semester freshman? Probably not.

⁸ I had a tendency to be a little childish when I was a freshman. I’ve since exchanged that for a much more respectable, nose-to-the-air/use academic lofty academic words form of frustration.

tendency to nod, and then make a soft commiserating noise at just the right moment, and she did it then. I sighed.

Anywhere from the age of twelve to eighteen, if you had asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up one of my answers would have been a commercial advertiser⁹. We did a project my sixth grade year to design a commercial series for a made up product that I'll never forget¹⁰. The world of creating ads seemed to me to hold limitless possibilities, continual evolution, always exciting and creative. Eight hours before settling down in the basement with Kelly that night, I was sitting in class getting those familiar shivers down my spine as we talked about how language affects the brain. I caught myself thinking *this is something special*. I don't know how much Fairclough's article, and feeling completely incompetent in a subject, had to do with it, but two months later and I never considered going into advertising again.

I turned back to Kelly.

“Whatever. It doesn't matter anyway.”

In 1993 David Foster Wallace wrote an essay titled *E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction* that is unlike any article published in an academic journal that I've ever read before¹¹ in that it mixes discipline specific, often academic words and references and writing style, with conversational language and phrases. The effect is both unique, and,

⁹ another was professional novelist, the third, much more sage answer, was 'happy'

¹⁰ I'm not sure if this will make any sense, but designing Powerpoint slides, adjusting colors, thinking about how the overall presentation would make someone feel, would make them think, something about it just felt...right. I can still remember getting tingles down my spine as I worked. It sounds ridiculous but it felt like some kind of destiny type bullshit.

¹¹ It is also the most engaging.

at the same time, something we've come to regard as relatively common in non-traditional internet journalism.

E Unibus Pluram is about the relationship between fiction writers, loneliness, and the voyeuristic, human experience that is watching television. But it's not what the essay is about that's important¹² -- it's how Wallace conveys the content that is crucial. It's evident in Wallace's writing that he has a profound and extensive knowledge of the subject. So, like most scholars, he doesn't skimp out on the academic, discipline specific language in his piece. Within the first page and a half, he references the 'Stendhalian mirror' a, "literary territory that's gone from Darwinianly naturalistic to cybernetically post-postmodern in eighty years," and television's *raison (sic)*. For someone new, or relatively new, to the genre (like, say, a freshman in a Media studies class), these references might mean nothing. While they may enrich for the most knowledgeable of readers, these kinds of allusions close off writing to anyone without the 'qualified' knowledge. They can make reading a slog, something difficult and ultimately, alienating. But David Foster Wallace is unique in this respect.

"The second great thing is that television looks to be an absolute godsend for a human subspecies that loves to watch people but hates to be watched itself." (152)

Wallace couches his academic jargon with a conversational tone and language that both draws us in and stops us from getting discouraged, ultimately connecting the author

¹² Nor, in a way, does the place of publication-- it's the style that is central to this essay. But it does matter, too, because academic writing, at least in my experience, is often the most willingly closed off of all kinds of writing.

and the reader. Read that last quote and see where you put the emphasis, on which words. Read it out loud if it helps. If you're like me then two of your highlighted words are 'absolute godsend'. Now if you're like me again¹³, then this is the first time you've ever seen the words 'absolute godsend' in a scholarly article. Something noticeable though, is how easily digestible that sentence is. For a lot of people, there is a particular feeling and meaning to the words 'absolute godsend'. Something that conveys relief and importance and excitement for the future all put together. If you were to call your new cell phone an absolute godsend, I might think that it had solved some problems that you had previously been very frustrated or stressed about. I might also think that you felt your new cellphone was exciting in this respect. The product of those two words in Wallace's piece is a sentence that connects the reader to a shared experience of what the phrase 'absolute godsend' means, and facilitates the understanding of what is going to be a complex, deep, ultimately impossible to fully justify in a short paragraph, idea.

This idea that Wallace has centers around the personal connection lonely people have with television. That connection, he postulates, is particularly because these 'voluntary shut-ins' as he calls them, are too intensely affected by in-person connection (152). "Lonely people tend rather to be lonely because they decline to bear the emotional costs associated with being around other humans," (152) he writes, and with those words we see the fulfillment of the relief promised in television being described as an 'absolute godsend' — television relieves those people of that experience, while still creating a social world. But go back up and replace absolute godsend with 'boon', or 'a very helpful or

¹³ Well, a kid can dream.

valuable thing' (Google's synonym and definition for the word, respectively), and the sentence loses its definitive connection to the reader¹⁴. Even while he writes about 'elevated' or 'academic' ideas, his language remains inviting.

That connection is crucial for both the words behind it and ahead of it. The previous paragraph ends with Foster Wallace boiling down a detailed point about television's social science into two relatively abstract ideas. He writes, "Television, from the surface on down, is about *desire*. Fictionally speaking, desire is the sugar of human food" (152). End paragraph. Any assertion like that, particularly in academic overtones, has the potential to absolutely befuddle the reader, to suddenly make them feel lost and alone. This is terribly dangerous. Because if we, the reader, never re-establish connection, then we aren't far away from that moment where we read the same *damn* sentences over and over and over again. The emotional connection of Wallace's colloquial allusion then, provides the reader with an ephemeral touchstone as they make their way between ideas and paragraphs -- almost like having neurologist hand you a kitten to pet as explains brain's reaction to something soft; even if you didn't quite understand completely, you understand the softness of this kitten on your lap, and that's enough to keep listening.

In explaining the conditions before the evolution of New Journalism, Wolfe writes,

"It was somewhat like a class structure on the eighteenth century model in that there was a chance for you to compete but only with people of your own class. The literary upper class were the novelists; the occasional playwright or poet might be up there, too, but mainly it was the novelists. They were regarded as the only 'creative' writers, the only literary artists" (153).

New Journalism, then, opened up a space for journalists to 'compete' in the same arena.

¹⁴ Work with me here for a second.

It allowed journalists to be creative, and it conversely allowed readers to access the same creativity in a different way. Academic literature appears like an even more strict eighteenth century model at times--scholars write something that is only meant to be read by other scholars. More often than not, the main embodiment of this barrier is language (in the case of New Journalism, it appears to be print form). Wallace's use of colloquial language then, acts in a similar way to the creative coup (so to speak) that the New Journalists pulled, it allows him to work in a new arena, while also speaking to a new population.

