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You Get To Decide What to Worship but Not What's Good: Rereading "This Is Water"

A quibble with David Foster Wallace and his famous essay, but a productive one, I hope —

One of the more humanizing small ironies of Wallace's last years is this image of him as the disheveled but still seigniorial speaker at a branded lectern, delivering a commencement address. Wallace, inevitably, no matter how much he'd spent his career doubting the parents, *was* the parent now, and a good one too. His young audience wanted wisdom and he was wise. Mordant too, of course, self-deprecating, halting, but taking a side throughout his essay-speech in an important postmodern ethical debate and doing it in accessible and compelling language — compelling *because* accessible. That he was willing to do this at all, to take the bait and try to say something big and packageable about *how we ought to live*, is brave, I think, and important. The particular debate revolves around the status of empathy as an ethical tool, particularly in a postmodern context where God as the unquestioned moral arbiter has exited stage left — and good riddance for that.

In "This Is Water," Wallace advocates for what I want *ethical imagination*, or in other words a version of empathy that relies on the storyteller's art, on *narrative* imagination. It's a natural enough approach from a storyteller, and one that conduces well to this version of empathy — probably too well. Here I'll argue that Wallace, who'd talked movingly about the *limits* of empathy, embraced in "This is Water" a logic or theory of goodness that ignores those limits, that in its attempts to use the self and its experiences to bridge the gap to the Other only reasserts the self.

A bit of background first, and definitions.

It wasn't all that long ago that I re-read "This Is Water" at the urging of one of my students. We'd gotten to the point of the semester where I invite the members of any workshop I teach (this was a creative nonfiction workshop) to fill in some of the many gaps in the syllabus readings with their own suggestions. I hadn't read "This Is Water" in several years, and perhaps I'd never read it all that carefully to begin with. Like the critic Emily Harnett, I think I'd come to feel a certain mix of chagrin and bemusement that this was *the* Wallace essay now, the lone ambassador to most readers from a largish, challenging and often rewarding experimental oeuvre. In Harnett's telling, it was the author of *Infinite Jest* now turning up each graduation season in chain email forwarded by somebody's uncle — and sounding all throughout the attached essay-speech like "the inside of a Hallmark card."

Writing a commencement speech demands that you say trite things with heartfelt conviction in front of a large crowd of people, some of whom might actually be listening and some of whom are absolutely being paid to record you. However handsomely remunerated, this is a trying assignment for a person who sets professional and personal stake in the things they say and write. The only real non-monetary consolation for such a task is the knowledge that no one in their right mind would ever expect you to produce meaningful thoughts in these conditions, much less publish them in a hardcover book the minute you die. ([Harnett](#))

And later from the same, rather Wallacian complaint —

Wallace's message seems to be: it's nice to think nice thoughts about people. This is a cheerful tautology and happy, undamaging advice. It is also a remarkably empty account of the ethical challenges and obligations of adult life. The nice thoughts that we think about people are worth nothing to anyone unless they are meaningfully voiced in the public sphere, unless they're given

an active civic expression. But in Wallace's vision, one's obligation to other people begins and ends in the privacy of one's own mind. (Harnett)

I'll want to prod at this binary a little later on — between impotent private feeling on the one hand, more potent public expression on the other, but for now, I record Harnett's thoughts since they express the critical view I'd more or less consented to after my first reading of "This Is Water" and that I carried around with me for years afterward. And yet in re-reading the piece with my students I was now struck by how earnest and daringly simple Wallace's urgings to virtue were. Also by how simply and non-confrontationally Wallace locates the true source of ethical power — not in a overarching Law, much less in a Lawgiver, but in the self and an Other at a moment of ethical encounter. I recalled some of Jacques Derrida's late writings on "postmodern ethics," or in other words the kind of ethical responsibility that discards the "transcendental" to focus solely on "the relation to the other, a response to the other . . ." (51). This from *The Gift of Death*, one of Derrida's most accessible, personal books — as if the eminence of late career or the sheer ancient weightiness of the subject he'd chosen meant that he could drop his capital-D difficulty. And maybe Wallace in 2005, three years before his suicide, was doing something similar.

For Derrida, ultimate "responsibility" (what he calls "response-ability") begins and ends in the self, but always a self in relation to an Other. And a self that responds to the Other only after due attention, deep listening — listening and attending as radical and almost numinous acts. (Useful to note, too, that "attention," coming from the Old French *attencion* and the Latin *attendere*, means etymologically to "give heed to," literally "to stretch toward" someone or something ["Attention"].) And it's this notion of empathy as radical attention that I want to put into conflict — productive conflict — with Wallace's narrativized version of it.

