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Privileging the Sentence:
David Foster Wallace's Writing Process for
"The View from Mrs. Thompson's"

"I don't discover the structure except by writing sentences because I can't think structurally well enough."

—David Foster Wallace, *Quack This Way*

On reserve at the Harry Ransom Center (HRC) at the University of Texas is the archive of David Foster Wallace, which holds various drafts and proofs of the writer's oeuvre, including both fiction and nonfiction.¹ Much scholarship has been devoted to Wallace's fiction; less to his nonfiction. This essay is interested in the latter, in particular Wallace's piece on 9/11 for *Rolling Stone*, "The View from Mrs. Thompson's" (Oct 25, 2001). Multiple versions of it are on file at HRC, including, in one folder alone, Wallace's handwritten draft, a largely pristine typescript draft, an edited version of the typescript, and a copy of the article that appeared in *Rolling Stone*.² Wallace did fairly light editing in the second typescript: just a few word changes and the striking of a paragraph that he restored for *Consider the Lobster*. *Rolling Stone*, for its part, changed very little from this second typescript. Nearly all change takes place between

¹ For background information on how the Ransom Center acquired the Wallace archive, see Megan Barnard, who notes that HRC had its "first glimpse into Wallace's creative process in 2005 with [its] acquisition of the papers of Don DeLillo," with whom Wallace had a lively correspondence. Barnard goes on to note that "Wallace's letters [to DeLillo] show a writer who was deliberate, funny, and often uncertain, but most clearly, they show a writer who took painstaking care with his art." For an overview of the kinds of papers the archive carries, see Meredith Blake, who describes how "Wallace's widow, Karen Green, and Bonnie Nadell, his long-time literary agent" assembled the Wallace materials "from the mess of papers he had stashed in a dark garage overrun with spiders."

² *Rolling Stone's* title for the piece it printed in 2001 was "The View from Mrs. Thompson's," but for some reason the magazine changed the title a decade later, when it posted it to its website as "9/11: The View from the Midwest." It might also be worth remarking that the photograph the website carries doesn't quite work: while the photo shows an image of a house bearing a large flag, the flag is draped across a rustic-looking cabin in Maine, not a house on the prairie in the Midwest. I can't imagine Wallace would be pleased.

Wallace's first two drafts. And so this paper will devote most of its attention to the difference between the handwritten draft and first typescript, in particular to changes Wallace makes to his sentences. By honing them carefully, Wallace finds his way inside the story, understands its structure more deeply, and enables himself to turn an incomplete rough draft into a thoughtful, polished essay. While such a process is not without precedent, the degree to which Wallace trusts his sentences to lead him from darkness to light is rare, warranting a close look by nonfiction writers and scholars alike.

Background

For much of his writing career, Wallace seemed to give short shrift to his nonfiction, perhaps especially the journalism. He said on more than one occasion that he was "not a journalist" (e.g., Jacob 153, Scocca 22), implying that nonfiction took second place in his career. Even so, Daniel B. Roberts argues that it would be unwise to take Wallace at his word when making such claims. Roberts states, "It would be weak to take Wallace's tongue-in-cheek humility as definitive evidence of what he was or wasn't as a [nonfiction] writer." He goes on to say that "Wallace was likely aware, even in his more self-doubting moments, that he was a skilled reporter." Josh Roiland, another advocate for Wallace's nonfiction, offers a detailed look at Wallace's journalistic output, which Roiland categorizes as "literary journalism": "a form of nonfiction writing that adheres to all of the reportorial and truth-telling covenants of traditional journalism, while employing rhetorical and storytelling techniques more commonly associated with fiction. In short, it is *journalism as literature*" ("Getting Away From It All" 26). "The View from Mrs. Thompson's" is among the eleven pieces of Wallace's nonfiction that qualify, all of which would be distinct from Wallace's memoir, reviews, etc.

In the same year that Roberts and Roiland are making their case for Wallace's journalistic excellence, Wallace biographer D.T. Max is arguing that Wallace felt that his nonfiction was too easy to write and that it was a distraction from what mattered more. In a Page-Turner essay for the *New Yorker*, Max quotes from one of Wallace's letters to Don DeLillo to undergird his assertion that "Wallace never

loved his nonfiction as he did his fiction. It was too easy, too unencoded; it took him too far from the Great White Novel that he was always trying to write” (“DFW’s Nonfiction: Better with Age”). Max would have known that Wallace had acknowledged in his interview with Scocca that he thought of himself first and foremost “as a fiction writer,” saying, “fiction’s more important to me” (22). Bear in mind, however, that in this oft-cited interview from 1998, Wallace appears to be burned out, for the moment, with his nonfiction. This is more noticeable in the long version of the interview (Melville House) than in the edited version reprinted by University Press of Mississippi. Know, too, that despite Wallace’s comments to Scocca about nonfiction fatigue, he wrote a major piece on the porn industry later that year.

However ambivalent Wallace may have been about his nonfiction, given his inability to finish his third novel (published posthumously as *The Pale King*), Wallace did for a time consider focusing exclusively on nonfiction (*Every Love Story* 296). After all, beginning with his work at *Harper’s* in the 1990s, in particular the state-fair and cruise-ship pieces, his nonfiction brought him good money and a certain degree of fame; more recently, his 2006 essay “Roger Federer as Religious Experience” had brought him a great deal of joy in the writing itself. Even when he was blocked on his fiction, he could work toward a fast-approaching deadline to produce clear and intricate nonfiction prose. In an interview with the *Atlantic*, when asked about Wallace sometimes “fabricat[ing] details” in such essays as the state-fair piece, Max answered,

The odd thing is that I don’t think he needed to do this. His prose and perceptions are so rich that he didn’t really have to make these embellishments. In my mind his embellishments were always a little shticky. I don’t think those pieces would have been much less admired if he’d been a little more literal-minded in what he saw. (“David Foster Wallace: Genius, Fabulist, Would-Be Murderer”).

Not surprisingly, Josh Roiland rejects such assertions in “The Fine Print,” where Roiland writes, among other things, that Max “makes broad generalization regarding Wallace’s fidelity to the facts” and that, in the

process, Max “gets some of his facts wrong” (154). In fairness to Max, he appears to approve of Wallace’s 9/11 piece, which Max calls “a short, delicate essay” (*Every Love Story* 262). It’s Wallace’s early nonfiction, primarily, that gives Max pause.