At the time, this was revolutionary, even, it seems among journals renowned for being revolutionary. The Review of Contemporary Fiction — the journal which published Foster's essay — has a reputation for highlighting authors whose work 'resists convention and easy categorization.' Their focus has been called, postmodern, experimental, avant-garde, metafictional, and subversive¹⁵. But, in this context, to highlight Wallace's uniqueness, and understand the particular effectiveness of his rhetoric, we can also put him side by side with William Vollman, the second of the three (the first being DFW) featured writers from the particular *Review* volume in question. Vollman's short essay, *Something to die for*, in which Vollman makes his stance on how television is killing the novel and describes the difference between the two, is similar to Wallace's essay in many ways. Like *E Unibus* it is quite provocative, also like *E Unibus*, its voice is unique. Again this is another writer being lauded as someone who resists convention. But unlike Foster Wallace's piece, *Something to die for* rarely reaches out to

¹⁵ Perhaps by themselves, it's unclear.

the reader. As a result, while Vollmann's essay has a personal tone, and one can imagine his speech out loud, it never crosses over into the colloquial 'I could be saying this to you at dinner, in the pub, on a tuesday' --ness that Foster Wallace has.

Vollman, in his essay, writes things like this:

*I have had other editors who mucked, omitted, twisted, bowdlerized and macarooned, all with the best intentions, and compared to some other writers I have been lucky. I remember the sad galleys of one poor fellow which I was asked to read. The original manuscript itself was in places quite good. But he had meant his story to be a tragedy ... it sickens me now to remember how the book was spoiled and degraded. (Vollman, *Something to Die For*)*

While interesting and personal, the 'the sad galleys of one poor fellow' doesn't seem to ring true for anyone living in this century. And his writing is almost overly methodical. So while Vollmann may sound personal, he also sounds at times, to be frank, what some people might call stuffy, particularly on the first read through. He doesn't sound very accessible. Foster Wallace, on the other hand, does--particularly in the moments when he's describing television as 'an absolute godsend.'

This manifests itself not just in language, but in other areas --here, Wallace explains a potentially closed reference (the Stendhalian mirror and television's 'raison' mentioned before) by giving a sort of layman's metaphor:

[f]or television's whole raison is reflecting what people want to see. It's a mirror. Not the stendhalian mirror reflecting the blue sky and mud puddle. More like the over lit bathroom mirror before which the teenager monitors his biceps and determines his better profile (152).

It's funny, but it's also not very high culture. Wallace takes a literary reference and turns it into a picture of an average teenager. And somehow, this visual creation is helpful. We can see this teenager in our mind, its a popularly mediated conception seen on countless

t.v. shows. Vollmann does something similar, but it comes off differently:

The mission of a work of literature is likewise to please and to sustain. However, precisely because of its uniqueness, its status as a [metonym](#) of the author's mind and spirit, it is not meant to be altered to please the crowd. Minds and spirits are not meant to do that. Of course, we all succumb to that tendency in various degrees: the baby becomes toilet-trained to [ingratiate](#) itself with the family, the schoolchild silently witnesses or participates in torture to gain the approval of playmates, the lover primps to gain attractiveness in the gaze of the beloved, and nationally and internationally it's all much worse (Vollman).

Although structurally similar, Vollmann's examples do nothing to take us out of the elevated space in which we were transported (the concept of television's status as a metonym of the author's mind and spirit) because his language and sentence structure is so forcibly academic, even in the unacademic example of a baby being potty-trained. The use of words like 'ingratiate' and 'the beloved' locate the examples in a higher sphere, too intellectual to be felt by anyone who doesn't use those words regularly. And the examples themselves are constructed to be too general to be visualized, or seen. They are held at a distance. So while Foster Wallace uses words like 'monitors' and 'profile', where he could substitute 'looks at' and 'side', he also literally starts off his example with 'More like the..' -- a common half sentences we use in conversation. And he creates a visual scene which allows us to see the example. Although the reference to the mirror may be above us, he doesn't lose his connection to the reader because suddenly they have a vision that they can understand. And this is what it's all about, connection. Or, as high school journalism teachers are so apt to say, "entry points". Because to be honest, I don't really know if DFW's example is that much better in terms of clarity. But it is better in terms of connection. And that's the ultimate, important point. In a moment where both writers may lose the readers to complex or knowledge dependent points,

they each reach out to try to reconnect. But the way they reach out is so different. David Foster Wallace looks to reconnect with the part of us that lives outside of the sphere which he's writing in, the part of us who watches TV shows and says things like 'absolute godsend.' Vollmann reaches out only to those who are so comfortable with his word choice that they don't need the visual picture. In essence, Vollmann's examples are held at a certain distance via their structure and word choice, whereas Foster Wallace's example tries to pull us in on a more personal level. It's the difference between primping attractiveness in the gaze of the beloved and flexing biceps in a mirror. One needs to be decoded, then personally applied to, and then is understood, the other is instant connection, instant gratification.

David Foster Wallace's article may very well be unique in its kind, something unusual in an already unusual venue, but his willful and self conscious effort to be more 'accessible' reminds me that academic writing doesn't have to be closed off. It also serves as a reminder that sometimes, a simple move to reach out can make all the difference in moments of obscurity.

Of course, facilitating understanding at difficult moments isn't the only reason for using colloquial language in conjunction with jargon-y or academic references or sentences. Much of today's internet journalism doesn't aspire to go quite as deep, nor does it tackle such an academic topic, and as a result, this combination of language is often used for other reasons. For example, the contrast is often set up for humor's sake just as much as for the sake of reader's comprehension.

Brian Phillips does so [here](#) in his article for Grantland.com on NFL quarterback

Peyton Manning titled *The Dad Rock Prometheus*. He starts a paragraph, "*George Orwell wrote that by the age of 50, everyone has the face he deserves.*" Here Phillips invokes a quote from a distinctly literary icon, setting us up for... well it depends on your viewpoint. I would predict some sort of philosophical or flowery analysis of Peyton Manning's visage. Let's see. Phillips continues, "*Manning is 37, well past 50 in football years, and his face increasingly looks like something that was squeezed from a tube of Crest.*"

So... not so philosophical after all. This second sentence by Phillips is funny by itself, but it's particularly funny in the context of an Orwell — he so oft academically analyzed and referenced — quote.

Conversational language can also be used to establish or define the relationship with the audience. Hua Hsu's *King Of Hong Kong* (also from Grantland) opens, *Violence is the birthright of the Hong Kong auteur. There's that one about the sharpshooter with the degenerative hand condition. Or that scene where the guy spits a bullet into the chamber of his gun and fires it in one continuous movement, all while flying through the air.*

While the initial sentence might limit audience to only people who know what the word 'auteur' means, the second few sentences comes off much differently. 'There's that one about the' is a distinctly conversational phrase. The 'that' and the two 'the's are very specifically colloquial in the sentence. Hsu could have just written, "There's one about a sharpshooter with a degenerative hand condition." But instead he makes it sound like the we know the particular sharpshooter he's referencing. It sounds almost chummy.

In a recorded interview, Hsu comments on this particular choice, and in doing so contextualizes Phillips choice by saying, "I think it just sounds funnier too. ... I think it's funnier to say, like, 'have you heard the one about' ... Any joke establishes the relationship with the audience." He continues, "It was also hedging your bets, I mean the history of Hong Kong film is pretty old so [...] it was an attempt to be like, 'Yeah there's this shit, and if you know it cool but if you don't, don't worry about it.'"