Wallace is concerned with simplicity in “This Is Water” — not with the obvious but with a set of premises whose importance is such that they deserve a simplicity of expression. Postmodernism in a popular language, then, postmodernism made legible to undergraduates, parents, uncles. Wallace is also at pains, early on in his essay-speech, to set his audience at ease, renouncing the kind of ethos a more traditional writer or speaker might rely on. “There are these two young fish swimming along,” he begins,

and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says “Morning, boys. How’s the water?” And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes “What the hell is water?”

This is a standard requirement of U.S. commencement speeches, the deployment of didactic little parable-ish stories. The story thing turns out to be one of the better, less bullshit conventions of the genre, but if you’re worried that I plan to present myself here as the wise, older fish explaining what water is to you younger fish, please don’t be. I am not the wise old fish. The point of the fish story is merely that the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about. (Wallace)

And a little later on —

So let’s talk about the single most pervasive cliché in the commencement speech genre, which is that a liberal arts education is not so much about filling you up with knowledge as it is about “teaching you how to think.” If you’re like me as a student, you’ve never liked hearing this, and you tend to feel a bit insulted by the claim that you needed anybody to teach you how to think, since the fact that you even got admitted to a college this good seems like proof that you already know how to think. But I’m going to posit to you that the liberal arts cliché turns out not to be insulting at all, because the really significant education in thinking that we’re supposed to get in a place like this isn’t really about the capacity to think, but rather about the choice of what to think about. (Wallace)

He is not the wise old fish, he protests — too much, I'd argue. And too late, since he's already at the lectern with its structural authority built in, an authority that no amount of self-deprecating or code switching can finally dispel. Also, all of Wallace and his brainy ethos are already here, on display: the casual but obvious intelligence, the chronic meta reflex, the deep self-consciousness, the jangle of registers (high slangy talky anxious low) that includes an access onto semi-philosophical words/ideas like "posit."

If Wallace doesn't want to say it, I will: he *is* being wise here, and his wisdom consists in noting the main elements of the stripped-down postmodern ethical landscape: a self (that knows that it is because it thinks, not that anybody thinks about that one anymore) and a world of others, a sea of others. Once the self learns to recognize its primal separation from its surroundings ("Morning, boys. How's the water?"), then any secular program of ethics worth the name can begin.

It's also worth noting what's *not* required in this basic list of materials: a god is not required, nor is any top-down universalist authority. In the original speech, Wallace mentions God and displays an interesting and perhaps instinctive preference for the theist over the atheist side in a hypothetical dorm room argument — perhaps it's an instinctive recoil against the New Atheists' brash triumphal rhetoric then sweeping the bestseller lists, but that's a speculation for another day. And it's not what Wallace finally lands on either.

True, there are plenty of religious people who seem arrogant and certain of their own interpretations, too. They're probably even more repulsive than atheists, at least to most of us. But religious dogmatists' problem is exactly the same as the story's unbeliever: blind certainty, a close-mindedness that amounts to an imprisonment so total that the prisoner doesn't even know he's locked up. (Wallace)

The theist-vs.-atheist detour turns out to be an example in kind. *Here's a conversation where we tend to dismiss each other, run imaginatively roughshod over each other, deny the other's reality and fullness, etc.* God becomes "God,"

then, a mere object lesson in interpersonal ethics (“‘God,’ if you’ll pardon the expression . . .” — Derrida again). What’s really required in an ethical exchange is not an over-viewing universalist authority but a self, simply, and an Other, simply, or a whole host of others. Always a self, in any case, and an Other, and a sense of mutual obligation.

Later, Wallace adds storytelling to the ethical landscape, as a way to engage the Other in a sort of imaginative embrace, an empathetic embrace — but by this point the landscape has complicated needlessly. And in troublesome ways, too. If the way to feel obligated toward a “fat, dead-eyed, over-made-up lady who just screamed at her kid in the checkout line” — Wallace’s most infamous example from the essay — if the way to feel obligated toward such a person is to make up a sympathetic story about them, okay, I guess. That’s certainly better than stewing in your resentments. It’s just that whatever fiction you’ve created now displaces the more attentive, more passive sense of obligation that postmodern ethics requires. “Passive” here is positively connoted: a standing ethical concern for the Other, a concern in waiting is what a checkout line situation or any situation requires of us. We can pretend, as Wallace does, that maybe the shouting woman is “not usually like this: maybe she’s been up three straight nights holding the hand of her husband who’s dying of bone cancer,” etc. Or that the woman is a “low-wage clerk at the Motor Vehicles Department who just yesterday helped your spouse resolve a horrific, infuriating, red-tape problem through some small act of bureaucratic kindness” (Wallace).