Wallace speaks to the process of drafting and revising in several of his interviews—see in particular his interview with a *Amherst Magazine*, where he calls himself a “Five Draft man,” which he says he developed while writing a paper every two weeks in an undergrad philosophy course at Amherst: “I got down a little system of writing and two rewrites and two typed drafts. I’ve used it ever since. I like it” (55). He goes on to say that “the first two of these drafts are pen-and-paper, which is a bit old-fashioned” (60). For “The View from Mrs. Thompson’s,” the Ransom Center holds only one “pen-and-paper,” a mostly clean typescript—which varies dramatically from the handwritten draft—and a slightly repaginated typescript with Wallace’s own light copyediting. Obviously Wallace produced fewer drafts than the five of his professed system in the small window of time he had for the assignment.

This paper will in part explore the structure of the finished essay, especially the first third of it. While Wallace’s first-draft sentences allow him to arrive at a more than serviceable structure, the power of “The View from Mrs. Thompson’s” derives less from its structuring than from Wallace’s having transformed the sentences between drafts, turning an unfinished narrative devoted largely to observable facts into a moving meditation on how 9/11 played out in Bloomington, Illinois. One comment by Wallace about drafting also touches on essay structure, and so it’s worth recounting here: He has compared the writing of his first draft to epilepsy (Wallace and Garner 65). With regard to his nonfiction specifically, he was asked how he goes about researching and “organizing [his] thoughts when [he’s] writing a long essay.” Wallace’s candid answer: “I find it very difficult. The truth is that most of the nonfiction pieces I do are at least partly experiential. They involve going to a place, talking to people, taking notes.... I end up taking a hundred times more notes than I need. My first draft usually approximates somebody in the midst of an epileptic seizure. It’s usually about the second or the third draft where I begin having any idea of actually

what this thing is about.” Wallace appears to have in mind the pieces he wrote on the Illinois State Fair, the cruise ship, some pieces on tennis and on the porn industry, etc. “The View from Mrs. Thompson’s” is a much shorter essay, of course, but its subject matter is darker, graver. While the magnitude of that historic event far exceeds the importance of the leisure pieces Wallace usually wrote, his note taking would essentially have amounted to only two days’ worth of material, not the fortnight of a state fair or week-long vacation typical of a cruise ship. He then groped his way through a loosely structured handwritten draft, leaving it unfinished after some seven pages of single-spaced scrawl to begin typing, at which point he had a good enough idea what his typed pages should look like; how the voice should sound; how the tone should ring.

The changes Wallace makes in the typescript, at least for the first third of the essay, are largely of two types: (1) revisions of original wording to sharpen precision and (2) additions to the original material, to round out and deepen the sentences and, very often, the storytelling itself. Occasionally—and only occasionally—change takes place between the handwritten draft and typescript that calls into question the veracity of the details (e.g., in the handwritten draft, a woman at a gas station makes a comment to another woman about her son; in the typescript, she speaks about two sons to a man). As well, a comparison of Wallace’s corrected typescript to the version *Rolling Stone* printed suggests that their fact-checking department found at least four inaccuracies, all small (i.e., the incorrect spelling of a convenience store, as well as the interstate along which it is located; the wrong call letters of a radio station; and, it seems, the wrong size of a TV set). Further, at the first use in the text of Mrs. Thompson’s name, *Rolling Stone* supplied the following footnote: “EDITORS NOTE: SOME NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED, AND SOME DETAILS HAVE BEEN ALTERED.” The periodical used all capital letters, making it hard for even the most casual reader to miss, and while a name-change or two might give few pause (protecting sources, e.g., has long been a journalistic staple), the alteration of a detail is somewhat more concerning. Which details, and why? The fact-checking? Aside from that, the agent of name-and-detail changing would

have to be Wallace himself, since his corrected typescript is nearly verbatim what *Rolling Stone* ran. Indeed, the handwritten draft shows that Wallace originally had used another first name for “Duane,” and that his mother is not Mrs. Bracero but someone else at the gathering. “F----” in the typescript appears in the handwritten version with a full-name that does in fact begin with the letter “F.”

But given the nature of the essay—the way 9/11 plays out in small-town Bloomington in gas stations, Wallace’s neighborhood, and people’s living rooms on, respectively, the 12th and 11th of September—fact-checking the number and names of the people Wallace writes about—or, for that matter, the number of tiny flags peppering a lawn or the size of someone’s flag or flagpole—becomes not only moot but virtually impossible from the distance of *Rolling Stone*’s editorial office. As for the details Wallace reports in the essay about the televised coverage of 9/11, certainly *Rolling Stone* editors could verify any times or events Wallace specifies (e.g., the exact time at which a particular tower is hit by a plane or how it looks when it collapses to the ground). Of course, Wallace had written the long piece for them on John McCain’s presidential bid the year before; it went on to win the National Magazine Award for Feature Writing. The magazine’s editors knew well the extent to which they could trust his work, and by this point in his career, Wallace understood the degree to which his essay had to stand up to editorial scrutiny. He had a vested stake in handing them clean, verifiable copy. The editors had no complaints about his sentences; these they let stand.

Method

I traveled to Texas in early May 2017 to page through nonfiction portions of Wallace’s archive, hoping to find something new about Wallace’s Midwest—or at least about the way he writes it. I had lived in the city of Chicago during many of Wallace’s formative years in Champaign-Urbana; years later, having left Illinois for graduate study in Florida, I found much to value when reading Wallace’s essays on the Midwest in *Harper’s Magazine*, especially his depictions of and thoughts on the landscape, weather, and people. His

tennis memoir and state-fair piece have become fairly well-trod scholarly ground in the time since their first appearance, in part because of the usual questions about an author's childhood and its influence on his work, but also because of questions raised about their veracity. "The View from Mrs. Thompson's," the last of Wallace's three essays on the Midwest and also the most moving, has somehow attracted less attention pro or con.