That's one of the beautiful things about this kind of mish-mash of language, it opens up the topic regardless of what you bring to it. None of these goals or purposes — humor, understanding, establishing a relationship — have to be mutually exclusive, but they all give this very personal feeling. Using colloquial language inherently invokes interpersonal connection. Whether that's because it's a joke or invoking a shared understanding to facilitate understanding or even just sounding like a friend. Because conversational language is always between two people, bridging a gap with it locates the reader particularly in a spot where they are participating. Essentially, it asks us to care for our own sake. And in a great many number of things, we are never reached out to like that, we're never asked to think about ourselves.

Of course, there is a danger in all this. At its most effective, this non-traditional internet journalism combines an empathic, conversational tone with persuasive knowledge based rhetoric, to create something both more accessible, and affecting and convincing on a deeper level. It's like the moment when you realize that woman or man you've admired from afar is as engaging as they are beautiful. When it's done well, the writing intertwines the emotional connection we have socially, with an intellectual

connection, and creates something more. But at its worst, the writing can rely on this kind of language to stand in for saying anything of consequence. It can pander to readers who want to feel as if they're understanding something deep, but miss out on the actual work of imparting that.

The Foster Wallace and Vollman essays above were published in a print journal, which has since been put on the Internet. Printed essays, by nature of being physical objects, rely less on holding the reader's attention than something that originates, and lives exclusively, on the Internet. A physical object must be obtained through a series of physical activities, and the process of exchanging that object for another object requires another set of activities. Internet writing -- Hsu and Phillips pieces -- on the other hand, depend on holding your attention, because reading the rest of an article or essay is no different, in terms of physical effort, than finding a new piece. Back in the day, giving up on an essay, or a book, and finding something different, represented a new investment in time and space and often money. So while DFW's article wasn't a product of that, it represents this value in reader investment very well. Because that's what the kind of humanistic connection Wallace attempts at really translates into -- reader investment. Acknowledging any understanding of his metaphors and language style requires acknowledging a lived experience that connects to it. And then in turn, his reaching out in itself is also a commentary on his subject of loneliness.

In a different way, acknowledging the efforts made by Hsu requires acknowledging the attempt at friendly connection, and that acknowledgement in turn plays back into a

community building of this type of Hong Kong action movie. They serve dual purposes. However, all of these pieces also did something more ephemeral for me, their efforts to appeal to me on a myriad of levels made me feel included and welcome.

Here's another story from freshman year: It was spring break and I was standing in a hotel parking lot talking to my best friend from home, Jack Jajewski, about education. We were both in the midst of our first courses in the study, and were innocently fired up over all the realizations we were having and thrilling in the discovery that our unconscious feelings — feelings that school shouldn't have sucked as much as it did — were actually grounded in something real. It was a powerful experience, one that happened particularly often in the early years of college for me (and I would guess for a lot of people). Finally someone said, I can't remember who anymore, "what if we had our own school?" It was the beginning of a powerful passion and, potentially, a lifelong dream.

But there's something very daunting and scary about acknowledging that you feel passionate about a subject in college, precisely because that subject could very well end up being your career. And it's scary because, you know, what if you're not good at it? Then what? For more than half my life, including the first semester of college, I wanted to be a fiction writer. When my first creative writing project came along I wrote like five drafts, or something that seems insane to me now as a Senior. I got a lot of good feedback from my peers and it was really important to me. Writing it felt special. And then, well, then it was slammed by my professor, whose opinion on my writing I had

come to care more about than just about anyone's. The hardest part though wasn't the negative feedback, it was that his comments felt cursory, as if I wasn't worth really explaining things to. A guy who had previously taken every pains to explain to me just why something I had written wasn't working for him, had written vague but barbed words like 'I'm not persuaded by his life or how he got there, but i'm not persuaded by the physical details either.' Eventually he culminated in the sentence, "*I think you do better when you write closer to what you know.*" The problem, of course, was that I had thought I *was* writing what I knew. I thought I was following the path towards one of my dreams, towards this thing that gave me a rush, that made me feel special. But it seemed like I must have read the map wrong or something, because I had been told firmly *you're in the wrong place*. What do you do when a door is slammed in your face? Some people knock again, with extra vigor. Others pull up their boot straps and eventually make their own door. I walked away.

A few weeks after my friend Jack and I finally left that parking lot where we first conceived our dream school, I was in my basement homework/Saw V room, this time reading a packet about a school in England called *Summerhill* by its founder A.S. Neill. Just three sentences in, after two that covered the basic when it was founded and where it is bases, there was this, a sentence that gave me a strange feeling along the edge of my brain, that after reading, I knew I wouldn't be able to stop. Here it is:

"Just a word about Summerhill pupils."

That's it. Like Neill was talking right to me. And that was enough.

Part Three

Back in a study with Hua Hsu we're reflecting on his first few sentences -- the ones using those 'that's and 'the's in just such a way -- when he pauses for a second, and then says, 'it sounds like i'm relaying an anecdote.' And, we realize, it really does. It sounds like he's about to tell a friend a story. This ends up being a startlingly important connection. Because in many cases, in fact, with almost all, it turns out that this kind of unorthodox internet writing is characterized by the 1st person anecdote.

In 2006, thirteen years after David Foster Wallace wrote *E Unibus Pluram*, he penned an article for the New York Times called [*Roger Federer As Religious Experience*](#). Since then the essay has been released in a slightly expanded form as the cover essay for his posthumously printed book 'Both of Flesh and Not'. Even in its Times version though, it is a remarkable piece of work, filled with many of the typical DFW-ian tropes we've come to think of today (footnotes, and footnotes of footnotes, and his remarkable voice) that challenge the traditional newspaper space. It also happens to be the most beautiful thing I've ever read about the sport I've played for most of my life¹⁶. In large part, that beauty comes from Wallace's ability to make the piece feel like it's about more than just Federer, more than just Wallace's experience with Federer too. He invites us in, to share in the experience, to expose our own part in it, and most of all, to

¹⁶ Tennis, for those of you who dare not know who Roger Federer is.

feel connected by the story.

It opens (in the Times version):

Almost anyone who loves tennis and follows the men's tour on television has, over the last few years, had what might be termed Federer Moments. These are times, as you watch the young Swiss play, when the jaw drops and eyes protrude and sounds are made that bring spouses in from other rooms to see if you're O.K.

A few things pop out at first glance. First, is Foster Wallace's ability to delineate an in crowd and at the same time, open up the piece for all readers. He sets up a population of people (almost anyone who follows the men's tour) who have experienced this particular thing, and then explains, sort of, what this particular thing is (in this case, seeing Federer do something so incredible it reduces us into cartoon amazement). It's reminiscent of Hsu's explanation of the beginning of his article too, in that it conflates inside knowledge with this comedic moment. The second thing is that Wallace creates an anonymous hypothetical. At the moment, because it has no specific body attached to the royal 'you', it acts as a signifier of potential: *this is what watching Federer can do*. At the moment, Wallace has a promise sort of floating out there, like when you ask someone how that movie was and they say *it was incredible, one of the best of the year*. Maybe you believe them, but you don't really *know*.