This is empathy of a sort, empathetic imagination, but it’s empathy of the kind that insists on bringing the Other closer to your self in order to make the Other more palatable. What would *I* find acceptable as a reason for this behavior, etc. — and you go imaginatively in search of that. I’ll say more about the basic problem of this approach a little later — a problem of ego, or self, that takes the self necessarily as the starting point for any imagination of this kind, however well-intentioned it might be. Or however shot through in this case with the sexist, body-shaming, classist assumptions Wallace’s mind was

sometimes heir to. That the shouting woman must work at the DMV, for example. That her body shape is somehow worthy of comment, or should count against her.

Not to mention the vanishingly small likelihood that any of these stories of the dramatic or quietly heroic are true, a fact Wallace acknowledges, or half acknowledges — “Of course, none of this is likely, but it’s also not impossible. It just depends on what you want to consider” (Wallace).

For now, it’s enough to consider that the self is not God, not fixed or categorical. Or in other words that “This Is Water” presents an importantly post-religious, post-categorical imperative ethical landscape. “You get to decide what to worship,” Wallace says elsewhere in his essay-speech — a premise point that Zadie Smith later adopted as the epigraph of her 2011 essay collection *Changing My Mind*, in which DFW hovers as a kind of patron ghost.

The contested question of empathy hovers over Smith’s book too, as it does over so many books and statements to come out of what I think of as the voice-driven critical essay tradition. For some in this cohort, the move appears almost faith-based: switch out God for Empathy, and hey presto. Others appear to want to cut empathy down to size, later embracing a more modest version of it as the best replacement for what’s been lost in all this necessary postmodern reshuffling. In this latter camp, I think of the Smith of *Changing My Mind* (particularly her essays on Barthes and reading theory, or on the moral popularizer and occasional condescender E.M. Forster). Or I think of Leslie Jamison in *The Empathy Exams*, or George Saunders in his nonfiction and interviews, Jonathan Lethem in some of his nonfiction and interviews, Eula Biss in “White Debt” and other essays, Claudia Rankine in “The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning” and in *Citizen*, a book of poetry informed by and at times inseparable from the personal-polemical essay tradition. Or I think of Jia Tolentino in her recent collection of personal-polemical essays, *Trick Mirror*. And the list could go on.

It's probably too corny and over-earnest to reprise Wordsworth and say that DFW should be living at this hour! America hath need of him! Yet I think I've just done it. At least it'd be interesting to resurrect the man and hear his own (inevitably) agonized and self-conscious responses to the critiques of DFW the man, DFW the sentimentalist, DFW the floating signifier. And to hear him continue to comment on the vital question of empathy in literature, empathy through literature and story, empathy in spite of storytelling's sometimes glib bullishness about the possibilities of empathy. The novelist, short story writer, and essayist George Saunders, a more religious thinker than some others in this cohort, can sound bullish to the point of missionary about empathy's power on and off the page. "When we imagine a character," he told an interview in 2019, "we're basically having a conversation with somebody other than ourselves. So we're trained in it, if we're fiction writers. That's what we do" (Yeh). Wallace by contrast had told an interviewer, "We all suffer alone in the real world. True empathy's impossible" — a contrast in emphasis, ultimately. I don't mean to suggest that Saunders, in "doubling down" on empathy, has somehow claimed a literalist, magical possibility for this kind of imaginative intervention. That "basically" of Saunders' is a hedge, but is it enough of one?