I know of two scholars who have worked directly with Wallace's nonfiction about the Midwest as, specifically, Midwestern writing. In a review of D.T. Max's biography that appeared in the *Chicago Reader*, Craig Fehrman argues that Max missed altogether how the Midwest "influenced [Wallace] ... in his philosophical and artistic orientation toward the larger world." As well, in a companion piece to his review, Fehrman describes the angry reaction of the local press years earlier to Wallace's state-fair piece, with its lacerating descriptions of, among other things, waist-lines, dietary habits, and make-up and clothing styles. Fehrman notes that Wallace, who was surprised by the backlash, is reported to have said, "If the piece came off ... as some one [sic] sneering at the Midwest, then that's really a deficiency in the piece. It really wasn't meant to do that" ("A Typical Case of a Small-Town Boy Who Betrayed His Roots': David Foster Wallace as a Midwestern Writer"). Josh Roiland argues that the 9/11 piece represents a kind of synthesis for Wallace, who had idealized the Midwest a decade earlier in the tennis memoir and then attacked it, more or less, three years later in the state-fair essay. For Roiland, the third and final essay "reconciles these divergent impressions; it's the Midwest of understanding and acceptance" ("Spiritually Midwestern").

While wending through the many folders on Wallace, and on his three Midwestern essays in particular, I came upon the handwritten draft for the 9/11 piece. In the same folder (30.11) were two typescript drafts, one nearly pristine, the other slightly differently paginated but showing copyediting marks (Wallace's own—I verified this by comparing the handwriting on the copyediting to a handful of words—"one," "the," "interior"—also used in the handwritten draft). In a 4th sleeve, a photocopy of the *Rolling Stone* article. The second typescript bore up to a line by line comparison to the first—the same words but

with two lines extending to a 12th page. The second typescript also bore up, largely, to the version in *Rolling Stone*—they incorporated nearly all of Wallace’s copyediting (including his cut of the full paragraph devoted to the local newspaper), changed a couple of facts (see fact-checking above), and added a paragraph break at a key point where Wallace himself had done a fair amount of line-editing. Aside from this, their changes amounted to following their house style (e.g., use of hyphens or capitalization).

For the *Lobster* book, by the way, Wallace appears to have gone back to his second typescript, rather than using the *Rolling Stone* version. Even so, aside from restoring the paragraph on the *Pantagraph*, there’s little difference between the magazine and book versions but for a little phrase-refining (e.g., “Bloomingtonians” in *Rolling Stone* becomes the more graceful though less concise “people in Bloomington”). As well, the fact-checking changes made for *Rolling Stone* get mixed treatment in *Lobster*: Wallace used the correct call letters for the radio station in *Lobster* but restored his own quirky spelling of the convenience store where he sips tea in a back room as well as using the interstate he originally specified; he also restores the size of the TV set.

For this paper, I have made five tables that highlight, quite literally, the differences between Wallace’s handwritten draft and his first typescript. I did this for only the first third of the essay, which amounts to the entirety of the heading information, “SYNECDOCHE,” and “WEDNESDAY.” Regarding the portion of the essay that comes next, “ARIEL & GROUND VIEWS,” the typescript largely hews to the order of the handwritten draft (a rundown of Bloomington’s population, prosperity, weather, churches, and television-watching habits), if not as much to the sentences themselves. By the time the handwritten draft gets to the material that would become “TUESDAY,” its order bears little resemblance to that of the typescript, rendering side by side comparison relatively useless. As well, quite a bit of material, especially on the last couple of pages of the handwritten draft, simply drops away. Mostly these are notes about Tuesday afternoon, when more visitors show up at Mrs. Thompson’s and conversation turns to asking one another where they were when they first heard the news; in the typescript, Wallace

focuses only on events that occurred that morning. (As Wallace said to Garner, “My [writing] process appears to be getting precipitate out of an enormous amount of solution” [66].) But it appears that sticking closely to the handwritten draft’s sentences in the early-going was enough to get Wallace started and help him enter deeply into the material, allowing him to cut, rearrange, and improvise more automatically as his typing progressed.

A final thought on the difference between drafts and what gets left out: Wallace is perfectly capable of self-censorship. For instance, he changes names, as noted above. In the handwritten draft he also refers initially to his neighbor—the one with the big flag and nice, shiny flagpole—as being a “putz” but wisely lines it through; it does not make its way into the typescript, where Wallace lets the details about his neighbor’s likability speak for themselves. Truly, if Wallace by chance did dislike the man, a reader would not guess it from the typescript, which makes great effort to be fair to everyone, arguably avoiding altogether the “Asshole problem” famously described elsewhere by Wallace (“It All Gets Quite Tricky 32). Once he moves from the handwritten draft to the typescript, Wallace lets all of his displeasure and general sense of abjection or misanthropy settle in on “Duane,” with whom, of course, he ultimately aligns himself. The handwritten draft appears to be the place where Wallace jots down just about any sentence that could be used—some of them, like the “putz” line, feel forced—but issues regarding ethos come to the fore once he starts typing. It’s not just that Wallace has a better idea where he’s heading by then; he also knows better who he needs to be.

Findings

This may be as good a place as any to state that aside from who wrote it and the circumstances under which it was written, little about the handwritten draft is exceptional. The content itself is largely straightforward description. Few of the sentences feature anything beyond ordinary writing. Little emotion is conjured, the tone dispassionate. In contrast, the typewritten draft sounds like classic Wallace. It moves

gracefully as narrative momentum builds; description is vivid and frequently riveting; emotion is based on how the events affect people in Bloomington, including the writer, himself a somewhat wary but largely needy participant of/(in) the community. The reader of this paper can see what I mean by reading, in sequence, all of the left columns on the five tables below and then the right columns. On the right, blue is used to show changes made to the handwritten draft's wording (including the occasional change of fact); yellow shows new information, i.e., what a composition teacher would term "development" of the base material. I should note that while it was a little hard occasionally to decide how to color-code differences between hand and type, usually it was easy to make the call. For instance, the first independent clause of dialogue in the original, "My boy thought it was some movie like *Independence Day*," becomes, "With my boys they thought it was all some movie like *Independence Day*." The preposition, plural pronoun, and adjective "all" have been added, so they code yellow, while "boy" has been made plural, which earns blue.

Table 1

From (1) the Hand-Written Draft of Wallace's 9/11 Piece That Was Published in Rolling Stone (10/25/2001) & Lobster (2005):

At the top left side of the first page of the handwritten draft: "View From the Interior," perhaps the working title.

At the top right side of the same page: "3 sections 1 [circled] Wednesday 2 [circled] Tuesday 3 [circled] Interior Views." Note: While the "3" is on the top right side of the page, "Interior Views" is on the left side, just beneath "View From the Interior," and so it's quite possible that Wallace had no section-name yet for "3" and that "Interior Views" is instead an alternative working title.