Next he describes, in beautiful detail, what turns out to be just one of these moments. His description is also analysis and commentary, typical to many traditional forms of sports journalism, like this Scoop Jackson piece [here](#). Sentences like,

John McEnroe with his color man's headset on TV says (mostly to himself, it sounds like), "How do you hit a winner from that position?" And he's right: given Agassi's position and world-class quickness, Federer had to send that ball down a two-inch pipe of space in order to pass him, which he did, moving backwards, with no setup time and none of his weight behind the shot.

It's conveying what happened from a relatively objective perspective. For all its charismatic, exciting storytelling, it's not much different than your movie friend describing some of the scenes which make the film so incredible — it's just now your moviegoing friend happens to be a really good storyteller. Next, something interesting happens though. The next sentences are:

It was impossible. It was like something out of "The Matrix." I don't know what-all sounds were involved, but my spouse says she hurried in and there was popcorn all over the couch and I was down on one knee and my eyeballs looked like novelty-shop eyeballs.

Turns out Wallace's hypothetical at the beginning was really a personal anecdote. Suddenly he moves from the objective, to the explicitly personal and subjective. And in doing so, he crosses through a line that changes the way the reader interacts with the story and with the author, it splits the focus from just the story, to the story and the author. From Roger Federer, to Federer *and* the individuals who watch him. It means one thing for your friend to tell you a movie is the best of the year, but it means quite a few different things if that friend tells you that the movie made them cry for an hour afterwards. Think about it.

At the interview with Hua Hsu, he recounted his slow entry into writers who used the first person. When I asked why he hadn't jumped in earlier, he said, "We just didn't think you were allowed to write in the first person until you came back from a war or something." And traditionally speaking, that makes sense. While traditional journalism has a particular power dynamic not unlike the banking style of education¹⁷, it also has set roles, dating back to the pre-New Journalism 'eighteenth century' models referenced earlier. The role of the journalist is to convey a story objectively, facelessly, who are you to think yourself so important that you can write about your life? Hsu talked about his friend who has started to write using first person narrative recently in his music reviews and his absolute surprise at its popularity. Although it still didn't make sense, they couldn't deny people connected with it. Hsu said something after this that's stayed with me. "Maybe we're just realizing something that everyone knows implicitly." Maybe.

Two months ago I was in a basement classroom, it was about an hour after class ended, when I finally broke through one of the metaphorical veils that clouds our vision between what we know and what we see. "Fuck that, I'm gonna teach them how to win," my professor said. His words hung in the air, filled with the level of intensity that always forces a moment or two of silence in acknowledgement.

"You really think that? For real?" My friend Abe responded, asking the implicit question that always jumps into my mind whenever 'that level of intensity' is invoked.

¹⁷ 'I have all the information, I'm going to deposit it into your brain.'

"You kidding me? Yes. Yes."

After a moment my professor looked down and said, "I don't know man." And we gave it another moment of silence. We were talking about, well, I should say they were talking -- I still hadn't contributed to the conversation yet (although I would) -- growing up as a black child, and the different forms of the 'talk' given to such a child by their family member or members. From my understanding, for the two of them it started something like this,

Listen, there are going to be times in your life when you get opportunities taken away from you because you aren't white. There are also times when you're going to be treated unfairly for that same reason. White people you see around you are going to get things that you aren't going to be offered. You're going to have to work twice as hard for half as much --

and then it diverges from there, depending on who's giving the talk. As a white male, it's probably needless to say I was never exposed to this conversation. Even as someone who has been, relatively recently, trying to reverse my inculcation into a society that likes to call itself 'post-racist' or even sometimes 'post-racial', I had never thought about other kids having this 'talk' before. And even though I had heard sentiments for a decade, and statistics for the last three years at college, I had never been able to see past the fog of my privilege and into the reality of those statistics.

The conversation continued — we went into the whole 'how would you do it with your kids' idea. Because there was a disconnect between my friend, Abe, who had also had this conversation as a kid, and my professor. Abe thought that the conversation

should be a positively based one, he didn't want his child to hate white people, he said, he wanted them to have the self esteem to achieve their dreams and hold on to their self worth in a society that implicitly and explicitly tries to destroy both those two concepts. My professor thought that was too soft. For him, the answer was... well, just like he said. *Teach them the rules, show them how to win. Fuck everybody else.*

At this point in the conversation I was completely lost. Not in the sense that I couldn't understand what was being said, more that I had no idea what to think about any of it. The implications of this were so intense, all my white relatively sheltered mind could do was get lost in their words, in trying to feel what Abe and my professor felt. And the result was that even in this moment, when I was confronted not with a singular moment of racism -- one that could be explained away by subconsciously and instinctively accusing the oppressor as a racist -- nor with a systemic one that was so intertwined with society and impersonal that it was hard to believe, but instead a moment with a personal, all encompassing, proclamation of a life of difference -- even at this moment I was unable to see past the veil. At the time, all I could see was their story, not its reality.

Writing traditional journalism with the inclusion of the personal anecdote, or the subjective perspective, creates a product that attempts to access the reader in an entirely different way than either form independently.

Cord Jefferson wrote an article on Gawker a few months ago called [*Kanye West Knows You Think He Sounded Nuts On Kimmel*](#)— right after Kanye's infamous

interview with the television talk show host. In the article, Jefferson starts by recounting three personal stories in which he encounters people who appear to be acting based on racist thoughts/feelings, but aren't doing anything overtly 'wrong'. He then explains that he thinks the most destructive part of racism in America isn't overt displays of it.

"Rather," he writes, "I think what's far more corrosive and insidious, the thing that lingers in the back of my mind the most, is the framework of plausible deniability built up around racism, and how insane that plausible deniability can make a person feel when wielded."

Next Jefferson describes two well known news stories which convey the same sentiment of the quote — the George Zimmerman trial and NYC Mayor Bloomberg on Stop and Frisk. He eventually goes on to reference the word 'gas-lighting' — the mental torture method of convincing someone that they are losing their mind by discounting their perceptions of reality¹⁸— and ultimately connects it all back to what happened on Jimmy Kimmel. Jefferson writes:

"You may think he [Kanye] sounded crazy, but it wasn't a kind of crazy that was foreign to me—or, I'd assume, millions of other Americans. [...]It was the crazy that comes from being the one person stopped by a cop amidst a sea of white people. "This is racist," you might say to the cop. "Prove it," he might say back. And at that moment, you can't."

