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LONELINESS AS IT STANDS IN RELATION TO THE HUMAN CONDITION: DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S GRAPPLING WITH LONELINESS, DEPRESSION, AND A DESIRE TO LESSEN THE PAIN OF EACH

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LONELINESS AS IT STANDS IN RELATION TO THE HUMAN CONDITION: DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S GRAPPLING WITH LONELINESS, DEPRESSION, AND A DESIRE TO LESSEN THE PAIN OF EACH

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Abstract

David Foster Wallace's unique writing style hinges on difficulty. His approach to storytelling challenges the reader's expectations, forcing them to actively engage with the characters and scenes rather than passively observing the story. Wallace developed this method because he was bothered by the societal tendency to encourage passivity; in a sense, his fiction is a wake-up call, pointing out modern problems and begging us (the readers) to acknowledge their existence. By writing authentically about American culture—specifically the challenges of living in a consumerist age—Wallace creates a bond between himself (as an author) and his readers: a community is forged. Struggling with clinical depression for most of his life, Wallace knew the pitfalls and hopelessness associated with loneliness. In other words, he knew the difficulties that arose from these intense feelings of isolation. In his first short story, "The Planet Trillaphon As It Stands In Relation To The Bad Thing", Wallace provides a detailed assessment of how difficult depression is. I analyze this story partially because I find it to be understudied in current scholarship, but chiefly because Wallace envisions unadulterated empathy as a key answer to the difficulty of loneliness. Ultimately, I argue that empathetic communities are a life-line, allowing members to admit in safe spaces that life is difficult so that they can be affirmed and push past their struggles. Wallace's difficult style is one type of empathetic community; sharing his pain through fiction helps others recognize they aren't as alone as they feel. By focusing my argument on this story, I aim to prove that Wallace's earlier work is more than worthy of our attention and that contemporary difficulties such as loneliness cannot (and should not) define us.

Introduction

There's no rhyme or reason for a vehicle getting stolen, receiving an unwelcome diagnosis, or even a premature death; these moments remind us that life is difficult. Or at least they should. Nowadays, difficulty is seen by the masses (at least in affluent societies) more as an inconvenience than an unavoidable reality; if you've got a problem then you must not have the right medicine, vehicle, clothes, home, hobby, ad infinitum. I'm not trying to suggest that quick fixes are a bad thing, but the growing social tendency to ignore the source of personal or public difficulties has consequences. There's a particular scene from the TV comic series *The Office* that highlights my point effectively. After failing to secure a sales call for Dunder Mifflin, Ryan and Dwight are seen dejectedly leaving the building. Ryan, the younger employee who had high hopes of a promotion, is particularly upset, "I don't get it," he tells Dwight, "I don't get what I did wrong." Dwight replies, "Not everything's a lesson, Ryan. Sometimes you just fail." Prior to this scene, the audience sees Ryan dutifully prepping, making sure he has everything he needs to succeed, but he fails anyway. Shocked by the outcome, he blames himself, searching for what *he* did wrong, and voices a desire to quickly fix the pain he feels. I also suspect that Ryan feels alone—at least mentally—in this moment; he refuses to see the setback as anyone's fault but his own, and we can almost hear his inner scolding for not doing more to be ready. In contrast, Dwight isn't as shaken by the rejection and, as a bonus, effectively counsels Ryan. Dwight understands something crucial that Ryan doesn't: we don't always have control. Thus, Dwight recognizes that this failure is unavoidable and accepts this without blaming himself or Ryan. The world—particularly in America—persuades us that there's always an easier, less painful way past a challenge, a maxim that has created a cultural belief that, as long as we address the present difficulty, we'll be fine. In *The Office* we see a more accurate depiction: addressing only the

symptoms of difficulty makes us ill-equipped to hold our composure or—in the worst cases—function altogether when difficulty pops into our path. David Foster Wallace saw this coming (among many other things) and addressed modern conceptualizations of difficulty in his life and vast body of work. Most notably for our purposes, one of his earliest short stories highlights one difficulty that plagues everyone in uniquely challenging ways: loneliness. I'm willing to guess that everyone has felt lonely before, whether through a major disappointment like Ryan or just at random. Metaphorically, Wallace is a real-life Dwight Schrute, showing us through fiction that, though we live in an age of quick, painless fixes, loneliness—as well as other difficulties—ought to be treated at the source. For Wallace—socially awkward as he was—the fictional medium was ideal. We will see how he used fiction to transpose what his mind observed into text, allowing others to view consumerist culture, of which he was highly critical, through his eyes.

Difficulty is, admittedly, a tough word to summarize since it has so many possible uses. I will not attempt to categorize each and every possible difficulty, which would likely bore you to death. Instead, I turn to George Steiner's helpful essay "On Difficulty," which serves as an excellent starting point for further discussion. Steiner begins by considering the common student response to a reading assignment, "I found this text really difficult." He theorizes that most students presume "a common sense intimation of continuities between linguistic intention and utterance." (Steiner 263) In other words, readers (especially students) expect to see and understand what exactly an author is trying to convey and, when they can't, become frustrated and label the entire experience as "difficult." There are, of course, several reasons that confusion may occur, but Steiner identifies four major categories: contingent, modal, tactical, and ontological. Contingent difficulty arises when a text produces readerly understanding but not readerly comprehension. As Steiner says, "we 'get the text' but we don't 'dig it.'" (267) Modal

difficulty occurs when a reader follows the author's expressions on a cerebral level but lacks the prior knowledge and experience necessary to appreciate or empathize with the invoked meaning; in short, "modal difficulties lie with the beholder", not the text (270). Tactical difficulty is seen when common vernacular is insufficient to properly express an author's new, emotional charge. Steiner clearly blames language before the author in this category, claiming that "the language at his disposal is, by definition, general, common in use. Its similes are stock, its metaphors worn down to cliché" (270); the idea may be excellent but the weak expression causes it to fall on deaf ears. Finally, there is ontological difficulty, which plagues the author, text, and reader alike. Steiner calls this category a "hypostasis of language" which exists between "the necessary and the factitious, and even between 'the real' and the 'more real.'" (276) Here, Steiner suggests that there is an ever-present, underlying difficulty beyond cerebral or emotional perception in a given text. In summary, contingent and modal difficulties develop because of a reader's approach, while tactical and ontological difficulties appear out of language deficiency or an inexpressible subject.

Steiner's methodical categorization is beneficial because it proves that difficulty can be conceptually broken down into its more analyzable parts when applied to a particular subject (e.g., loneliness). While I appreciate Steiner's findings, his focus is so narrow that he misses a wider audience; if a reader doesn't care immensely about poetics and syntax then it's unlikely they'll appreciate his efforts. This is a shame because, in this article, Steiner arrives at an extremely interesting and insightful observation, "our culture professes to know less but to feel more than any before it. We may have to look up even the most elementary of scriptural, mythological, historical, literary, or scientific terms and reference; but we claim confident empathy with … every genre and epoch in western art" (269). There are, without a doubt, a

multitude of uncategorized difficulties relating to culture and art that Steiner neglects to mention except in this one quote. I mostly aim to address the difficulty of loneliness, pinpointing its common effects on the human spirit, seen clearly in Wallace's short story, "The Planet Trillaphon As It Stands In Relation To The Bad Thing." While alive—and his death is most regrettable—Wallace was deeply interested in using fiction to discover what it meant "to be a f—ing human being" (McCaffery 26). Most Wallacean scholarship centers on *Infinite Jest*, his magnum opus, as that important text is continually mined for further meaning. However, this reality, I think, has inadvertently pushed his other writings—mainly his short stories and essays—into the critical and readerly background. So, in an effort to correct this, I plan to showcase one of these "lesser" texts, showing what it has to say about the human condition. I also hope to better explain Stiener's categories by locating and examining their impact on Wallace's life and work.