In a diagonal box between left and right sides of the top of the page: "Caveat: Written Very Fast, and In Shock"

In the left margin of the first page, in the top half, perhaps an afterthought:

Illinoisans aren't unfriendly, but they're reserved. But now there's something to talk about. Overheard at Burwell's Cil (the Neiman Marcus of gas station convenience stores, - [sic] centrally located and with the best tobacco prices in town, it's a municipal treasure) between to [sic] large ladies in cashiers [sic] smocks, : [sic] re [sic] The Horror: "My boy thought it was some movie like Independence Day, except after a while he realized the same movie was on every channel." She didn't say how old her boy was.

From (2) the First Typed Draft of Wallace's 9/11 Piece That Was Published in Rolling Stone (10/25/2001) & Lobster (2005):

untitled

LOCATION: BLOOMINGTON, IL

DATES: 1-13 SEPTEMBER 2001

SUBJECT: OBVIOUS

(CAVEAT: WRITTEN VERY FAST AND IN WHAT PROBABLY QUALIFIES AS SHOCK)

SYNECDOCHE In true Midwest fashion, Bloomingtonians aren't unfriendly but do tend to be reserved. A stranger will smile warmly at you, but there normally won't be any of that strangerly chitchat in waiting areas or checkout lines. But now there's something to talk about that outweighs all reserve, like we were somehow all standing right there and just saw the same traffic accident. E.g., overheard in the checkout line at Burwell Oil (which is sort of the Neiman Marcus of gas station / convenience store plazas—centrally located athwart both one-way main drags, and with the best tobacco prices in town, it's a municipal treasure) between a lady in an Osco cashier's smock and a man in a dungaree jacket cut off at the shoulder to make a sort of homemade vest: "With my boys they thought it was all some movie like that Independence Day til then after a while they started to notice it was the same movie on all the channels." (The lady didn't say how old her boys were.)

"Bloomingtonians," while perhaps an unwieldy construction, is obviously more specific and no less unwieldy than "Illinoisans," and thus a more effective choice. Having the cashier's smock bear the workplace moniker "Osco" serves to enhance imagery, and certainly the man with the homemade vest cuts a more striking image than just another large woman in a nameless cashier's smock (though, of course, both instances can't be true, unless the man was also present in the store, and who the woman was

originally speaking to—assuming such an utterance occurred, etc.—was ambiguous). The minor changes to the sentence of dialogue are in keeping with Wallace’s own comments about how he approaches dialogue: “You sort of have to rewrite it so it sounds more out-loud” (Scocca 31). Certainly the woman’s revised speech pattern sounds more “down home” than the handwritten version’s suburban trim; it’s also in keeping with a footnote of Wallace’s from a later portion of the published essay that describes the local accent as “rural.”

As for the new material in this passage, the heading information about location, date, and subject certainly helps ground the material, especially in the absence of a title on the typescript. It is unknown whether Wallace had decided at this point to have no title or whether he was simply leaving it up to *Rolling Stone*. The addition of parentheses and a qualification (i.e., “what probably qualifies as”) to the earlier version of the caveat serve to shape a classic Wallace aside—a reference to himself as writer of the piece that calls attention to both his vulnerability and desire to be honest while acknowledging at the same time that his perception is surely subjective and perhaps even occasionally in error, though of small importance (by use of parentheses) compared to the events herein. He may have learned the utility of being honest about his state of mind through his study of the nonfiction of Joan Didion, a writer who makes her biases and limitations part of nearly every story she writes. (See, for instance, her highly criticized yet deeply empathetic examination of the Las Vegas wedding industry in “Marrying Absurd.” Wallace had been an “enormous fan” of Didion’s essays since college [Scocca 36].) Wallace’s added use of “SYNECDOCHE” as a subtitle for this opening helps to designate it as being representative of the rest of the essay (see his comments to Garner about how an opening should “lay out the terms of an argument” and “imply the stakes” [80]) as well as, more obviously, to suggest that what’s going on in Bloomington on the 12th of September is representative of what has gone on throughout the Midwest.

Note the added human connection and direct address, too, in Wallace’s new material made by the “stranger [who] will smile warmly at you” but usually eschew “chitchat” and the reason for breaking that

routine, which Wallace also chooses to bring down to a human scale by his use of the simile “traffic accident.” In short, this opening has been transformed in the act of revision in ways that make both writer and town vastly more human and worth caring about. And yet, the sentences that serve as the basis of the opening were almost surely not the place where Wallace began his thoughts, given their marginal position on the first page of his handwritten draft. They were probably something arrived at once Wallace figured out what he was trying to do. Even so, he managed to keep the size of his opening to a single concise paragraph, apparently the ideal size, as he remarks to Garner, of a “good opener [that], first and foremost, fails to repel” (80).

Table 2

Hand-Draft

#1 circled Wednesday

Everybody has flags out. Homes, businesses. It's odd — you never see anybody putting one up, but by Wednesday morning there they are. Big flags, small, cloth and plastic flags. A lot of people here have those angled flag-holders by their front door, whose brace takes four Phillips screws. Those little hand-held flags-on-a-stick are all over some people's yards like they spouted overnight. Rural-road people attach them to their mailboxes out by the street. Some people have actual poles; their flags are at half-mast. Several houses have big quilt-size flags hanging from their second story. It's a total mystery how they got these up. ~~Some p If you~~ My own next-door neighbor, he's a putz a postal supervisor and VFW whose lawn- and home-care are always phenomenal, has a regulation-size flagpole ~~stuck~~ screwed in 18" of cement that nobody in the neighborhood likes because they think it attracts lightning. He says there's an etiquette to putting a flag at half-mast; you're supposed to run it all the way up and then bring it halfway down. Otherwise it's an insult or something. ~~And you're supposed to bring it in at sundown. If you ask him what exactly the flag's for, he'll look at you.~~ The flag's out straight and pops in the wind. It's the biggest flag on the street. You can also hear the wind in the cornfields just south—it sounds like surf. The pole's rope makes a mournful clanking sound, something else the neighbors don't care for. He is literally polishing the pole with some kind of special ointment, and it shines like God's own wrath.