Jefferson attempts to reframe Kanye's rant by reflecting on his own life and what he sees on the news, and then applying it on a large scale. But what makes it powerful and

¹⁸ Its name taken from a play in which a man convinces his wife that the gas lights in their home she sees brightening and dimming are, in fact, maintaining a steady glow. So yeah. That's horrifying.

lasting, is that in doing this he's also implicitly asking the reader to make their own reflections, their own conclusions, the same way we do when someone gives us an opinion, and then a story to back it up--we check our own thoughts to see if it's valid.

When Jefferson tells his stories and gives his opinion on the damaging effects of racism in today's America, couches them in relevant news stories, and brings it back to a perspective on a particular event, he asks the reader to consider his words on a bunch of different levels: a personal experience level, a personal viewed experience level, a personal opinion on the Kanye segment level, etc etc. But its all personal added to the front, because he's explicitly voiced his own personal views, and somehow that levels the playing field for us to jump in. And not just some of us, but all of us. Jefferson shares a personal view that is unsure of itself, which allows the reader to interact even if they are unsure of their own views. In one of his stories he recounts being refused service in a bar because the bartender believes he is 'too drunk', whereas minutes later his slightly more intoxicated white friends have no problem. Although the interaction feels discriminatory, he wonders, "Are we the wasted minorities in a bar full of unprejudiced white people who want us out of there?" That moment of questioning allows us input, both to wonder about the story at hand and of our own experiences.

In essence, it involves us not as evaluators of Jefferson's experience, but as legitimate contributors to the discussion. In the same way a story from one person prompts a competing story from us, so this operates. It can almost be seen as the ultimate evolution of the trend Wolfe spoke of, about who has license to comment on the human soul and profound emotions. From the realistic novel, to journalists, and now to the

reader themselves. Our involvement isn't in our disagreement with his experience, it's with the ability to attach our own experiences to the academic topic, which is the step so rarely taken by readers.

That crucial part though, of reader self implication, of self reflection, (for without our involvement, the story's merit resides only in our appreciation for the author's feelings, or for their opinion) doesn't happen without both pieces. And in the end, Jefferson's article is particularly notable here for what it would be if it were limited to one form or the other — to just personal narrative or just traditional journalistic storytelling.

The first person story doesn't carry the same weight without the Kanye anchor (and the news stories), Kanye/the news stories (perhaps strangely and unfairly) gives the narrative credibility and depth and, most of all, a relatable touchstone. Even if you've never experienced the stories Jefferson tells, you understand the context of Kanye on Jimmy Kimmel, or of the Zimmerman trial. But on the other side, the Kanye piece by itself, coupled with news stories, would also be limited. For without the personal, there's no leveling, no room for the reader's voice, and there's also no question that can be answered with any sense of ambiguity/by looking inside. Without the anecdote, the reader has a choice: to believe Jefferson and his claims, or to not. With the anecdote and subjective view, we are suddenly legitimated as contributors — for everyone can look at an experience (our own or someone else's) and give an opinion. But not everyone has the 'credentials' to give an opinion on the racial implications of an event in the same way a published author on Gawker does. There is a traditional idea that Jefferson is qualified to

tell us certain things about the news because of his position, and traditionally our options are to agree or disagree and leave it at that. The combination of personal anecdote with that is suddenly *we* are also qualified.

Beyond the general idea of opening the door for our opinion's by leveling the field using a personal anecdote, a large part of what encourages our involvement is Jefferson is explicitly challenging the status quo in two ways. First, the idea that Kanye sounded crazy on Kimmel, and second, that the most poisonous form of racism is outspoken acts. The reader is made introspective or self implicated in large part because we are exploring this challenge. In our day to day life, we might not care about every opinion, but ones that challenge our ideas usually catch our attention. There's more to this whole reader involvement thing than just tossing together personal stories and news stories. Jefferson's central aim is to question our current views, and that's a large part of what opens up the whole story. Yet different aims often work in the same way. Bill Simmons, in his article [The Consequences of Caring](#), uses personal anecdotes about his daughter's first experiences with the joys and tragedy of sports to access the part of a sports fan that sometimes wonders 'why do I even care'? He employs the same combination of personal anecdote with traditional 'qualified' journalist talk, but uses this different aim to achieve the same result: reader introspection.

Simmons' story starts out with his daughter's first time crying over sports, including his pleasure over this¹⁹ and his partial rationale behind that pleasure²⁰. He

¹⁹ The slightly self-effacing "I remained sympathetic while being secretly delighted, like she had passed some sort of "Fledgling Sports Fan" hurdle or something.

moves on to the discovery of her first favorite team, the Los Angeles Kings (hockey) and a brief account of their unlikely journey to the Stanley Cup Finals. Eventually this leads him to the second time his daughter ever cries: the night she expects her team to win the Stanley Cup, but instead they suffer heartbreaking defeat. The article is almost entirely anecdotal, with a few sentences that directly address the reader while moving the story forward²¹. The most important moments though are not the stories he tells. For Simmons, the founder of Grantland, came to fame as ‘The Sports Guy’ for ESPN, an identity based around this idea of him as a fan, and not as a traditional journalist doing a lot of legwork²². But his rise to the ‘most prominent sportswriter in America’ as the New York times calls him (*Can Bill Simmons Win the Big One*), has given him a deity like authority when it comes to reflecting on being a fan. So the most important moments are when Simmons departs from his story and moves to displaying his those reflections, or when he spouts rhetoric befitting of his position as ‘paid sports-writer’, because they are the most nuanced. The power balance between Simmons and his readers is more equal than most relationships, but readers still go to him for something more than just friendship. They’re looking for connections and statements, sometimes even validations from this higher source. At one such moment in the article, Simmons questions his desire to have his daughter become a sports fan. He writes,

²⁰ “Of the 75 greatest moments of my life, sports were involved in at least [...] maybe even 40 [of them].”

²¹ At one point he says, "She watched Kopi [star Kings player] skate around for a few shifts, ultimately deciding, "I want to get his jersey!" because, as you know, little kids are the biggest front-runners on the planet." It strikes me that these kinds of moments are the difference between a diary entry, and what Simmons creates here. These moments make the writing feel more like a letter.

²² Which, of course, is not true. [This](#) piece on the NY times goes into great detail on Simmons, particularly noting the contrast between his image as a slacker, and his reality as a research obsessed, work intensive writer (Mahler). It also provides an interesting lens on how traditional journalism ‘objectively’ views this ‘new-ish’ thing (as a gimmick, it feels like in the undertones).

Remember that scene when Forrest Gump finds out about his son, digests the news, then worries that the boy is just as stupid as he is? For two terrible seconds, he's thinking to himself, Oh, no, I hope I didn't ruin this kid. That's how I felt when I watched my daughter sobbing. Why did I do this to her? Why would I pull her into this fan vortex where you're probably going to end up unhappy more than happy?