A Note on the Style of This Very Article You're Reading Right Now

Before we go much further, I want to provide a brief note about my chosen writing style. During the final semester of my undergraduate career, I enrolled in a Cultural Studies course when I heard that the first eight weeks would be spent reading *Infinite Jest* in its entirety. Those eight weeks were extremely challenging and rewarding; I became captivated by Wallace's storytelling and his insight into how humans and cultural norms all fit together, each shaping the other in subtle or dramatic ways. Since then, I've yet to find a writer who fascinates me quite like Wallace. For me, his approach to writing is conversational and comprehensible. It is these attributes that I hope to reproduce in my analysis of his work. I am not attempting to imitate him; however, I see a desperate need for scholarship to become more readable. I'm not brazen enough to think that I'm blazing a trail for future scholars, but I would welcome that outcome. So, the

bulk of my argumentation will be presented in as much of a conversational tone as I can create through a written medium. There will be asides, cultural references, and potentially some jokes along the way. Ideally, this will make for a better reading experience. Writing this way feels much more authentic because it seeks to include readers as a vital part of the process, creating a *community* between the author and the audience. Wallace saw community as an essential part of the human experience, an insight that pushed him to write first and foremost for the reader; he wanted his audience to like him (who doesn't), but he was more interested in peeling back the curtain, helping others define what living in the contemporary world means. In my experience, writing in the academic sense is much more isolating and exclusive; readers need to know a substantial amount of prior historical or contextual knowledge, sift through highly specific terminology, and (on a subconscious level) assume that the writer knows more than the reader. We see this in Steiner's essay; his rationale is solid but his audience is hyper-specific. This, I think, is why I have always disliked the traditional academic style, and I hope my approach is more accessible to the reader. As fictional teen icon Troy Bolton once said (technically it was a group musical number), "We're All in This Together" (High School Musical Cast 0:58). I feel that Wallace would approve of this choice of style, and honestly, that's enough for me.

I ultimately found the confidence to write like this because of a book that is postmodern in every sense of the word, Sasha Fletcher's *Be Here to Love Me At the End of the World*. Though primarily an apocalyptic love story, Fletcher frequently steps into the text as a pseudo-narrator; in this role, he rants about secret police, asks if anyone is really listening to him, and when enough will be enough. Towards the beginning of the book, however, he addresses his audience directly and reveals his reason for crafting this type of novel:

> As I'm telling you this story, sometimes I just want to talk to you, directly, outside of the story, and also inside the story, and so sometimes I can't remember the order things in the story happened, and sometimes it's important to hear them out of order because that's what the story needs, and anyway I'm doing the best I can with it, and trying to stay as true as I can to the heart of it. *I'm doing the best I can. And I am so incredibly sorry if it's not enough*. I just don't know how else to do this. (Fletcher 8, italics added)

To me, this is the most Wallacean writing I've come across since reading *Jest*; Fletcher's unique stylistic approach may turn off some readers, but he still has his readers in mind. Fletcher recognizes that he isn't writing according to expectation, but he accepts this by prioritizing *empathy* between his work and his readers. Like him, my following argument reflects the best that I can do, and I truly hope that it's enough. If nothing else, it aims to be readable and digestible, making it notably different from much peer-reviewed scholarship. All right, that should about cover it as far as I'm concerned. Here we go!

Loneliness, Writing, and Redemption

Wallace was a notably bright young man, but his intelligence was challenged during his five-year undergraduate career at Amherst College. Despite his innate ability to produce oohs and aahs from professors and peers, Wallace dropped out of college twice due to severe bouts with depression, experiences that left him numb and lethargic. This persistent condition affected him in a very personal way, proving to be one of his lifelong contingent difficulties: Wallace knew when he was afflicted by The Bad Thing—his fictional nickname for depression that I unpack later—but struggled to understand why his affliction affected his ability to function normally. In a notable example, he told his mother, Sally, "how frightened and uncomfortable the

world felt to him and how nothing seemed meaningful anymore" (Max 22). Though initially drawn to the subjects of logic and philosophy, Wallace began to pursue fiction during his absences from campus; writing helped him crawl out of the pit in which he felt trapped. Since childhood, fiction had always offered Wallace a reprieve from his anxiety and mental anguish, "he found [fiction] absorbing and relaxing and mined them for the information they provided." (Max 29) Reading a novel forced Wallace to focus on the text rather than on his personal difficulty. Much later, Wallace explained that the job of fiction, as far as he saw it, is to dramatize the difficult aspects of life while simultaneously dramatizing "the fact that we still are human beings, now. Or can be"; fiction, at its core, isn't about teaching a particular moral or principal, but about exploring "what it means to be human" in the present day (McCaffery 26). As a writer, Wallace reimagined his depression or disenchantment with consumerist culture and channeled these thoughts into fiction; this action allowed him to think about his difficulty in a less agonizing way, meaning that writing—like his original experience with reading—became a reprieve from difficulty. Similarly, Wallace readers get swept away in his story because they have to fully engage with the tactical difficulties embedded in the text. For example, Wallace's essay, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, is 97 pages yet contains 137 footnotes, some of which span multiple pages and contain crucial information. To fully engage with Wallace, readers must commit themselves to reading *actively*, which distracts them from thinking about their own difficulties. In short, Wallace wanted his readers to think critically about what they were reading, taking note of what he was advocating for and how it did (or didn't) apply to their experiences. This type of engagement is how Wallace read, evidenced by Max's choice of words in describing Wallace's reading habits—"mining for information." Wallace expects his readers to commit as he would; they may not even realize that, if they push beyond the difficulties he

deliberately puts in their way, they receive a moment of rest from their thinking obsessively about their real-life difficulties.

Needless to say, writing fiction alleviated parts of Wallace's anguish, but the craft was not a permanent escape. Eventually, his psychiatrist prescribed Tofranil, which made him apathetic and quiet. The drug alleviated much of his anguish, allowing him to return to school, but he was less social than before; he remained loyal to his inner circle, relying on them quite often for emotional stability, but he often retreated from public spaces because he felt overwhelmed or assumed that he was a bother to someone else. Nonetheless, Wallace steeled himself against this (seemingly modal) difficulty, resolving to "try to get better so that I could exist" (Max 34). Academics continued to be a comfort for his mind—a helpful distraction outside of his own thoughts—but he now turned toward fiction, deeming philosophy too cold and lifeless to assist him in what would become a lifelong struggle with loneliness. Though a part of him would always be attracted to logic, fiction was unique because it helped him feel less lonely; rather than working through his struggles alone, writing allowed him to connect with an audience and offered the opportunity to find people who felt as lonely as he did—I'll bet he thought they (he and his audience) could help one another. Also, writing made his inner, contingent difficulty more dissectible: putting his pain into a fictional context was redemptive because, if he crafted a character that shared his struggles, then he could answer or explore their suffering in a more acute way than he could with his own.