First Typed Draft

WEDNESDAY Everybody has flags out. Homes, businesses. It's odd; you never see anybody putting out a flag, but by Wednesday morning there they all are. Big flags, small flags, regular flag-sized flags. A lot of homeowners here have those special angled flag-holders by their front door, the kind whose brace takes four Phillips screws. And thousands of those little hand-held flags-on-a-stick you normally see at parades — some yards have dozens all over as if they'd somehow sprouted overnight. Rural-road people attach the little flags to their mailboxes out by the street. Some cars have them wedged in their grille or duct-taped to the antenna. Some upscale people have actual poles; their flags are at half mast. More than a few large homes around Franklin Park or out on the east side even have enormous multi-story flags hanging goniaton-style down over their facades. It's a total mystery where people get flags this big or how they got them up there, or when.

My own next-door neighbor, a retired CPA and yet whose home- and lawn-care are nothing short of phenomenal, has a regulation-size anodized flagpole secured in 18" of reinforced cement that none of the other neighbors like very much because they think it draws lightning. He says there's a very particular etiquette to having your flag at half mast; you're supposed to first run it all the way up to the top and then bring it halfway down. Otherwise it's an insult or something. His flag is out straight and popping smartly in the wind. It's far and away the biggest flag on our street. You can also hear the wind in the cornfields just south; it sounds roughly the way light surf sounds when you're two dunes back from it. Mr. N----'s flag's halyard has metal elements that clank loudly against the pole when it's windy, which is something else the other neighbors don't care for. His driveway and mine are almost right together, and he's out here on a stepladder polishing his pole with some kind of ointment and a chamois cloth—I shit you not—and in fairness it's true that his metal pole does shine like God's own wrath.

The changes to this first section of “WEDNESDAY” obviously help to refine imagery. Half of the base is devoted to a series of still shots showing the variety of ways that people in and around Bloomington display their flags; the other half focuses on a neighbor’s very large and much fussed over flag. Readers will note that the neighbor undergoes a change of vocation, from “postal supervisor” to “retired CPA.” Both could be true, of course, but it’s possible that jobs, like names, have been changed to protect identities (or, less charitably, to avoid lawsuits). Perhaps Wallace was simply mistaken initially, while drafting, and corrected himself in type. On the handwritten draft, as noted above, Wallace has lined through a rude assessment of the neighbor (“he’s a putz”). By 2001, even while writing in a “state of shock,” Wallace wills himself to become a kinder writer than the one who five years earlier described a middle-aged woman sitting at a table with him on a cruise ship as looking like “Jackie Gleason in drag”; granted, circumstances for the two occasions are radically dissimilar.

Syntactically, the most striking change appears in the next-to-last sentence of what has become the first of two paragraphs. Wallace goes from “Several houses have big quilt-size flags hanging from their second story” to “More than a few large homes around Franklin Park or out on the east side have enormous multi-story flags hanging gonfalon-style down over their facades.” This is a perfect example of my earlier comment that much of the writing of the handwritten draft is unremarkable. But in the typescript, Wallace transforms a basic observation into something that sounds like David Foster Wallace. We can chart the differences between the sentences phrase by phrase and see the superiority of the enhancement; at the same time, we can see how firmly grounded in the first sentence the second sentence is. In the second, however, we get a strong sense of the diverse geographic make-up of Bloomington—two parts of the town are named, one somewhat generically though still somewhat specifically (“the east side”) and the other a very specific neighborhood (“Franklin Park”). Somehow this variety of place names pleases; certainly the pairing is superior to its nondescript base, “[s]everal houses.” In the second sentence we also gain a much richer image of not just the size of the flags, but of how they “hang” (“gonfalon-style

down over their facades,” with “gonfalon” subtly evoking the martial implications of flag display, something Wallace would surely know, given his love for and actual collection of unusual words). Certainly the revised version has a music all its own when said out loud (hear/feel not just the cadence, but also alliteration and assonance).

As for additional material, the sound the wind makes in the cornfields has been deftly developed: it’s a “light” surf that Wallace apparently had imagined—or it has become such through revision—and now we know just how far back from certain natural obstructions of specific number it’s meant to be heard (“two dunes back”). Also worth remarking is how nicely the low clause “I shit you not” pairs up with the biblical wording that ends this sentence and passage. While “God’s own wrath” somehow turns out to be a perfect phrase to retain from the base draft, the addition of “does” as a helping verb helps seal the biblical tone of the final clause (at some faint level you hear the trace of its King James undergirding, “doth”). Don’t miss as well just how much research Wallace has managed to put into describing all aspects of his neighbor’s flag set-up: the cement has become “reinforced”; “halyard” details have been added, including the fact that now it’s the halyard, not the rope, making sound, and it’s no longer “mournful” (a highly personal choice of adjectives that could be easily challenged), just “loud” (an apt adjective many times over and an easy sell for the reader. This substitution also allows the sound of the corn to stand alone in this passage as the one aural evocation of melancholy).

Table 3

Hand-Draft

"Nice flag, Mr. ----"

"Why thank you."

"Seen all the flags out everywhere this morning?"

"Something, isn't it?"

"If, say, somebody like a TV reporter or a foreigner were to ask what ~~all these~~ [~~three unrendable~~ letters, perhaps 'dev'] the purpose of these flags was exactly, what do you think you'd say?"

"To show our support and empathy towards what's going on."

[Wallace had written a note in the margin to the left of his last question to his neighbor: "Ask three different people:" (quotation marks added). Listed below are the three responses, which continued in-stream in the hand-draft, just after his neighbor's response about showing support.]

"They're to make a statement that we're all united on this and ~~proud to be Americans~~ not bowing down to anybody."

"To show we're proud to be Americans For pride."

~~To show who~~ As a kind of pseudo-patriotism to manipulate people into going to war; which to profit corporations" (college student in mega death T-shirt).

First Typed Draft

"Hell of a nice flag and display apparatus, Mr. N----."

"Ought to be. Cost enough."

"Seen all the other flags out everywhere this morning?"

This gets him to look down and smile, if a big grimly. "Something isn't it?" Mr. N---- is not what you'd call the friendliest next-door neighbor. I really only know him because his church and mine are in the same softball league, for which he serves with immense precision as his team's statistician. We are not close. He's nevertheless the first one I ask:

"Say Mr. N----, suppose somebody like a foreign person or TV reporter were to come by and ask you to say what the purpose of all these flags everywhere after the Horror and everything yesterday yesterday [sic] was exactly—what do you think you'd say?"