In "The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning," poet and essayist Claudia Rankine takes empathy to task, writing in the wake of the Charleston Church shootings and in the long shadow of white terrorism against the Black body. "Though the white liberal imagination likes to feel temporarily bad about black suffering," she writes,

there really is no mode of empathy that can replicate the daily strain of knowing that as a black person you can be killed for simply being black: no hands in your pockets, no playing music, no sudden movements, no driving your car, no walking at night, no walking in the day, no turning onto this street, no entering this building, no standing your ground, no standing here, no standing there, no talking back, no playing with toy guns, no living while black. (Rankine)

This is frank, potent, unconcerned with “building bridges” or whatever other pap too often dominates discussions of the racialized Other. For Rankine, “no mode of empathy” is available to white people to “replicate” the experience of Black precarity and fear that white people created in the first place. Whiteness can’t speak to Blackness, in other words — unjust and complacent power can never appreciate the extent of Black powerlessness. Of course, white people can and often do *pretend* to imaginatively identify with Black people and Black suffering (I’m thinking of the particularly gruesome example of misplaced empathy in which a classroom of California eighth graders had their wrists taped together and had to lie shoulder to shoulder on the floor, in the dark, as a clip from *Roots* played: *There, kids, a little taste of the Middle Passage...*). Rankine’s real point is that whiteness can’t successfully or *really* speak to the suffering of people across an unbridgeable divide of history and experience. Race in America becomes the reality check, the example *par excellence* of a category of identity and experience that bluff empathy can’t cross — and shouldn’t try to.

Not that Rankine’s main task in “The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning” is to chastise white empathy. What work she does in this regard is important but by the way, genuinely countercultural but offhand. What’s more, by the end of Rankine’s essay-plea for “[a] sustained sense of national mourning,” you could argue that she’s come back to empathy as if to give it another chance, or out of a kind of default. It’s a more modest, less triumphal empathy, granted — and certainly not the easy or rote empathy of the channel change, in which the white liberal learns to “assimilate” Black suffering by paying lip service to it and then ignoring it (Rankine). Rankine calls instead for a simple empathy of listening and looking, or not looking away — “Grief, then, for these deceased others might unite some of us, for the first time, with the living” (Rankine).

In essayist Eula Biss’s hands, empathy is also a hampered, semi-potent force. In this case it’s an outgrowth of a certain white guilt, but in “White Debt,” Biss’s explicit response to Rankine’s essay, white guilt is itself a force, a certain goad to goodness.

A guilty white person is usually imagined as someone made impotent by guilt, someone rendered powerless. But why not imagine guilt as a prod, a goad, an impetus to action? Isn't guilt an essential cog in the machinery of the conscience? When I search back through my correspondence with Sherman Alexie, I find him insisting that we can't afford to disempower white people because we need them to empower the rest of us. White people, he proposes, have the political power to make change exactly because they are white. (Biss)

Biss's essay is less a rejoinder, much less a rebuttal to Rankine's "The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning," but rather a personal-polemical meditation on "what the condition of white life might be." In it, Biss tries to imagine a way to be inside whiteness, inside white privilege, without implicitly underwriting or buttressing these institutions — "Whiteness is not a kinship or a culture," etc. And "it is entirely possible to despise whiteness without disliking yourself," etc.

One part of the solution, Biss suggests, is to acknowledge that if you happen to be "white" or in any case if you wear this skin and this label, you belong less to a racial or national group than to a club with powerful perks that first accrued on the backs of slaves. And of course this truth, this knowing is already a form of empathy — a goad toward conscience, goodness, which in my own reading I want to connect to political or collective goodness.

We're in the empire of the feelings, either way — an empire built on feelings, acting from feelings: guilt, grief. These feelings aren't useless or self-indulgent necessarily — nor necessarily sentimental, nor finally dispensable. In Rankine first, and in Biss's engagement with Rankine, civic and political virtue matter, of course they do — structure matters. And yet part of what haunts Rankine particularly is the awareness that a "rerouting of interior belief" must first take place in the American mind before any American law or structural-legal innovation can finally matter — "It's an individual challenge that needs to happen before any action by a political justice system would signify true societal change" (Rankine).

Rankine’s vision of a collective, structural conscience made up of any number of individual consciences is simple, almost commonsensical, but also at odds with a long line of writers, from Orwell down to Emily Harnett, apparently, who want to wave “structure” as a sort of magic wand, or in any case something to chastise and embarrass “feeling” with. Emily Harnett again: “The nice thoughts that we think about people are worth nothing to anyone unless they are meaningfully voiced in the public sphere, unless they’re given an active civic expression.” Or Orwell, from his long essay on Charles Dickens —

It seems that in every attack Dickens makes upon society he is always pointing to a change of spirit rather than a change of structure. It is hopeless to try and pin him down to any definite remedy, still more to any political doctrine. His approach is always along the moral plane .. Useless to change institutions without a ‘change of heart’ — that, essentially, is what he is always saying.