A near-perfect example of this can be found in *Infinite Jest* through the character Hal Incandenza, who is believed to be a fictional stand-in for Wallace. Both author and character play tennis, get high, and are—you guessed it—extremely lonely. Much of Hal's loneliness stems from his absurdly complex familial relationships. Hal's parents are James (nicknamed J.O.I. and

Himself) and Avril (nicknamed Moms) Incandenza, founders of the Enfield Tennis Academy, where the Incandenza boys, Hal, Orin, and Mario, are raised. It would be kind to say that James, who commits suicide by inserting his head into a specially crafted toaster oven (a clear allusion to Sylvia Plath), and Avril, who runs the Academy with an iron fist and shows almost zero affection for her children, are not the best of parents. Additionally, Hal "hasn't had a bona fide intensity-of-interior-life-type emotion since he was tiny" (*Jest* 694) due to a childhood accident where he ingests an unknown fungus, an incident that, according to Orin's memory, is largely Avril's fault (11). As a result, Hal detests Avril and views her as a major source of "the one thing he feels to the limit, lately: he is lonely" (694). Obviously, Hal's circumstances are the product of Wallace's imagination—which is on full display in what I assure you is the briefest summary of the Incandenza family that I could provide—but not all of Hal's vehemence against Avril is purely unmotivated. In real life, Wallace adored his mother but was deeply betrayed when she moved out without telling him, electing to pass the information along to him via his sister, Amy (Max 23). Years later, Amy realized what her brother was doing with Avril's character and "asked him if he really felt this was the right way to deal with his anger at his mother" (Max 211). Whether Wallace is right or wrong to smear his mother isn't for us to say, but it's significant that he processes his real-life difficulties—primarily loneliness and isolation here, but I offer a concrete definition of despair later—by reimagining them into fictional events. Wallace's strategy of pouring nearly all of himself into his fiction was the most effective method he had for addressing difficulties in his life. His strategy is ingenious. By fictionalizing his loneliness, he develops a better understanding of his specific difficulty and, as a result, is better equipped to face it; Steiner would argue that, through fiction, Wallace is successfully moving himself out of contingent difficulty by recontextualizing his pain into a more comprehensible subject. Readers

of Wallace can also move beyond the contingent category, in fact, Wallace prefers if they would. In “Trillaphon”, the story’s narrator reimagines his many struggles into a singular object—The Bad Thing—an image that is more accessible for both the narrator and the audience member; Wallace invites his audience into a community where each person—author, character, and reader—can better comprehend their struggles. This isn’t to say that each of Wallace’s novels, short stories, and essays should be read solely as an autobiography, which was one of his chief anxieties before *Infinite Jest* was published (Max 211). However, his fiction continues to resonate so strongly with readers because of Wallace’s commitment to authenticity; he was willing to share even his darkest, most damning thoughts because he recognized that his readers, influenced by the same cultural norms, likely felt confused and lonely too. So, as he began to consider the pain of others, we see Wallace moving past his personal, contingent struggles, focusing instead on ontological difficulties at a cultural level. Wallace’s fiction is unique because it is both a confession—on an individual level—and a call for a response—on a collective or societal level; he was willing to “die in order to move the reader, somehow” (McCaffery 50).

Wallace became such a definitive writer in the postmodern era because he was humble enough to recognize his own humanity and involvement in contemporary culture while simultaneously being cocky enough to call out B.S. where he saw it. His various novels, short stories, and essays cover a wide range of topics, but, if we had to pick just one theme, I think it’s fair to hone in on loneliness. We’ve already seen that Wallace was lonely in college; anti-depression medicine helped in some respect but addressed the symptoms rather than the source of his internal difficulty—medication seems like a modal difficulty to me, alleviating the branches of depression but not reaching the roots. In an interview with Larry McCaffrey, Wallace skillfully explains that Americans “all suffer alone in the real world” and proposes redemptive,

reader-focused fiction as a solution: "if a piece of fiction can allow us imaginatively to identify with characters' pain, we might then also more easily conceive of others identifying with our own. This is nourishing, redemptive; we become less alone inside. It might be just that simple" (22). The stuggles of Americans can take many forms, but Wallace contends that there is an underlying (therefore ontological) loneliness epidemic affecting anyone immersed in consumerist culture. He claims that *all* are suffering *alone*. The real trouble isn't that everyone is lonely, it's that society reinforces those feelings as normal. Wallace doubles down on this in the same passage from *Jest* we looked at earlier; Hal begins tracing the source of his loneliness beyond his nuclear family and finds a worthy scapegoat in "The U.S. arts," which offer themselves as "our guide to inclusion" when, in reality, culture shows "[us] how to fashion masks of ennui and jaded irony at a young age … and then it's stuck there" (*Jest* 694). An easy example of these metaphorical masks is the common call—how are you doing?—and response—I'm good. If you're like me, you've responded like this countless times because it's just easier than being upfront that you're actually having a horrible day. Adam Miller calls these occurrences "defensive gesture[s]. It's meant to give you enough space to breathe easily. But, instead, the mask buries you … insulating you from contact with anything" (44). More recently, mask imagery has been a continual dilemma on any social media platform; users post hyper-idealized photos of themselves or their surroundings as a front that masks their internal emptiness, rather than being genuine and, therefore, admitting that they are lonely.

With this in mind, Wallace theorizes that the only effective counter to the cultural tendency to fictionalize life is to actualize fiction, in other words, to write about life in such a way that readers learn to recognize and accept that life is difficult. Wallace's approach to fiction was nothing if not authentic: he hoped that his readership found reading his work "like a late-

night conversation with really good friends, when the bullshit stops and the masks come off" (Max 221). Wallace took issue with the "bullshit" of consumerist culture, particularly its insistence that pretending is preferred to truth-telling—this maxim is certainly a contemporary ontological difficulty, one that Wallace fought till his dying day. For our purposes, I'd say that pretending or treating the symptom is easier, whereas admitting that life is difficult or that we need help feels weak; those actions deliberately set aside the mask in an act of defiance against the cultural norm, but it's also the only hope of being heard and seen on a meaningful level (Miller 45). At the end of his musings, Hal concludes that "we're all lonely for something we don't know we're lonely for" (*Jest* 1053). Hal isn't cured because of this realization, but this moment is crucial because he feels a positive emotion: *empathy*. Hal gets to this "aha" moment because he grapples with his difficulty; he isn't cured—the icky despair (ontological difficulty) still exists—but his mood improves and he empathizes with others, showing that admitting difficulty even just to yourself can be redemptive. Realistically, Wallace hoped that all of his readers would reach a sincere moment of empathy like Hal; the goal of his writing was not to point out how dark present times may look or feel but rather to create a story "that locates and applies CPR to those elements of what's human and magical that still live and glow despite the times' darkness" (McCaffery 26). The key to overcoming loneliness through fiction—whether for himself or for others—was to convince his readers that being alive and grappling with personal difficulty was worthwhile.

Stay Alive: Wallace, Tyler Joseph, and Genuine Art

To do this effectively, Wallace tried to write empathetically, without judgment, and sought to create a community between himself and his readers. Whenever he wrote, Wallace

chased “the click,” a moment of total clarity, almost like a flow state. At first, he felt the click was a sign that he had written something really good, but as he grew in his craft he realized that listening to the click produced “an extractable value here for both me and the reader” (McCaffery 51). In his most difficult moments, Wallace saw value in thinking deeply about the world as he fit into it or how he might make a story out of it, and he wanted his audience to have that same experience; he wanted them to think critically, rather than just be entertained by a good story: the masks needed to come off. This, he believed, was intrinsic to elevating his work to the status of good art, which sought to give the reader something, whereas so-so art was content to entertain as many people as possible (McCaffery 50). Thinking deeply about his personal battles along with societal issues is tough work, but doing so allowed him to write more genuinely. Readers are drawn to Wallace because unlike the U.S. Art Machine, which forces us to awkwardly or ironically present ourselves to others, he doesn’t hide his struggles behind the pages; his fervent readers appreciate that he has baggage and feel no need to put on a front.