"Why" (after a brief interval of giving me the same sort of look he usually gives my lawn) "to show our support and empathy in terms of what's going on, as Americans."¹

¹ (Plus selected other responses from various times during the day's flag- and Magic-Marker-hunts when circumstances allowed the question to be asked without seeming like a smart-ass or loon:

"To show we're Americans and not going to bow down to anybody";

"The flag is a pseudo-archetype, a reflexive semion designed to preempt and negate the critical function" [grad student];

"For pride."

"What they do is symbolize unity and that we're all together behind the victims in this war. That they've fucked with the wrong people this time.")

We're in the realm of dialogue with this table, and thus for Wallace in the realm of fair play. As noted on the left side of the table, Wallace poses a question to his neighbor about "the purpose" of "all the flags out this morning," and in the margin beside the question, Wallace has written, "Ask three different people," indicating that he plans to pose the same question to others. Yet, the answers themselves appear on the same page of lined college paper, just after his neighbor's reply, rather than on a separate sheet of paper or in the margin, either of which would have indicated that Wallace had conducted the survey some hours or days later. A skeptic might take this sequence as suggestive that Wallace simply made up the answers.

However, other, more Wallace-friendly explanations are possible. Wallace may well have stopped writing to conduct his brief survey by phone or on a run through town. Another possibility is that he simply saved space at the bottom of the page of his draft (three blank lines would have been available), planning to gather these responses later, and moved on while in the act of writing to the top of a second page of ruled paper. If it is this second possibility, he appears to be using the same black pen in the same hurried hand; to find all the room he needs to write the replies, he has to use the bottom margin and far-right side of the page, which suggest that he did in fact move on to the top of his second page as he wrote, saving the bottom of page 1 for his research. Whatever Wallace's process, his typescript shows four, not three, footnoted responses aside from his neighbor's. As well, Wallace prefaces these lines with a note stating that he gathered the material during his "flag- and Magic-Marker-hunts" (methodological aside: Wallace's preface could be coded blue, rather than yellow, if I were to assume that it's actually a revision of the much more terse "Ask three different people:" noted in the left column and commented upon above).

Regardless of Wallace's method, the original lines of dialogue grow sometimes and change at others. For instance, Wallace's simple "Nice flag" greeting to his neighbor becomes "Hell of a nice flag and display apparatus." Quite possibly, of course, Wallace only jotted down a kind of short hand on the hand-written draft and knew he'd get the whole phrase down in typescript. However, the change of his

neighbor's reply from the bland "Why thank you" to a far more compelling "Ought to be. Cost enough" isn't as easy to explain away. Even so, it's quite possible his neighbor did say this very thing during their conversation, and that he said it fairly close to his "thank you" reply. Wallace is surely writing the exchange from memory anyway, though possibly he has approached his neighbor on 9/12 with a pen and notepad in hand. In part I'd like to think so, and that his neighbor knew he was being interviewed. In fairness to Wallace, I do not know at what point he actually knew he was going to write a publishable piece of journalism on 9/11, though his handwritten draft suggests he knew the moment he pressed his pen against the top of page 1 of his college-lined paper. As for the changes and additions to the footnoted replies, the only one that calls into question enhancement beyond the call of duty is the student's, which bears only the base-word "pseudo" in the rewrite. Questions of veracity aside, the refigured response is far more thoughtful and engaging than its knee-jerk, adolescent-sounding forerunner; thankfully the T-shirt has also disappeared. Assuming Wallace did the legwork to gather both responses, he settled on the right one, even if it means he may have cherry-picked his smartest grad student to offer it up. Wallace makes no overt claim that the responses he lands on are perfectly representative of a broad cross-section of "Bloomingtonians," nor need he. After all, what he's writing in this case is journalism, not social science, more man-in-the-street style than randomly selected.

One other comment is worth making about the rewrite. It's possible that Wallace considers his scenes as good a place as any to tie parts of the essay together and help unify story-telling, not simply as a place to make dialogue sing. For instance, his own line's added "display apparatus" harkens back to the lanyard and other details added to his neighbor's flag set-up. Conversely, deciding to eliminate the "T-shirt" here allows Wallace to save it for his description of "loathsome Duane" later on in the piece, which, at just a few thousand words, should probably spare the reader too many black-shirted Bloomingtonians of a certain age.

Table 4

Hand-Draft

There's a weird sort of pressure to have a flag out. If the flags make a statement, it seems like at a certain point of density of flags you're making more of a statement if you don't have a flag. It's not totally clear what statement this would be. What if you just don't happen to have a flag? Where does everyone ~~in town~~ get these flags, especially the little ones you can stick in your yard? Are they from the 4th, and people save them, like Christmas decorations? [The next sentence appears in the margin to the left of "decorations."] Nobody says Hey – your house doesn't have a flag, but you can kind of imagine them thinking it.

First Typed Draft

The point being that on Wednesday here there's a weird accretive pressure to have a flag out. If the purpose of a flag is to make a statement, it seems like at a certain point of density of flags you're making more of a statement if you don't have a flag out. It's not totally clear what statement this would be. What if you just don't happen to have a flag? Where has everyone gotten these flags, especially the little ones you can put on your mailbox? Are they all from the July 4th [sic] and people just save them, like Christmas ornaments? How do they know to do this? Even a sort of half-collapsed house down street [sic] that everybody thought was unoccupied has a flag in the ground by the driveway. There's nothing in the Yellow Pages under *Flag*. There starts to be actual tension. Nobody walks by or stops their car and says, "Hey, your house doesn't have a flag," but it gets easier and easier to imagine people thinking it.

The left side and right both show the first part of a long paragraph in handwritten and typed versions, halved here for the sake of fitting material comfortably on these tables. Here's where Wallace's essay gets truly interesting by relying on his self-awareness (or out and out paranoia) to make a keen observation. If everyone is displaying flags, what does it say about the one house on the street (or in the town) that isn't? Wallace's "you" is a barely disguised version of "I"; he would know readers know that, of course, but at the same time he gives the appearance of including them. For the most part the changes (in blue) make wording more specific. "Accretive" and "it gets easier and easier" replace Wallace's filler words "sort of" and "you can kind of"; "accretive" also sounds better, aurally, between "weird" and "pressure" (the series of "e"s plus the extra beat), while helping, at the same time, to make "weird" weirder. "People" (last line) arguably evokes a stronger image than "them" in that it's less vague; "people" also manages to increase the

number of eyes on the house without the flag, in part because the plural pronoun of the handwritten draft is being used informally to denote a single person.