 (“Charles Dickens”)

By contrast, part of what recommends Rankine and other popular essayist-polemicists is their frank refusal to be embarrassed by certain common sense ideas. For Rankine, a sort of private, internal compass (that “interior rerouting”) is inevitably connected to the larger structural-political map — and it needs to reroute, reorient toward goodness.

One other name I could add to the list of personal-polemical essayists on empathy is Iris Murdoch, the Irish novelist and philosopher. A little earlier than the other writers I’ve mentioned and considered (in my emphasis on the contemporary, sure, but perhaps in my presentism and myopia — a fuller consideration of empathy would stretch back far before the word “buzzed” in the classrooms and the journals). Murdoch, in discussing her fiction and fiction-making generally, bemoans how difficult it is to write the Other as something more than a “conventional puppet.”

How soon one discovers that, however much one is in the ordinary sense “interested in other people,” this interest has left one far short of possessing the knowledge required to create a real character who is not oneself. It is impossible, it seems to me, not to see one’s failure here as a sort of spiritual failure. (283-4)

In an earlier working-out of these ideas, Murdoch admits that the difficulty is not just in creating a “free and lifelike” portrait of an Other but in feeling, given the likelihood of this failure, “that this particular effort is worth making” (qtd. in Wood 176). This is Murdoch’s (somewhat anachronistic) resignation letter from the Church of Contemporary Fiction. At the very least it’s the beginning of her apostasy from this church. And yet here again, I’ll note, is a writer who’s come to the crucial question of empathy from a literary background that prizes stories not just for their entertainment value but for their didactic potential. It’s a hollowed-out, secularized didacticism, to be sure, but didacticism nonetheless.

I’m coming at length back to Wallace, and to my quibble. In “This Is Water,” ethical life is first a matter of recognizing or really re-recognizing that primal separation between *you* and *the world of others*. Fish in water, etc. A stripped-down, postmodernist reckoning that, in Murdoch’s phrase, is about “really appreciating that other people exist” (284). That’s first things first — again, the premise point where Wallace’s essay, quietly, implicitly, does its most important positive work. *You get to decide what to worship* reminds us that a bottom-up, cooperative moral authority is the necessary if not quite sufficient condition for goodness post-God, and post-capital-G Good too.

The rest of the value in “This Is Water” is negative, I’d suggest, instructive by way of a sort of rarefied cautionary tale. Wallace’s main recommendation to the students he was first addressing (and later to my precocious nonfiction student and later still to the entire class) is that they should practice a kind of ethical imagination about others, especially when our more aggrieved angels turn up. Let’s say we’re in gridlocked traffic on the way home from work, after that stop-off at the grocery store with the endless lines and the shouting women, etc. And let’s further say that our aggrieved angels now take “a more

socially conscious” form of what Wallace calls our “default setting.” Annoyance, frustration, dismissal of the Other, refusal to recognize or much engage with the Other’s reality. “I can spend time in the end-of-the-day traffic being disgusted about all the huge, stupid, lane-blocking SUV’s and Hummers and V-12 pickup trucks, burning their wasteful, selfish, forty-gallon tanks of gas,” etc.

The thing is that, of course, there are totally different ways to think about these kinds of situations. In this traffic, all these vehicles stopped and idling in my way, it’s not impossible that some of these people in SUV’s have been in horrible auto accidents in the past, and now find driving so terrifying that their therapist has all but ordered them to get a huge, heavy SUV so they can feel safe enough to drive. Or that the Hummer that just cut me off is maybe being driven by a father whose little child is hurt or sick in the seat next to him, and he’s trying to get this kid to the hospital, and he’s in a bigger, more legitimate hurry than I am: it is actually I who am in *his* way.

(Wallace)

And so on with other examples of day-to-day frustrations, day-to-day temptations to see humanity as so much *stuff* in our way. And so on with the imagined narrative shortcuts around this mired thinking. The real trick is in the imagining, Wallace suggests, in the *empathetic* imagining. And yet of course it’s the storyteller’s own experience and brain, not to mention their accidents of class and nationality and gender and race, etc., that will inevitably furnish the details of these imagined stories. Another problem: Wallace isn’t *quite* handing down a top-down directive here, some “golden trick” that applies in all cases, to be accessed at all times — but he’s suddenly swerved closer to one. This is a perilous variation on the categorical imperative, and in its reliance on story and therefore, inevitably, in its reliance on the personal, it misses the somewhat abstruse but essential goal of true postmodern ethical reckoning: an engagement with the Other that seeks always and forever to be open, non-restrictive, non-repetitive, that is always and forever ready to reinvent itself if the Other requires it. An engagement that eschews all tricks and shortcuts, finally, either religious-ideological, political-ideological, or narrative-ideological.