Other artists such as Tyler Joseph, lead singer of the alt-rock band twentyonepilots, try to embody Wallace’s vision in their work. The band’s slogan “Stay Alive” is intended to reach those who feel utterly alone; Joseph and his bandmate, Joshua Dun, create music for the struggling person. In the 2012 song “Holding Onto You,” Joseph empathizes with the loneliness of his listeners by revealing his own thoughts of suicide, “And the window-sill looks really nice, right?” but implores them to “Fight it! Take the pain, ignite it” (twentyonepilots 1:31), using loneliness as fuel to push forward and continue living. The song’s bridge aligns yet again with Wallace as Joseph repeatedly sings, “Lean with it, Rock with it. When we gonna stop with it? / Lyrics that mean nothing, we were gifted with thought” (twentyonepilots 3:12). In the first line, Joseph alludes to the vapidity of contemporary culture, which encourages consumers to adhere to

the status quo, and asks when someone will stand against the tide of popularity? The latter half of the song points an accusing finger at other types of art that "mean nothing"; like Wallace, Joseph agrees that humans are uniquely "gifted with thought" and should fight consumerist culture, which is content to entertain and numb the masses. The tool or weapon in this "fight" is giving something back. Both Wallace and twentyonepilots possess a unique, tightly-knit following not just because they approach art authentically, but also because their fans have to dutifully search through pages or multiple songs to unearth the full meaning. James McAdams sees a great benefit in shuffling through Wallace's difficulties—sprawling sentences, invented words, and endless footnotes to name a few—because it creates a gift that works "both ways, enticing the reader into having fun working very hard at something and having that difficulty create its own reward, be its own gift" (125). These textual challenges bypass Steiner's modal category. Wallace is only read successfully if a reader goes all in; the participation he asks of his readerly community is visceral rather than cerebral.

This experience that Wallace creates in his fiction goes directly against the allures of consumerist culture. Wallace addresses these allures in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, an essay in which he embarks on a week-long luxury cruise, dutifully recording every iota of his experience. In a promotional ad for the cruise, the company promises that its voyagers will do "something you haven't done in a long, long time: *Absolutely Nothing*" (*Fun* 268), offering an experience where a passenger's every desire can be met and answered. This promise is enticing as a leisurely activity, but Wallace assesses that "There is something about a mass-market Luxury Cruise that's unbearably sad" because the overall experience produces "*despair*…a simple admixture—a weird yearning for death combined with a crushing sense of my own smallness and futility that presents as fear of death" (261). This description is more potent than Wallace's

earlier depictions: there are effective counters for loneliness—I argue for empathy and community—whereas despair is, in a sense, synonymous with death. Time aboard the cruise transforms humans, capable of thought and action, into zombies with little to no agency by entertaining them to death. The cruise experience feels like despair because it is a direct twist of a redemptive community. Onboard, Wallace is surrounded by an *apathetic* community that hopes to drown out the realities of difficulty and death with as much pleasure as possible, making these people entirely self-oriented and causing Wallace to despair (*Fun* 264). Contingently, Americans know they will die but don't want to accept or comprehend that, opting for the mentality that "ignorance is bliss." Passivity—doing *Absolutely Nothing*—is the cultural norm, but Wallace refused to adhere to this mantra; his work pleads for the apathetic to snap out of it, to recognize that they are alive and capable of more than coasting numbly through life.

Empathetic Fiction and Readership

What we learn here from Wallace and see briefly through Joseph is this: art that is difficult to understand is often the richest in content; Steiner might say that tactical difficulties—which are present in both of my presented cases—require viewers to redeem themselves or their apathetic attitudes by engaging with the art. Wallace readers often become such die-hard fans precisely because they bought in and were rewarded for their efforts; is this, after all, not what we hope for students in the classroom? I can imagine a lonely reader finding comfort in Wallace not just because he understands their suffering, but because his writing causes them to forget how they feel temporarily. Obviously, loneliness (or any difficulty) is not ideal—Wallace does not advocate for or praise meaningless suffering (anyone who does is likely a psychopath)—but it is fair for Wallace to claim that *all* Americans are or have felt lonely. This idea of mass

loneliness, I think, is one namable aspect of Steiner's ontological difficulty. We don't know precisely why we all feel lonely, but the affliction is nonetheless real and needs to be addressed, otherwise, this loneliness could lead to despair. With this in mind, Wallace's first short story, "The Planet Trillaphon As It Stands In Relation To The Bad Thing", addresses the discrepancy between how loneliness *feels* and how it is commonly represented. In this story, we see Wallace begging to be understood, searching for someone else who resonates with how isolated he feels.

Wallace first published this story in the 1984 edition of *The Amherst Review*, but, unfortunately, this story is largely neglected by Wallacean scholars. Greg Chase (with whom I have a bone to pick) argues that the story lacks the "stunning formal originality" that defines much of Wallace's mature writings (184), but I think he is downright wrong to convey this as a negative. In my opinion, "Trillaphon" is an excellent place to begin an analysis of Wallace because it is written and presented with readers in mind, not critics. On the one hand, Wallace obviously intended "Trillaphon" to impact his collegiate peers, since he was (much to the chagrin of writers everywhere) just 22 when writing it and gave it to a literary magazine run by students. However, the beginning of the story implies an even more generalized audience. We read the piece through the perspective of an unnamed narrator who, unsurprisingly, is dealing with the same symptoms of depression—apathy, crying fits, and dropping out of school—as its author. Though the narrator clearly resembles Wallace, the absence of a proper name allows any reader to quickly identify with the storyteller, especially if they're familiar with the depressive pains he describes. Nonetheless, the lack of a name is confusing in the manner that a simple "contingent" difficulty is confusing, and, in an effort to not bore, confuse, or frustrate you, I will correct this difficulty (as Steiner says we can) and henceforth refer to the narrator as Waller, which was Wallace's self-professed nickname in college.

Anyway, the story begins with this sentence, “I've been on antidepressants for, what, about a year now, and I suppose I feel as if I'm pretty qualified to tell what they're like” (26). Waller doesn’t name a particular person that he’s telling all this to, but it’s sensical to imagine—an action frequently asked of readers in the story—the second-person pronoun “you” as the ideal target. Diego Santos and Claudio Banzato note that Wallace communicates through “a first-person narrator using direct speech that *welcomes the reader* with some sort of empirical authority that ‘qualifies’ him to explain how antidepressants and how depression feels” (192 italics added). Much like his belief that all Americans are depressed, Wallace crafts this story for the masses, not for a select few; social status, college attendance, and prior knowledge are not necessary for understanding what Wallace is getting at: anyone who experiences the complex difficulty of loneliness (which, as we have seen, exhibits contingent, modal, and—most of all—ontological difficulties) is a potential audience member. (It is precisely his “tactical” fictional work that creates this audience awareness.) Thus, most generally, this story unpacks what it means to be lonely; Wallace is exploring what the sources—the *difficulties*—of loneliness might be, rather than remaining content to treat and observe only symptoms of a larger issue. It’s also worth noting that “Trillaphon” was only brought to light because a Wallace fan, Ryan Niman, discovered the story in the Amherst archives and posted it online (Kelly 48). Though it lacks the style and pizzazz that Wallace would develop years later, “Trillaphon” is a prime example of fiction that mystifies critics and comforts readers (Baskin). The story is stylistically simple but rich with meaning, particularly for young people because Wallace so clearly conveys “what it is like to be deeply depressed” as a high-school or college student (Max 36). Lastly, he mentions to McCaffery that he first heard the click when writing “Trillaphon”; he felt that this story

contained themes that were vital for the modern person to internalize if they wanted to function properly in a consumerist culture where loneliness is a norm (35).