This is another moment in which Simmons talks directly to the reader, but it's also a moment in which he levels the playing field in a similar way to Cord Jefferson— by questioning himself. Just as with Jefferson, Simmons' stated question above is a question to us. Why should my daughter be a sports fan? We're asked. And, if we are sports fans, we subconsciously ask ourselves the same question. Because Simmons whole game here is that he's talking about his daughter, but he's also talking to the reader's inner self- the one we don't remember very often, the one that didn't always care about sports. It's an important person to recognize, he's guessing, because *he* always wonders after it in times of great sports pain, and he guesses we do too. For me, at least, he was right. It gets to that deep, bitter question, 'Why do i care about this anyways'? Simmons taps into that. But he doesn't just reference it, he asks you to explore yourself while looking at his self and looking at all the selves.

Leading to the latter kind of important moment, which occurs directly after the above. In it, Simmons departs from his stories to make a statement about sports as a whole. He writes,

Then I remembered something. Sports is a metaphor for life. Everything is

black and white on the surface. You win, you lose, you laugh, you cry, you cheer, you boo, and most of all, you care. Lurking underneath that surface, that's where all the good stuff is — the memories, the connections, the love, the fans, the layers that make sports what they are. It's not about watching your team win the Cup as much as that moment when you wake up thinking, "In 12 hours, I might watch my team win the Cup." [...] It's black and white, but it's not.

The whole essay is nothing without this. This paragraph is so beautiful, so effective, because it connects with the reader on so many levels. It's about something so personal that we connect with Simmons on a social, emotional level, it's about something so relatable (for the usual audience) that we connect with the idea on a large scale, and it also moves beyond the realm of Simmons' 'authority' while still being grounded in that authority. Something similar happens with the ending of the article, where Simmons relays his daughter's tantrum in the back seat on the way home from that Cup loss:

"Then you don't understand," she decided. "You don't understand what it's like. You have NO idea."

She fires at him, and then Simmons finishes,

"But that's the thing about sports ... I do."

The end. Simmons comes full circle, from the questioning of being a sports fan at the beginning, to the remembrance of the beautiful parts of fandom in the middle, and a final acknowledgement of how deeply he -- and through our enticed reflection, we -- care at the end. But take a closer look at that last sentence. Without the first half, which

independently is a general statement, the second part doesn't carry the same weight. Take away the independent general statement and make it a personal general one, so, say "*But...I do.*" And I get it, it still carries the same weight in the story. I would still get that tingly feeling you get when you reading something that hits *just* right. I would still smile and feel all warm about the relationship I've just been exposed to between the author and his daughter and their love of sports. *But.* But, here's the catch: I wouldn't know, nor would I stop to think about, why I felt that way. Because I'm not directly implicated. It's traditional journalism all over again. And there's too much shit going on in this world, most of the time, for me to wonder why it is that I feel a certain way. Most of the time I just feel it and move on. Other times I try to figure out my feelings, but can't. But enhance that overarching feeling by exposing my own stake in it, and suddenly I don't feel warm and fuzzy as an outsider looking in, suddenly we're part of the moment, suddenly it's our moment too and we know why. Or at least, I knew why. Simmons goal isn't to challenge the status quo or make the readers rethink an event and their own experiences like Jefferson's was, it's to put us back in touch with something most of his general readership knows, but maybe forgets sometimes. Simmons anecdotes help him create a community of sports lovers, Jefferson's facilitate social awareness. And yet despite their differences in focus, and in outcome, both Simmons and Jefferson make a visible effort to not only connect with their readers, but also encourage them to involve themselves in the story.

David Foster Wallace's Roger Federer piece turns out to be so wide and far

reaching it extends beyond the scope of what the personal narrative does, touching on the history of Wimbledon and the evolution of rackets and historical perception of players, among other things which have to do with but don't have to do with the experience of watching Federer. Unlike Simmons, whose personal anecdotes are the dominant narratives in the piece, Wallace's personal anecdotes in this article are more like a distanced, even more sparse version of the frame-depart-and-return structure we see in Jefferson's piece. Yet, despite the fact that Wallace spends relatively little time telling his own personal views, nor his stories, without them, without bridging that gap, I don't think I'd feel like it asked me to think of it as anything more than information. I might go beyond that, I might apply it to watching Federer and it might change my perception, but I'm not sure it would change my experience. But this, this uncovering of a personal moment and the gravity of that moment, does change it. Has changed it. Going back to that movie we've been talking about -- watching it is an entirely different experience when you're trying to see why it made your friend cry then it is when you just watch for yourself. Suddenly that movie means more than just a movie, it's a piece of work that has depth, it has affected someone, and in hearing it affected them, you might begin to wonder how it would affect you.

Wallace's goals in his piece were first and foremost to give the portrait of a man and contextualize watching him within the greater tennis history. And even though I want to say one of his secondary goals was to relate his own experience watching Federer--and textually, that's true, it's present-- I know somewhere in that part of you that knows things you couldn't really back up if someone asked you to, that his writing,

although it includes personal narratives, admissions of bias and personal declarations, is entirely unidirectional. If there were to be a secondary goal, I can't help but think it would be to help us understand what we're seeing, to connect us to one another, instead of to connecting us to him. In an interview he once said, "All the attention and engagement and work you need to get from the reader can't be for your benefit; it's got to be for hers" (*D.T. Max*). Wallace believed it, but I don't know if Simmons would agree. Jefferson wouldn't either. One of the fascinating things about this writing style is that it feels like a selfish exercise by the author, even to the authors themselves. But somehow, we readers get something to. It seems to be what Hsu was getting at in our interview when he said, 'maybe we're just realizing what everyone knows implicitly', that we gain something from sharing this experience that is both story and personal reflection. As for me, I can't emulate David Foster Wallace because I don't know how to explore my own self without making that an explicit goal and because I don't know how to connect you to the experience I'm conveying without, at the same time, trying to connect you to me. But I think it works both ways.

Wolfe wrote that much of New Journalism was couched in an autobiographical format, a sort of "I was there and this is how it affected me" he explains (152). And then later after revealing the commentary that some saw New Journalism as 'subjective' journalism because of this, he explains that although some saw it as a form in which the writer needed to be in the foreground at all times, "In fact, most of the best work in the form has been done in third-person narration with the writer keeping himself absolutely invisible" (153). Today, Wolfe's critics would be more accurate. The writer does occupy

the foreground, not all the time, but often enough. Yet what we found, or at least, what I've found, is that this subjectivity, this vanity, whatever you want to call it, when combined with traditional journalistic writing, does more to implicate myself in the piece than distanced objective writing ever has.

In my Junior year of high school I attended a retreat called Cultural Relations that changed my life. Sixty students, including ten student leaders and three adult chaperones, piled on a bus for a weekend that would focus on exposing and discussing and sharing the rarely talked about things in our lives: stereotyping, cross cultural experiences and values in sex, drugs, and family life, societal injustices, our deepest secrets and greatest fears. Kind of cliché stuff but it was real.