Coming back to *The Gift of Death* now, where Abraham's encounter with God over Isaac comes to symbolize this inevitably reinvented, spontaneous and responsible engagement with the ethical Other. (Derrida throughout his text refers alternately to "responsibility" and "response-ability," in his punny, French, very intentional way.) For Derrida, Abraham and God are characters. The story of Abraham and Isaac and the commanded sacrifice is *pure* story, allegorical but importantly non-restrictive. And the "moral of the story" is not *When God tells you to do something, always do it*. Instead the story suggests the radical Otherness of God, or of any Other. Finally it's the unknowability of the Other that has to move us to ethical openness, away from rules and tricks, away from narratives, away from shortcuts. "Whether or not one believes the biblical story," Derrida writes, "whatever credence or credit one gives it, whether one doubts or transposes it, it could still be said that there is a moral to the story, even if we take it to be a fable...The moral of the fable would be morality itself..." (67).

In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida dispenses with the question of a moral first cause — who can finally know *where* the impulse of the "ought" comes from, but there it is in us, a fact. Derrida spends his energies elsewhere, arguing that the God-soaked notion of sacrifice properly belongs to secular ethics since the *absence* of a Moral Arbiter now enjoins responsibility on everyone for everyone else equally. With the refrain of "*tout autre est tout autre*," Derrida poses a much more pressing question than the question of final moral origins (67). If every Other is every (bit) other, and if our secular responsibility forbids overarching rules of priority, what will govern our ethical behavior when two or more others make contradictory claims on us? The story of Abraham and Isaac represents for Derrida the apotheosis of this problem. There's no rule book, finally, no repeatable moves. "On what condition is responsibility possible?" Derrida asks. "On the condition that the Good no longer be a transcendental objective, a relation between objective things, but the relation to the other, a response to the other . . ." (51). It's that simple, that difficult, free and non-restrictive — "free and lifelike," if I can come back to Murdoch. Goodness, in any case, is not something "you" or any other decides on independently anymore — it's not capitalized

anymore. It's a negotiation, a spontaneous and necessary collaboration between the self and the other or others in a moment of ethical encounter.

Also notable is the fact that in *The Gift of Death* Derrida has reached for a narrative in which the Other (conventionally capitalized in this case) asks Abraham to kill his own son, out of loyalty or obedience to the Other or who knows why. God's motivation here is either unrecognizable or recognizably inhuman. Either way it defeats our instinct to project a version of our self onto the screen of the Other as a way of explaining or understanding the Other, a way of justifying the Other. That we sometimes append the trending term "empathy" to this projection, as if to forgive or excuse it, doesn't finally do either. There's no excusing the inevitable failure of this projection, the inevitable failure that *is* projection. Almost a "spiritual failure," as Murdoch put it.

In the words of another spiritually inclined philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, it's simply the face of the Other that entitles them to our unceasing ethical attention. The face of the Other, the mere fact of the Other has to work on us. And if it doesn't, maybe nothing else will.

All this worked into my rereading of "This Is Water," alongside my students. I heard the echoes and also the withholding silences of certain foundational relativists and reformers — Derrida particularly, who was attached to literature but never bound by its tics, its limitations. And yet I also watched how hungrily my students responded to Wallace, the more engaged with literature and storytelling the more engaged with Wallace's story-based empathetic reflex. Perhaps it's cold water on this natural and youthful enthusiasm to insist on the mere, generic, universal face of the Other — universal in its radical particularity. *Every other is every bit other*, etc. In any case all this is less handy, less "sensory" and "concrete," less exciting than an imagined story. It's also less "particular" in the conventional workshop sense of that word ("particular" as in "the particularizing detail," another buzzy phrase, another article of faith of the communing Writer — I quote it to my creative writing students all the time, and to myself when I'm writing creatively).

And yet the essential premises of postmodern ethics remain — perhaps it's impossible to get much beyond them. If an ethical life begins with the realization that we are selves swimming in a sea of others, many billions of them, now and across time, then that life finds its realest purpose in the insistence that these others are entitled to our ethical attention and engagement no matter what. Where the narrative imagination fails us, or is more trouble than it's worth, our responsibility to the Other is unchanged.

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