Before getting on antidepressants, Waller makes it clear that he wasn't doing so well. At least he knew that he wasn't. On the surface, he "was doing quite well in school and people were saying, 'Holy cow, you're really a very good student, you should just go on to college right now, why don't you?'" But these people—presumably his friends, classmates, and teachers—couldn't see what was going on behind the scenes. For Waller, "It was just pretty clear to me that I shouldn't go right on to college then, but I couldn't say that," due to ever-felt U.S. cultural norms, so he keeps his difficulty hidden and follows the traditional trajectory. Though he continues to maintain outstanding grades, it isn't long after his arrival at college that "the Bad Thing started," and he explains that "The Bad Thing is more or less the reason why I'm not on Earth anymore." Thus, he reveals that he is the sole inhabitant of the planet Trillaphon, which is "good news for everyone involved," but he doesn't mention his lonely occupancy on the planet again until the end of the story. Throughout the narrative, Waller is extremely forthcoming with nitty-gritty details about his experience with depression, recounting several embarrassing details, like his uncontrolled crying fits, paranoia, and hallucinations; he admits that these symptoms embarrassed him, but he still includes them for the reader. Yet, he struggles to explain how precisely The Bad Thing afflicts him. In his descriptions, he uses the phrase "sort of" twenty-one times, showing that even he isn't sure what's wrong with him. Dr. Kablumbus, Waller's psychiatrist, is the one who calls The Bad Thing, " 'severe clinical depression' ". However, Waller remains unconvinced: "I really don't know if the Bad Thing is really depression," he says. There's a quality about the word that doesn't fit perfectly into Waller's experience: a modal difficulty presents itself. Dr. Kablumbus prescribes antidepressants to Waller to lessen his

symptoms, but his response is entirely cerebral, rather than empathetic was Waller had hoped. Greg Chase effectively summarizes this difficulty by posing this question, “Is the signifier ‘depression’ really adequate to describe depression?” (185); in other words, can language—an exterior force—consistently and accurately convey our feelings—an inner experience? On the one hand, Waller is afflicted by the difficulty of loneliness, but we also see a new type of difficulty: the modal difficulty of self-expression. Before, Waller opted to keep silent about his pain, either because he feared judgment or because he didn’t want the attention. Now though—in a heavy ironic twist—he tells someone what’s going on and is met with a diagnosis (for a symptom!) rather than empathy and understanding. Seeking the “modality” of friendship, he encounters the difficulty “modality” of diagnostic (or linguistic) speak. The Bad Thing is Waller’s humorous, all-inclusive name for his mental anguish, but it’s only after he tells Dr. Kablumbus “as best I could about the Bad Thing” that those internal feelings are named as signs of depression. Symptomatically, Waller is clearly depressed, but he’s also *lonely* and receives no guidance on how to cope with this emotional state.

Failing to fully express himself to Dr. Kablumbus, Waller turns to a new source: readers. Wallace wanted to use fiction to bridge the gap between reader and author, and he accomplishes this in “Trillaphon” by asking his readers to connect with Waller through imagination. In his 3-page description of The Bad Thing, Waller directly invokes the audience’s imagination twelve times, beginning with a description of “feeling really sick to your stomach” (29). Stomachaches are, tragically, universal experiences, making this illustration an effective starting point—readers need almost no effort to instantly resonate with this example. After focusing the audience’s imagination, Waller slowly adds layers to his initial description that result in a highly detailed image of his personal pain:

> Imagine your whole body being sick like that: your feet, the big muscles in your legs, your collar-bone, your head, your hair, everything, all just as sick as a fluey stomach. Then, if you can imagine that, please imagine it even more spread out and total. Imagine that every cell in your body, every single cell in your body is as sick as that nauseated stomach…Now imagine that every single atom in every single cell in your body is sick like that, sick, intolerably sick. And every proton and neutron in every atom … swollen and throbbing, off-color, sick, with just no chance of throwing up to relieve the feeling … Just imagine that, a sickness spread utterly through every bit of you, even the bits of the bits. So that your very … very *essence* is characterized by nothing other than the feature of sickness; you and the sickness are, as they say, 'one'. (29)

Waller begins with a familiar, localized discomfort and, continually reminding the reader to stay engaged as he expands the description—accomplished by repeatedly stimulating their imagination—finally explains himself in a meaningful way. His experience not only sounds dreadful and exhausting, it *feels* that way. Wallace uses a fictional moment to share a flicker of his difficulty with the reader; someone who has never been clinically depressed receives insight to how that feels, whereas a clinically depressed person might read this and think to themselves, "huh, that really is what it's like. This guy gets it." Either result is helpful because it cuts through both the modal and contingent difficulties of self-expression with honesty, showing that U.S. cultural norms are part of the problem. After discussing The Bad Thing for quite a while (I've only included a small portion of the full depiction) Waller admits that he got carried away, "this is more than I intended to say" (30). Whereas Dr. Kablumbus immediately treated Waller, leaving him feeling emptier than before, a reader who patiently confronts contingent and modal difficulties works through Waller's self-expression and performs the role of empathizing with

him; Waller says more than he intends to because, perhaps for the first time, someone is listening to him. And, since we know that Wallace's real-life experience is nearly identical to Waller's, the reader extends empathy in a more meaningful sense to the author, allowing Wallace to feel heard and seen.

The Value of Community

Empathetic readers thus plays a key role in "Trillaphon," but, since they cannot respond within the fiction itself, they only embody a quasi-community for Waller. It is helpful for him to explain himself, but he longs to be understood on a face-to-face level. This desire is fulfilled in the character of May, a seventeen-year-old girl whom Waller meets in the hospital's TV room. We never learn why May was in the hospital, but her effect on Waller is monumental: "My meeting and making the acquaintance of this girl … even now stands out in my memory as more or less the last good thing that happened to me on Earth" (32). Unlike Dr. Kablumbus, who is mostly concerned with treating his pain, there is an unparalleled level of authenticity between May and Waller; she sees his pain but responds *empathetically*: "she broke into a big deadly-pretty smile and asked me tactfully where I got my scar" (32). May's first response to Waller's self-induced injury is to ask clarifying questions, to understand the individual behind the obvious affliction. This is the beginning of what might have been a healthy community (albeit a small one) where Waller could fully disclose his loneliness without fear of judgment, but May is tragically killed in a sudden car accident. Her passing saddens Waller but, for the most part, he remains largely unaffected, telling the story as if he were delivering the nightly news, "She was killed by her boyfriend in his drunken car only ten days ago" (32). Waller's response is a side-effect of Trillaphon, which he finally explains at the very end of the story is his nickname for

Tofranil. Existing on Trillaphon makes Waller feel extremely distant from anyone else; such "existence" is the result of the drug, and it establishes yet another isolating barrier between him and any empathetic, redemptive community. "Trillaphon" ends abruptly (literally in the middle of a sentence), suggesting that Waller—and potentially Wallace—really don't know if life on antidepressants is better than good old Earth. Life on a new planet alleviates Waller's depressive symptoms, but our final image of him is one full of uncertainty Did Tofranil help Waller function, or did it create new difficulties—now an ontological difficulty: one of "existence"—and add layers to his preexisting feelings of isolation? The latter seems more likely.

Thankfully, mental illness is not as taboo today as it was in 1984 when this story was penned. Countless internet resources such as Lauren Krouse's brief article, "How to Tell Someone, 'I'm Depressed', And Ask for Help," provide a step-by-step guide to encourage those suffering in silence to speak out. Krouse proposes a 7-step plan: Ask Yourself Some Questions, Pick Someone You Trust, Game Plan How It May Go, Pick a Place and Time, Ask for Help, Have a Backup Plan, and Keep Trying Until Someone Helps (JED Foundation). At the end, Krouse implores her readers that, no matter how they feel, they aren't alone, reminding them that "every one of us deserves to feel heard, seen, and supported—including you" (JED Foundation). This is the right advice to give, and Wallace isn't saying otherwise. However, I think he would take issue with Step 7, Keep Trying Until Someone Helps, a step that implies the ultimate anxious thought for any struggling individual: what if nobody understands how I feel? This anxiety is certainly reflected in "Trillaphon"; Waller describes his feelings and is met with a diagnosis, not empathy. There might have been a chance for an empathetic community to form between Waller and May, but that option is cut short, leaving Waller alone and unfulfilled on Trillaphon. In *Infinite Jest*, recovering alcoholic Don Gately has the exact opposite experience.