The new material begins with a transition that sounds informal and hustles the reader inside the paragraph. “The point being that on Wednesday here” also helps justify the previous scene’s inclusion, lest anyone think the scene’s only reason for being was to be scenic. But it’s the four new sentences, which appear as a single unit, that develop the passage emotionally. The first sentence helps to make clear the writer’s concern about not being one of the crowd—what lack of information or brain-part has kept him from realizing that everyone needs a flag tucked away somewhere, just in case? After all, as the next sentence makes clear, even people who don’t care all that much about the appearance of their home have the God-given sense to have on hand a flag. The third new sentence, about the Yellow Pages, briefly injects humor alongside pathos—imagine a panicking Wallace (or someone like him) scrambling for the phone book, to look under *Flag*. (Granted, few readers would have found it even briefly, blackly humorous back when it appeared in *Rolling Stone* six weeks after the event.) And if the reader needs to be told what the impact of this situation is, emotionally speaking, the fourth sentence brings it home: “There starts to be actual tension.” This final sentence of insertion lays the groundwork for the brilliant final sentence, largely intact from the handwritten draft, about people actually confronting “you” for not having a flag—people who “walk by” or “stop their car” to do so—only of course they don’t do so, or haven’t done so, because the sentence begins with “nobody.” We could ponder how such a paranoid thought would ever be worth sharing in what amounts to a feature piece. And yet, it’s obviously effective as one more means of drawing a reader in and inviting him to imagine 9/11 as it was experienced hundreds of miles away from New York City. If something like this is part of what Wallace means by “embellishment”—as in “you hire a fiction writer to do nonfiction, there’s going to be the occasional bit of embellishment” (Scocca 31)—what reader could object?

Table 5

Hand-Draft

[continuation of final paragraph of WEDNESDAY]

Neither grocery store nearby has a flag. All the businesses downtown have flags but don't sell flags. The VFW hall doesn't open till noon. A couple small convenience stores out by I-74 say they had some up front, by the bandanas and NASCAR caps, but they're gone. There's not a flag to be had. | [The first bracket was Wallace's own left bracket—his only use of a bracket in the sentences transcribed for these tables] Stealing one out of the yard of the [three unreadable letters crossed out, possibly "gay" or, less likely, "goy"] people across the street with over a dozen and a flag-design ribbon around his [sic] tree seems is [three or four unreadable letters crossed out] ~~like a ghastly thing to do~~ like not an option—what kind of message would that send?

First Typed Draft

[continuation of final paragraph of WEDNESDAY]

None of the grocery stores in town turn out to stock any flags. The novelty shop downtown has nothing but Halloween stuff. Only a few businesses are even open, but even the closed ones are displaying some sort of flag. It's almost surreal. The VFW hall is a good bet but it can't open til noon if at all (it has a bar). The lady at Burwell Oil references a certain hideous KWIK-N-EZ store out by I-55 at which she was under the impression she'd seen some little plastic flags back in the racks with all the bandannas and NASCAR caps, but by the time I get there they turn out to be gone, snapped up by parties unknown. The reality is that there is not a flag to be had in this town. Stealing one out of somebody's yard is clearly out of the question. I'm standing in the KWIK-N-EZ afraid to go home. All those people dead, and I'm sent to the edge by a plastic flag. It doesn't get really bad until people ask if I'm OK and I have to lie and say it's a Benadryl reaction (which in fact can happen)... Until in one of the Horror's weird twists of fate and circumstance it's the Kwik-n-EZ proprietor himself (a Pakistani, by the way) who offers solace and a shoulder and a strange kind of unspoken understanding, and who lets me go back and sit in the stock room amid every conceivable petty vice and indulgence America has to offer and compose myself, and who only slightly later, over styrofoam cups of a strange kind of tea with a great deal of milk in it, suggests, gently, construction paper and "Magical Markers," which explains my now-beloved homemade flag.

The right side shows how the top half of this passage has been transformed through an evenly distributed mix of revised phrasing (blue) and development (yellow) alongside original wording (white). This portion represents the wind-up to "WEDNESDAY"'s finale—i.e., the bottom all-yellow half. One wonders if

Wallace revised first and then, on a separate pass, inserted new sentences and phrases. Anyway, bear in mind that the person in search of a flag (i.e., Wallace) is experiencing “tension” all the while he travels through downtown along the streets and then out by the interstate(s). Revision allows Wallace to add a new stop (“the novelty shop downtown”) and to add clarifying detail to the setting (the “bar” at the “VFW hall” as the reason why it can’t yet be open); such enhancement allows Wallace to show more vividly that he has left no stone unturned and leads naturally to what appears to be a little breakdown or emotional collapse, i.e., the brand-new material that forms the last part of this passage and the final moment of the “WEDNESDAY” section of the essay.

Here, Wallace has the good sense to make clear how silly a thing it is, given the circumstances, to lose it in the middle of a convenience store: “All those people dead, and I’m sent to the edge by [my inability to find] a plastic flag.” Others in the store notice him in distress (“It doesn’t get really bad until people ask if I’m OK”), and finally he is comforted by the store’s “proprietor ... who offers solace and a shoulder and a strange kind of unspoken understanding.” Wallace’s acute self-awareness of just how different he is—not having a flag to begin with, not being able to find a flag to fit in, not being able to keep it together as a result—render him on the page as someone trying very hard to respect social mores under extreme circumstances. As a writer, he has managed to make the story of 9/11 as it plays out in a small town in the Midwest about himself, at least for these few sentences. While some might find this shockingly narcissistic, readers who appreciate souls in torment find the self-abasement both relatable and heart-rending. 9/11 *was* awful—shocking and trying—and nearly everyone who thinks and feels has his own story about that day and the day after, and probably every one of them would in some way involve Wallace’s twin objects of scrutiny, televised coverage of the event and the immediate aftermath of flag-waving. And so being able to handle (or write about) not being able to handle it makes a potent combination, as Wallace’s revision of his handwritten draft shows. It’s the handwritten draft that was “written very fast and in shock”; it’s the typed draft that gives Wallace the chance to slow down and focus,

and to realize by then that what others would make of his state of mind “probably qualifies as” shock, but not necessarily.