The first night, I lay in bed and listened to the captain of the football team sob quietly, and then tell 8 boys he barely knew that his girlfriend was pregnant and nobody else knew and he didn't know what to do. It only got more intense from there. That whole weekend shattered something I had believed in for a long time: that there was some semblance of fairness in the world. But it felt good, to be around people who were also shattered, who could help you back up, who you could help. When I got back, feeling more raw but more connected than I ever had in my life, I was sure it was the most important thing I had ever been a part of. As the year came to a close, applications for a position in the student group that lead this retreat, CORE they were called, opened up. I applied without hesitation and interviewed with passion; I'd give up everything else I did for this, I'd decided, if I needed to. On the day the applications came out a girl whose

older sister was in CORE told me she knew whether I got in or not, and when I pressed her, she told me that her sister had told her I was selected. Twenty minutes later I was given a slip of paper telling me that I had been passed over. Behind only the revelation of my parents divorce and my grandfather's death, it was probably the most devastating news I had ever received. Still is.

Since then I've been drawn into issues of race and gender at various times. Each time I would get inspired, learn a lot, but never follow through. I vowed to start Cultural Relations at my college three separate times, and gave up partway through each time. Something was always missing. Back in the basement with my Professor and Abe, the conversation was following a pretty similar trajectory. I was baffled by this new information, and was trying to process what the presence of this talk meant emotionally for these two people I would like to call friends. But the likelihood it really changed anything, the way I viewed the world on a daily basis, the way I lived my life, was disgustingly small.

Eventually we moved on to the topic of 'the talk' as a general term, and that's when I finally spoke. I wondered aloud, because I'm always thinking about education and that's just where my mind goes in times like this, in difficult, complex, times -- what if everyone got 'the talk' when they were young? In that moment I imagined what it would have been like to hear that my successes, my advantages, often came at the cost of someone else. If you were anywhere near the idealistic kid I was, perhaps you can understand that I think this may have seriously fucked with me.

I don't know for sure, but that's when I think it began to really sink in. We talked about

what that conversation would look like for people of privilege²³ --- We wondered if schools would be able to incorporate it, or help with the aftermath. Basically kicked around ideas in the post-big realization that there are a ton of different views on this talk, including ignorance of its existence. But since that night I haven't been able to look at the world the same. I haven't been able to feel, in the truest emotional sense of the word, the same about that topic. In leaving that classroom that night, and in looking back on the whole experience, I can't help but notice that after being exposed to a large series of academic and personal discussions on racism and sexism, it never made it past my head and to my heart and eyes, for a long time. That night, their stories opened it up for me, but it was the combination of those stories and the impersonal, objective, talks about education— that allowed me a way in, a way to self reflect, and that made it lasting, that made it feel like I belonged, or at least that I understood enough to belong. Eventually, it was 10:30 and class had been over for two hours. My professor, Abe, and I walked out into the night together. The air was warm and every so often we turned to one another and asked a question.

Part 4

²³ “Look son/daughter, there are going to be times in life when you get things that you feel like you deserved, and you will have deserved it. But just know that on some level, you also got it because we live in a system that's set up to privilege you. And you have to understand that those opportunities, that privilege, comes at the cost of someone else loss, or oppression. That test that was 'easy' for you, that you aced without even studying, comes at the cost of being overly difficult for someone else, not because you're smarter than they are, but because they made the test for you. And so they made the test to be not for someone else.' For the people reading who didn't get this talk -- Can you imagine what it would have been like to hear that, or a coherent version of it? Can you imagine the long lasting effects? For the readers who did -- what would it be like to know that everyone got this talk? I'm not sure if it would solve, or even do, anything. But it's a helluva thing to imagine.”

Describing the effects of the personal and personable writing present in this kind of writing can often feel, quite honestly, utterly cliché. The wishy washy smoochy goochy description of feelings and connectedness and personal reflection can come to seem very much like made up bullshit. Or, at the very least, the kind of qualities that cannot be proved; and like the easily dismissed rookie who tries to argue using only qualitative, personal, unacademic and uninformed statements. So if you've found yourself in a cynical disbelief of the use of personal narrative as a tool for both entry point and eventual reader self reflection etc., I don't blame you. As a society we aren't really used to conflating the personal with the academic, or perhaps more accurately, knowledge with emotion. Sometimes, it's tough to tell just how different or special a moment is until that moment is over. Sandwiched in between the last footnote and the last few paragraphs of Foster Wallace's Federer piece, provides us with just such a moment.

To explain this moment in a way that is, perhaps, more comfortable and academic, one must first be introduced (or reminded) of Thomas Penson De Quincey, author of 'Confessions of an English Opium-Eater' and, surprisingly considering said title, a resident of the early 1800's wing in the metaphorical "English writers that scholars talk about" building²⁴. In his essay, "On The Knocking At The Gate", De Quincey analyzes the knock that ends act two scene two of Shakespeare's Macbeth -- the murder of King Duncan by the scheming Macbeth and his wife. He deduces that the knock on the gate, is what makes the viewer/reader fully aware of the actions that have

²⁴ Scholars, Oxford scholars to be specific, credit him with shifting public perception on the use of addictive drugs [here](#).

just taken place. He writes,

When the deed is done, when the work of darkness is perfect, then the world of darkness passes away like a pageantry in the clouds: the knocking at the gate is heard, and it makes known audibly that the reaction has commenced; the human has made its reflux upon the fiendish; the pulses of life are beginning to beat again; and the re-establishment of the goings-on of the world in which we live first makes us profoundly sensible of the awful parenthesis that had suspended them (De Quincey).

So, it is when the personal narrative, or the use of colloquial is departed from, and ordinary journalistic language is used again, that we realize just what a moment it was, to be caught up in the experience and thoughts and feelings of another human being. In Wallace's essay he meanders back and forth between these two voices expertly and subtly, never allowing the reader to go too far into one or the other, never allowing us too close to his mind²⁵. His skill is so deft that we are hardly aware that what we are reading is a piece in the New York Times, and if we are, that it is also categorically different (read: more personal) from anything we have read on the site/in the paper before. In the seventeenth and last footnote of his piece, he details his experience of watching one particular Federer vs. Nadal point. It is classic Wallace in its slipperiness -- he writes

²⁵ Part of which must come from Foster Wallace's desire to stay out of the limelight. Bill Katovsky relays to us, upon visiting one of Wallace's classes at Arizona university, his words, "I usually puke my guts out in the bathroom when class ends," he later admits. We are in the cafeteria. "I guess I'm really a shy sort of person. I hate to be the center of attention" (Katovsky). With respect to this anecdote, Wallace and Wolfe's point earlier about invisibility, it seems Wallace was more comfortable, personally, in the style of New Journalism than he ever was in this Internet age. His 'die for the reader' quote, and the above story, hint that maybe he just wasn't self-centered enough to truly thrive and enjoy the age we live in and the kind of writing he represented.