Gately, at the end of his rope, swallows his pride, attends a Boston AA meeting, and develops an uncharacteristic "Blind Faith in the older guys," who mentor him through his recovery process (351). Surrounded by an empathetic community, Gately is redeemed and begins helping other residents of the halfway home overcome their addictive cycles. It's unclear though if Waller is redeemed; his symptoms are treated but not the source of his pain. Thus, his story is literally unresolved; the readerly difficulty of not knowing the story's conclusion mirrors Waller's difficulties (contingent and modal) of not fully understanding The Bad Thing (pain, loneliness, depression, etc.) Even in college, Wallace understood that most people (i.e. non-addicts) tend to seek fixes to difficulties, but what Waller (and Wallace) needed in those moments was an empathetic, listening ear, rather than an immediate, cold diagnosis and prescription slip to cure him.

Ultimately, "Trillaphon" is a fictional device that allows Wallace to point out the problems of depression and, more significantly, loneliness. In the McCaffery interview, Wallace says that Americans possess a "compulsive tendency to regard pain itself as the problem" unlike other cultures and societies which understand pain "as basically healthy and natural, a sign that your nervous system knows something's wrong. For these cultures, getting rid of the pain without addressing the deeper cause would be like shutting off a fire alarm while the fire's still going" (23We don't want to face our difficulty; rather, we aim to ignore it or treat it quickly, a choice that can lead to greater consequences. "Trillaphon" is proof that Wallace doesn't ascribe to this cultural tendency. Though the story is not particularly difficult (tactically) to read through, readers are challenged to stare down their loneliness (contingently and ontologically), confront it, and (hopefully) understand the source of their own difficulties. Wallace contends that difficulty cannot be overcome on impulse; rather, it "requires us first to face what's dreadful, what we want

to deny" (McCaffery 32), a task that is monumentally less isolating when it is faced in a meaningful, empathetic community.

Dissecting Names and Countering Unnecessary Difficulty

We've just observed how crucial the themes of empathy and community are in "Trillaphon," yet most scholarship on this story barely addresses these subjects. A major focus of the small amount of existing scholarship on "Trillaphon" focuses at length on Waller's descriptions of The Bad Thing, which, in all fairness, take up about a third of the story. Santos calls these imaginative moments the "most memorable" (192), and Chase uses this section to make (yet another) connection to Wallace's philosophical influences (184). This part of the story allows young Wallace to begin flexing his authorial muscles, dazzling his audience with his impressive vocabulary and innate talent; a technique that scholars are drawn to because it satisfies traditional academic expectations for style. However, as I've hopefully convinced you, there's more to this story than eloquent descriptions of the inner mind; Waller's life on Trillaphon is lonely and he uses storytelling to explain his personal difficulty—likely an ontological one that exists in many people besides Waller. Now though, I'd like to take a closer look at Dr. Kablumbus as a character, as well as closely examine Waller's interaction with a bus driver, a scene which I believe is the lynchpin of this story. D.T. Max refers to "Trillaphon" as Wallace's coming-out party, the illustrious author's first attempt at wrestling with themes that would define his life and writing decades later (36); with that in mind, I hope to answer the following question after looking at these narrative moments: why is "Trillaphon" regarded as a lesser text by scholars and critics?

First, Dr. Kablumbus as a character does more for the story than step aside so The Bad Thing can take center stage. Moving forward, I'll refer to him as DK because it's easier but also reading these letters aloud produces the word "decay," an occurrence that would certainly resonate with the witty Wallace. Inspired by Donald Barthelme's (should I call him DB?) authorial trick of not telling straightforward stories (Max 29), Wallace constructs "Trillaphon" slightly out of order, allowing DK to act like a jack-in-the-box, popping up out of nowhere (reminiscent of Fletcher's interruptive narrator). In one of these surprise appearances, Waller tells us that "Dr. Kablumbus wanted to know what was up" (30). The language used here is no accident; DK is trying to be cool, an obvious move that doesn't fool Waller for a second. "I rather liked Dr. Kablumbus," he writes, "although he sucked on very nasty-smelling candies all the time—to help him stop smoking, apparently—and he was a bit irritating in that he tried to talk like a kid—using a lot of curse words, etc.—when it was just quite clear that he wasn't a kid" (30-31). Waller packs several interesting descriptions about DK into this single sentence, but the overall impression passed on to readers is that DK is middle-age (possibly older) and trying to bypass this reality with youthful behavior and mannerisms. These attempts are, according to Waller, poor and make DK pitiful. Chiefly, this moment is funny, likely Wallace's primary goal for the section; it's easy, particularly as a young student, to laugh or mock DK here for his failed attempts to relate to a younger demographic. I myself have several dreadfully embarrassing collegiate memories of professors making references to present-day culture ("can you believe they're making another Star Wars trilogy?") or assuming that the entire class is composed of four-year-olds ("all of you know what the show *Friends* is, right? I'm not that old, guys!"). I'm sure that readers of *The Amherst Review* got a good kick out of that, but

there's another interesting detail about DK that's easy to miss, even though it's smack-dab in the middle of the sentence.

Waller is irritated by DK's continual use of "very nasty-smelling candies" that help him stop smoking. The irony here is astounding: DK, a licensed psychiatrist, is paid to help Waller and other clients through their mental addiction, but he's addicted too. You might be saying to yourself, "Okay, but he's taking pills to quit." True, but Waller claims that DK takes these candies "all the time" and seems unconvinced they're working, evidenced by the adverb "apparently." Waller may struggle to express himself, but he isn't a liar; these are signs of an addict. If that wasn't enough for you, I return to my earlier assertion that DK sounds like decay, meaning the "gradual decline in strength, soundness, or prosperity" or, in the most final sense, "destruction or death" (Merriam-Webster). Obviously, the name Kablumbus is absurd and comical, but, broken down into mere letters, Wallace seems to be using this character's name to make a point. Waller doesn't know much about DK outside of his psychiatric role, but we know enough to make some educated assumptions: DK became addicted to smoking, recognized this as a problem, and decided to quit, leading to the purchase and frequent use of "nasty-smelling candies." On the surface, the choice to begin the road to recovery is noble, but it's not redemptive in the fullest sense because DK hasn't gone cold turkey, he's just replaced his addiction to smoking with an addiction to anti-smoking candies. Adam Miller identifies Wallace's belief that "addictions often come intertwined with a second sort of addiction" (17); DK's reliance on these candies is a sign that, although he offers solutions for addiction, he is just as susceptible as his patients. It's also possible that DK's onomatopoeic name ("Kablumbus"—like kaboom!—sounds like a mock-explosion) is an act of humorous rebellion from Wallace, a means of pointing out the fundamental humanness of psychiatrists and doctors—the prescribers

of secondary addiction. Wallace felt that most of our anxieties, fears, and loneliness—that is, the chief "difficulties" of human life, contingent, modal, ontological—found root in our "angst about death, the recognition that I'm going to die, and die very much alone, and the rest of the world is going to go merrily on without me" (McCaffery 32). The dark joke with the sound of DK's name and the hidden meaning in his initials is that, though he has knowledge and status now, he will die also. Death is the premier ontological difficulty, a reality that we can neither cure nor escape—no matter how many new products and products culture offers as a distraction. DK and Waller are more alike—as humans that will die —than dissimilar—as either a patient or counselor. We try to distract or numb ourselves to the unavoidable fact that we will die, when, in reality, embracing this truth can create the beginnings of a community. There's little connection between this duo in the story, yet both were suffering on their own; I wonder how their paths might have changed if they had embraced their shared difficulties and forged a simple, empathetic community—would they have been better off?