Discussion

By attending to Wallace’s sentences in the early-going and seeing how they change, we are able to follow Wallace transforming himself from something like an observer to someone like a witness—i.e., someone who can impart a deeper truth because he is wholly involved in the proceedings. By getting inside his sentences, Wallace is able to get inside the experience and convey not just what happened, but how it felt. Paradoxically, he is able to set aside his self-consciousness by working in service to the story. While some writers prefer to know the big picture and even to outline their stories extensively prior to the actual writing, Wallace is not one of them. His approach is more inductive. Once he has a good enough sense of where he’s heading—once he sees enough workable sentences on the handwritten page—he begins to type. And once he begins typing, those viable sentences change, refine, extend and deepen, and so does the story. So much so that Wallace is able, from the more dross-laden portions of the handwritten draft, to pick out the handful of phrases worth developing.

The three most moving moments in “The View from Mrs. Thompson’s” are (1) that scene in the back of the convenience store; (2) the moment watching TV at Mrs. Thompson’s when everyone realizes that the dots falling off the buildings are people who are still alive, some of whose shoes are slipping off as they plummet to their deaths; and (3) the moment near the end of the essay when Wallace realizes that Mrs. Thompson and her friends are quietly praying, and he too prays. These moments pack enormous emotional power, in large part by taking us deeply inside Wallace’s perspective. Each of these three passages, however, is barely present in the handwritten draft.

The first moment is referenced only implicitly, by a single sentence that doesn’t mention a “proprietor” or back room: “A couple small convenience stores out by I-74 say they had some [flags] up

front, by the bandanas and NASCAR caps, but they're gone." The dots from the second moment aren't there at all in handwritten draft, though one sentence on p. 5 of the draft mentions "film of people jumping from the building," and how the women at Mrs. Thompson's house go to the kitchen when it is shown. In the draft the sentence seems like little more than a note attempting to record one more random fact of the day. As for the third moment's praying, the sole reference to prayer in the handwritten draft is when Wallace mentions President Bush's eyes: "Nobody notices how Bushe's [sic] eyes seem to get closer together every time he [come?] and how there's so little light or spark of mind inside then you find yourself praying you're wrong about him that he's smarter than you think." The last of these sentences is far more disjointed than the other two, both of which are grammatical, for that matter. But it becomes carefully developed in the final two paragraphs of the typescript, just prior to the essay's concluding handful of sentences. As John Jeremiah Sullivan has noted of David Foster Wallace's nonfiction, it is Wallace's "sheer ability to *consider* a situation, to revolve it in his mental fingers like a jewel whose integrity he doubts," that helps to make his essays so intricate. The minimal presence in the handwritten draft of what will become the essay's most powerful moments suggests that Wallace relies heavily on improvisation of base detail once he gets round to typing. It's unlikely he has entire scenes or moments in his mind when his fingers meet the keys, but he has at least the rudiments in place.

If we allow that the opening of the essay serves as a beginning in an Aristotelian sense (a fairly easy allowance), and that the conclusion of the essay begins very near the end of it, with the sentence "Innocent people can be hard to be around," then all three of these moments of heightened emotion, perhaps not surprisingly, appear in the middle. The back room of the convenience store is described at the top of p. 4 (of 11 full pages) on the first typescript, the dots around the middle of p. 8, and the prayer on p. 11. In his interview with Garner, Wallace says of the middle (or of a middle) that "[i]t lays out the argument in steps, not in a robotic way, but in a way that the reader can tell (a) what the distinct steps or premises of the argument are; and (b) this is the tricky one, how they're connected to each other" (83).

While Wallace is talking overtly about arguments, of course, what he says largely holds for any essay, including “Mrs. Thompson’s” (which we could argue is, ultimately, an argument); certainly what he says about how the pieces of an essay are “connected to each other” obtains for just about any piece of nonfiction prose. A basic reverse chronology helps to establish the premises or, more so, the steps—we start with the effects (people talking and putting out flags) and move to the cause (the planes hitting the twin towers). Better to begin with resilience than catastrophe, perhaps, if you want to draw readers in and fortify them for what is probably the bleakest concluding line in all of Wallace’s nonfiction.

As for “connections,” Wallace refers to them as “transitions,” and he goes on to say that “the reader needs help understanding how two sentences are connected to each other—and [the reader] also [needs help understanding] transitions [or connections] between paragraphs” (83). If we take the first moment of heightened emotion and parse it for “connections,” what do we see? We see that the paragraph that it’s in begins with a clear transition—“The point being that on Wednesday here ...”—and that it has another prominent transition to set up the Pakistani proprietor’s offer of a seat in his stock room: “Until in one of the Horror’s weird twists of fate and circumstance.” It’s worth noting the prominence of these key connections: at the start of a paragraph and after the only ellipsis mark in the paragraph, near mid-point, as a visual signal for the move. Each transition helps the reader understand how this portion of the essay relates to the rest, just as Wallace says. And, of course, neither transition looks anything like a run-of-the-mill connection (“however,” “consequently,” etc.).

Looking at the handwritten draft, we see that Wallace began by dashing off the events of Wednesday, the day after 9/11. At some point, he roughs out an opening just to the left of his first sentences; as well, he roughs out something like a structure above them. On the whole, the handwritten draft is largely objective—that is, it’s focused mostly on noting what’s going on the day after 9/11 and on 9/11 itself, the things Wallace has overheard or seen. The typescript, on the other hand, is largely subjective. It allows Wallace to go deeply inside his own head and posit himself as an especially attenuated

witness and point of view. “The View from Mrs. Thompson’s” isn’t so much “the view,” of course, as it is Wallace’s view. In the typescript, Wallace repeatedly finds ways to harness his keen awareness of self in service to the story. It’s a fiction writer’s move, in part: making a potentially unlikable narrator sympathetic. It’s also a move that cutting edge journalists like Joan Didion had mastered some 35 years before “The View from Mrs. Thompson’s.” Arguably, it’s Wallace’s style, rather than his approach, that’s fresh, though where one ends and the other begins is fairly porous. Even so, Wallace’s ability to do a lot with a little data may be without equal.

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