typical journalistic sentences, ones that are both descriptive and analytical, like, "What looks like an overwhelming baseline winner was actually set up by that first clever semi-short slice and Nadal's own predictability about where and how hard he'll hit every ball," followed up by utterly conversational ones, "Federer sure whaled that last forehand, though." But the next paragraph²⁶, something unusual happens. Wallace takes us into his mind and lets us watch through his eyes for an extended period of time. He stands in Centre Court at Wimbledon, watching along with a stadium full of people as Federer plays yet another brilliant point, and then wonders where the terminally sick child he referenced earlier, William Caines, is at the moment. He describes the, 'deep personal privilege at being alive to get to see this', and reminisces on what the bus driver told him at the beginning of the piece, the quote that gives the article its title, that seeing Federer is a 'bloody near-religious experience'. Independently, these things aren't unusual, but one gets the feeling reading David Foster Wallace that he is almost always explaining, and in this moment, united by the understanding that he is thinking and more than that, feeling all of these things, a moment of distinction is created. And then, he says this:

It's hard to describe — it's like a thought that's also a feeling. One wouldn't want to make too much of it, or to pretend that it's any sort of equitable balance; that would be grotesque. But the truth is that whatever deity, entity, energy, or random genetic flux produces sick children also produced Roger Federer, and just look at him down there. Look at that.

Reading this, reading those last words, it's hard not to sit back and exhale. I did. Because that's the end. In an article titled 'Roger Federer As Religious Experience', that's it.

²⁶ Still in the footnotes, mind you.

‘Watching Roger Federer is a confirmation of the beauty of creation’, so to speak — that’s everything. Right? It’s not. It took me a moment to remember that that was only the end of the last footnote, not, in fact, the end of the entire article. And, so, returning back to the main text, this is what I read: an entirely informed, but ultimately distant and intellectual, analysis of Federer, and the experience of Federer, which ends with the line, “Genius is not replicable. Inspiration, though, is contagious, and multiform — and even just to see, close up, power and aggression made vulnerable to beauty is to feel inspired and (in a fleeting, mortal way) reconciled.”

One can examine those lines, and the last few that ended the seventeenth footnote, and see the same writer--the same voice, the same structure which includes both a statement and a half negation of that statement²⁷— but somehow they come off entirely differently. For the first, the end to the footnote, is very explicitly couched in the realm of DFW’s mind. The lines are spoken as a broader statement because that’s what he always does, but the understanding that the broader statement is coming, very particularly, from him and his experience, that it is in fact, personal, puts the reader in such close proximity to the mental and emotional state of the writer, who is also another human being, that for a moment we are encouraged, perhaps through the connection of all human beings, and because of his command to ‘look at that’, to think on our own experience with Federer. In this entirely ephemeral moment I remember thinking, “Jesus. That’s right. That’s perfect.” Because I remembered watching Federer, and whether his words manipulated my memory or not, it suddenly felt like the most

²⁷ It’s a thought that’s also a feeling, but you wouldn’t want to make too much of it vs genius is not replicable, but inspiration is contagious

wonderful of all moments: a shared one. And yet, just one sentence later, the glow, or the moment, was gone. For the next and last two paragraphs, words that were written by the same man, constructed in much the same manner, felt as if they were held at arms length. That last line, although beautiful, feels empty. Because how can you replace connectedness with anything²⁸.

De Quincey writes, of the knock on the door and all moments like it, that the reader, "will be aware that at no moment was his sense of the complete suspension and pause in ordinary human concerns so full and affecting as at that moment when the suspension ceases" (De Quincey). In a way, it is only in going off on the provocative, personal and personable tangent that DFW goes off on in footnote, only to be sharply brought back to a distant, scholarly view of Federer, that we realize the pseudo personal relationship we have been given access too, and that we realize just how far we have been brought into in the writing.

One of the four tenets of New Journalism, as Wolfe saw it, was 'third person point of view', and he explains it as, 'the technique of presenting every scene to the reader through the eyes of a particular character, giving the reader the feeling of being inside the character's mind and experiencing the emotional reality of the scene as he experiences it' (157). Now, forty years later it's the first person point of view that matters, with the exact same statement but instead of character, the word author is often input. Some might say it's uncomfortable, that what we crave now is for someone

²⁸ It dawned on me that what I'm trying to do here might be impossible. I've rhetorically analyzed Foster Wallace's piece, and that's one level. But on another level I'm trying to convey the personal experience, my personal experience, reading his piece, which is, ultimately, about the personal experience, his personal experience, of watching Roger Federer. And maybe it's impossible to do all that.

to relay an experience through their own eyes, so we can always be watching, always be participating, but that's just the truth. Our society is stuck between this mixture of permanent FOMO (fear of missing out), and a desire to have real, meaningful experiences in a system²⁹ that constantly feels like it devalues all experiences through sheer force in numbers³⁰. And in such an age, a kind of writing that not only displays intimate human moments within the stories we see, but also consciously reaches out to the reader through language, in that age the writing is somewhere between crack and dessert. It's either a drug masking some really messed up facet of society, or something beautiful and sweet, something to look forward to.

The sun is rising over new snow and I've been up all night. I'm thinking about walking away from that parking lot after talking to Jack, about walking into my house that night after parting with Abe and my Professor, about the moment that's still to come, when I'll walk off this campus as a student for the last time. In all those moments, I didn't realize how much I finally felt like I belonged until it was over. And that's the thing, those moments are rare and fleeting to me and that's why I *love* this writing so much. Maybe this is for everybody or maybe it's particularly for college students or maybe it's just for me, but I can't help but think sometimes, *I'm 18, 19, 21, the things that are happening in my life, they're supposed to be special. Right? Aren't they?*

²⁹ The internet and mass media, social or otherwise

³⁰ You know what's a mundane, but potentially special experience? A really beautiful day. Just the words have a different meaning to many individuals, and that in itself is special. But do you know how many Instagram posts we see of beautiful days from around the world *every day*? We want to just share the wealth and it feels harmless. But in some way, doesn't that devalue our beautiful day today? It's like the government printing a ton of money only to find that inflation makes all those twenty's more like ones anyways.

Sometimes you need to be reminded what that special feels like. Other times you need to be reminded that many things already are.

In the New Yorker's post-humous profile of David Foster Wallace we learn that the writer had two goals, help readers, "feel less alone inside," and, "to make living people feel stuff" (Max). Wallace is, in a lot of ways, a kind of architect behind much of the modern writing talked about here today. He wasn't the first doing it, but he became such a powerful force that a lot of people have tried to mimic his style, myself included. It's fitting then, that his purpose is what comes through for me, although not quite in the same way.

New journalism often required long term journalistic commitment — we think of George Plimpton joining the Lions for months to achieve his goal of living out and reporting the common man's dream of 'what would it be like to play professional football for one snap', or Hunter Thompson traveling with Hell's Angel's for 18 months, as a reporter, in order to write his piece. Today's stuff just requires a moment and reflection. Sometimes it doesn't even require going out of your way. Just tying things together and making meaning between the things we see and the things we live.

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