Regardless of Wallace's intent with this name-game, it's intriguing that, even before his career and fame, Wallace seemed captivated or, at the very least, interested in writing about addicts. When I discovered this, I expected most Wallacean scholarship to dutifully analyze DK—given that he's Wallace's first fictional addict—but (and of course I may have missed something) that doesn't seem to be the case. Maybe this scholastic absence is The Bad Thing. In other words, maybe this omission is responding to the, perhaps overwhelming, ontological difficulty behind the playful pizzazz that scholars *do* take up. Yes, Wallace's magnum opus is a 1,000+ page beast that encompasses almost every theme or literary endeavor a scholar could dream of, but may that help us to encounter an *ontological* difficulty that is hard to perceive? Or, to put it differently, does that mean figures like DK, whom we encounter in a short college-

journal story, are less worthy of our attention than a magnum opus? I don't think so, but I do know that doing the type of analysis I just did—the type of analysis that Wallace asks of his readers—is difficult. I didn't particularly enjoy pouring over every section of "Trillaphon" that DK was in, but I'm proud of my findings; the result was well worth it. As I said, I have no way of knowing if Wallace meant any connection between the name and the letters, but working through that challenge revealed something that I find new and interesting. This, in my mind, should be the goal of scholarship. But is it? Are we really trying to advance the current conversation or are we content to harp on the same themes, disagreeing with one scholar and agreeing with another? I hope you found that analysis at least a little intriguing, because to me it shows that working through difficulty—even when it is tiring—is a worthy goal, plus it means that scholarship can (and should!) do more than create unnecessary difficulties via jargon or complex definitions. Like Wallace, scholarship should be inviting, not excluding to general readership; we should break down existing—particularly ontological ones that need answers—difficulties not add to them.

Empathetic Community Can Decrease Difficulty

Speaking of Wallace scholarship, it's time for me to pick my aforementioned bone with Greg Chase. Truthfully, I agree with Chase at nearly every moment in his article as he skillfully connects Wallace's youthful fascination with Ludwig Wittgenstein to much of his fiction, most notably "Trillaphon" and "The Depressed Person," a story in which the protagonist possesses an empathetic community to support and encourage her, but acts as a selfish leech, demanding constant affirmation but refusing to return the favor when a member of her community is diagnosed with cancer. Chase reasonably claims that Wallace portrays and finds this character

entirely insufferable because she takes more than she gives—it's the responsibility of *each member* in a community to care equally for one another (189). In between his analysis of these texts, Chase highlights a character from *Jest*, Kate Gompert, to show how Wallace's views of The Bad Thing changed through the years. Roughly halfway through the novel, Gompert is "down in the trenches with the thing itself, [she] knows it simply as *It*," a dark being that "pervades the self at the self's most elementary levels. *It* is a nausea of the cells and soul" (695). In "Trillaphon," Waller describes The Bad Thing's chief affliction on his troubled little body as if "every single *atom* in every single cell in your body is sick" (29); *It* seems synonymous with The Bad Thing, except that Gompert's suffering is so total that she "is incapable of empathy with any other living thing" (696). Thus, Chase arrives at this conclusion:

> Wallace indicates that the clinically depressed are, counter-intuitively, those least likely to feel compassion for a figure like Kate, since their total preoccupation with their own pain leaves them incapable of empathy. If Wallace's descriptions of this indescribable condition are meant to accomplish anything, then, it would seem they are aimed at encouraging the rest of us, those not currently occupying this "hell for one" (696), to experience compassion for such seemingly unsympathetic figures. It is this suggestion on Wallace's part that provides the key to reading "The Depressed Person." (188)

Chase presumes that, based on Gompert's experience, clinically depressed individuals either cannot or just don't empathize with anyone, even if their suffering is the same; their condition pushes them so deeply inside of themselves that they cannot offer solace to anyone else. Therefore, it is the job of non-clinically depressed folks to look for signs of suffering and extend our services, i.e. ask them if they need help, if they need to talk or what have you.

Chase isn't wrong about this—honestly, we can probably still be doing more to help than we are now—but Gompert's *It* is different from The Bad Thing in that Waller is capable of empathy, perhaps more so than "regular folks." We see this in the responsibility he assumes when May dies unexpectedly. Despite his stunted emotional state due to moving to Trillaphon (i.e. Tofranil), Waller possesses enough wherewithal to reach out to her family: "I tried to call May's parents just to say that I was incredibly sorry yesterday. but their answering service informed me that Mr. and Mrs. Aculpa had gone out of town for an indefinite period. I can sympathize, because I am 'out of town,' too" (32). This quote is significant because it shows that Waller is capable of empathy—unlike *Jest's* Gompert—but there's another name-game hiding here. The young girl's name is May Aculpa, which sounds like mea culpa, a Latin phrase meaning "a formal acknowledgment of personal fault or error" (Merriam-Webster). On some level, Wallace (not Waller since he's in the same fictional world as May) feels guilty about May's tragic fate. We can only speculate but it could be that, since this story is a response to the author's continual bout with real-life suicidal depression, Wallace is considering how his death might impact others. Wallace does eventually commit suicide, but not for twentyish more years; in this moment and in this story, he seems to resolve himself to not let death be his fault—May Aclupa. Thus, Waller and Wallace are both depressed, yet both are capable of empathy, meaning that Chase's presumption is wrong: The Bad Thing is not identical to *It*. This is important to our analysis because it reminds us that difficulties such as loneliness and depression, which can have common symptoms or side effects, affect hosts in vastly different ways; it would be a poor choice to aid or treat an individual with head trauma as if their arm was broken—why do we assume that one fix will cure all?

Unfortunately, though, we've sort of—as Waller might say—ended up back where we started: what is The Bad Thing? DK says it's depression, Waller is unconvinced, and we don't leave the story with any concrete answer. However, in the scene that, to me, is the most powerful of "Trillaphon," we see The Bad Thing—heretofore shortened as TBT (just for ease this time, no more name-games I swear, so don't think of any connection with some kind of TNT kaboom where there isn't one)—at work rather than solely being an object of description. Waller is going home for the holidays via good old—borrowing one of Wallace's favorite phrases here—public transportation when his bus driver, neglecting to pay attention to traffic and—most regrettably—not being buckled, crashes. No passenger except the driver is hurt, and he starts freaking out because he's going to lose this job which he needs oh so badly, and everyone ignores this except for Waller who, against his will, is accompanied by TBT. In this moment though, TBT doesn't explode but produces a mysterious sentiment in Waller:

> I knew that the bus driver was probably going to lose his job, just as he had feared would happen. I felt unbelievably sorry for him, and of course the Bad Thing very kindly filtered this sadness for me and made it a lot worse. It was weird and irrational but all of a sudden I felt really strongly as though the bus driver were really me. I really felt that way. So I felt just like he must have felt, and it was awful. I wasn't just sorry for him, I was sorry as him, or something like that. *All courtesy of the Bad Thing*. (30 italics added).

In the simplest sense, Waller empathizes with the bus driver to such a degree that it frightens him, but he makes it clear that TBT *causes* this unfamiliar sensation, to be "sorry *as* him." Eventually, another bus comes to finish the route and an ambulance arrives for the negligent driver. Waller though is so moved that he slips the driver a hundred dollars and a bag of weed. Despite his future realization that giving the driver weed may deepen his trouble, Waller explains

to DK (and us) that “I really only sincerely meant to help him” (31). So, unlike Gompert, Waller sees the driver’s pain, recognizes it as similar to his own, and tries to help him. Also, not a single word passes between the driver and Waller, but Waller is impacted enough by the driver’s distress to act.

I don’t think it would be quite right to insert a haphazard claim here that the bus driver is depressed, but I’m confident that he is lonely. There’s a difference between being alone and being lonely. The former can be a choice—one often preferred by the introverted who need to recharge—while the latter is a feeling that almost always has a negative connotation. Loneliness, to Wallace, is an all-too-common feeling in America, one that is more like “a way of life, not a confrontational art form” (Baskin). Oftentimes, I think, we feel incredibly lonely when we make a mistake; this is certainly the case for the bus driver who is described after the crash as being “incredibly upset. He was sure he was going to lose his job, because he'd messed up … He was almost crying, and me too, because he said he had about seventy kids and he really needed that job, and now he would be fired” (Trillaphon 30). Although he’s thinking of his family, the driver’s feeling unbearably lonely at that point because he knows that he’s in a world of trouble; the loneliness stems from the fact that nobody is going to come along and save him. Sometimes empathy and community aren’t enough—they’re alleviating forces but not cures. Yet, there’s beauty in this desperate situation because Waller—a stranger with no reason to—empathizes and offers what he can; his offering isn’t enough, but it is unequivocally human. This moment, a person reaching out and giving what they have, is a microcosm for Wallace’s entire approach to writing, unwavering in his belief that “literature ought to address the paradoxes and confusions of its moment” but isn’t responsible for offering perfect solutions to any problems (Baskin). In his fiction, Wallace questions everything, even though he gives a short list to McCaffery: “how is

it that we as human beings still have the capacity for joy, charity, genuine connections, for stuff that doesn't have a price? And can these capacities be made to thrive? And if so, how, and if not, why not?" (27). Wallace didn't have all the answers and didn't feel the need to pretend otherwise—his role as an author is to offer what he has to contemporary Americans and see what they do with it. So, returning to "Trillaphon," we don't know what exactly TBT is or how it precisely prompts Waller to respond to the bus driver's difficulty, but—and I can almost hear Wallace asking this—why do we need to know? Like Ryan in *The Office*, we want answers to our difficulty and pain. Furthermore, we want an absolute, final quick fix: to beat death. Even if you've accepted that you will die, it's still scary and, arguably, painful to think about. Why? Because it's unknown. The challenge with death, like all other difficulties, is to understand it as an ontological fact so that we are not overwhelmed when it comes. Thus, the only response is to give what we have while we can—while we are alive—that is what facing the reality of death looks like.

Being alive in the twenty-first century is insane, disorienting, and downright depressing at times, but it's also wonderful and awe-inspiring. I see (and hopefully you do too) in Waller a person who despite his mental affliction is making his way in the world and, while doing that, wants to help others do the same. Waller doesn't understand exactly how TBT works—that is the *ontological difficulty* he confronts throughout his work—but he might someday and that's enough for him to keep going. This, ultimately, is why I think Waller's relationship with TBT is so important; it's a symbol for us to continue living as bravely and boldly as we can even though we don't understand the difficulties we face.

Conclusion: Grappling with Difficulty is Worthwhile and Redemptive

In typical Wallace fashion, this charge is buried beneath wild analogies, wacky characters, and sad encounters, but I find the journey to be well worth it. I suppose that I disagree with Chase's assessment that *It* equals TBT because I find this conclusion too shallow; depression, loneliness, and mental illness can take many shapes, so it seems logical that Wallace wouldn't give a precise answer for his imaginative interpretations. Also, these difficulties afflict people differently just as culture offers unlimited options for distraction, hoping to keep customers happy in apathy (a good slogan, I think). In "Trillaphon" we see him advocating for empathy-driven community, fueling his belief that being surrounded by living beings who care makes life more bearable. Suffice it to say, I find "Trillaphon" more than worthy of both readerly and scholarly attention. The piece is funny, fascinating, and brutally honest about the human condition; its witty handling of death and depression makes these ontological realities more comprehensible. While researching and writing this article, I've been teaching freshman composition at the University of Oklahoma. On a whim, I decided to assign "Trillaphon" to my students because I wanted to see what they thought about it. Honestly, I didn't think they'd like it at all. For context, earlier in the semester, I assigned the first chapter of *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* (a book, mind you, for children) and was told by one student—in a remarkable impersonation of Steiner's contingent category—that she "didn't get it." So, I wasn't exactly hopeful when I opened the floor for discussion on "Trillaphon." However, I was shocked when over three-fourths of the class told me that they liked it. To my surprise, they found the writing engaging and thought the story's premise was interesting. This, I think, is a particular strength of "Trillaphon": the story is easy to follow, making the themes it addresses much more obvious compared to later works like *Infinite Jest*. Also, it's a good reminder that Wallace wrote this piece with college students in mind since he was immersed in the collegiate world at that time.

I bring this personal story to your attention for two reasons; the first is that I (like any other teacher, professor, instructor, or what have you) can be wrong—I hope this assertion is a humbling reminder that, oftentimes, we can learn from students as much (if not more) than they from us. Second, and more relevant with words like loneliness, empathetic community, and difficulty all bouncing around in your brain, students of this generation are more capable than they are given credit for. Ontological difficulties—like mass loneliness or despair—are challenging to name but they still afflict us in a multitude of ways; to live meaningfully we have to accept these difficulties and work to help one another surpass their negative effects. Wallace would likely be more interested in my second point, since he taught composition and fiction courses at multiple universities. Although he enjoyed teaching—I'd kill to be a fly on the wall during his lectures—D.T. Max tells us that Wallace was well "aware that the teacher-student relationship was one of performer and spectator. The teacher was under constant pressure to *entertain* if he wanted to be liked—and no one wanted to be liked more than Wallace did" (79). It's difficult to do anything well if you feel unliked or unsupported, but in my experience—and Wallace's evidently—this is doubly true of teaching. Imagine standing in front of a crowd every day knowing that, in a very short amount of time, you need to explain a new fact or concept while simultaneously holding their undivided attention. Now imagine that they all hate you—do you feel lonely yet? On the flip side, students can be lonely too, feeling left behind or struggling to keep up with the rest of the class. Both roles in the classroom can feel infinitely lonely at times, and I think that's the problem we desperately need to address.

The saddest part in "Trillaphon" to me lies underneath the actual text: Waller is in school, therefore surrounded by teachers, friends, and peers, yet he is unfathomably lonely even before he leaves Earth. We send students to school Monday through Friday for over two-thirds of the

calendar year, knowing that the environment will be unnecessarily difficult. While we weren't looking, "Academia and commercial culture have somehow become these gigantic mechanisms of commodification that drain the weight and color out of even the most radical new advances" (McCaffery 31). Rather than solving preexisting difficulties, we're inventing new ones. The culture that profits off our loneliness has infected our school systems, places that should be filled with empathetic people working and living in community. Why have we settled for less? I'm not calling for revolt—put down your torches and pitchforks, sheesh—I'm just trying to be honest: we have the structures in place to make a massive impact on countless Waller's if we reorient ourselves and take advantage of it. To his credit, Wallace tried; "Despite his struggle, Wallace managed to keep teaching. He was dedicated to his students: He would write six pages of comments to a short story, joke with his class, fight them to try harder" (Lipsky 179). Wallace saw their struggle and met his students in the trenches, using everything at his disposal to convince at least one person they weren't as alone as they felt. I wonder how much our culture would change if we did the same? There are too many Bad Things—contingent, modal, tactical, and ontological difficulties—to count, but Wallace shows that grappling through these difficulties is a valuable use of time. Ideally, this practice helps us to better understand ourselves and the world around us; as scholars, teachers, and thinkers, our duty is to follow in Wallace's footsteps: we can use our platforms to explore and dissect contemporary difficulties, as well as offer solutions on how to embrace and overcome these difficulties in meaningful, uniting ways. Fiction was Wallace's preferred method for completing this process, but it isn't the only one that works. The classroom, lunch table, social media platform (sparingly), and office are all fair game. Culture offers distractions and various sources of numbing, but we—the humans who think and feel these complexities—can help one another through any circumstance that feels

impossible by caring radically for the afflicted and hurting. Wallace did all this mostly by himself, what could we change if a community rallied behind his same cries for hope in an age of despair?

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