

From 17 November to 16 December 2014, I spent one month in the archives of the University of Texas at Austin's Harry Ransom Center—a research visit that was made possible by a generous EAAS Travel Grant as well as a Dissertation Fellowship supported by the Creekmore and Adele Fath Charitable Foundation and the University of Texas at Austin Office of Graduate Studies. Most of my time at the Center was dedicated to working through the David Foster Wallace Papers in order to find material that would help me expand on a first draft of a chapter of my doctoral dissertation, *Straight from the Heartland: New Sincerity and the American Midwest*, which I am writing under the supervision of Dr. Patrick Hayes at Oxford University.

Among some of the first materials I consulted was Wallace's "Midwesternisms" binder, a notebook full of midwestern phrases and idioms that, as I found out, had just come back from an exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art. In their efforts to quickly track down this particular document as well as several other high-demand materials, the reading-room staff were very helpful indeed. Thanks to their assistance, I managed to have a look at every document I planned on consulting, including some rather delicate items, such as the author's visual aids and map of Peoria IL, which had been removed from the collection for conservation purposes.

In addition to examining the abovementioned map and notebook, I took the opportunity to read through a relevant selection of books from Wallace's personal library. Most of these books are either by established midwestern authors (e.g. Sherwood Anderson, William H. Gass, Michael Martone) or deal with some aspect of regionalism and/or the Midwest (e.g. Olivier Razac's *Barbed Wire*). Reading them, I was struck by how deeply Wallace was engaged in a literary conversation with these authors and how often this conversation explicitly centers on questions of regionalism and how to represent the Midwest. Judging by the extensive annotations in Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, Gass's *Omensetter's Luck*, and Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time*, Wallace seems to have treated these books as a source of inspiration for his own work, in particular his unfinished novel *The Pale King*.

My views that Wallace was highly attuned to the nuances of place in both fiction and non-fiction were, moreover, reinforced by his teaching materials. These include the author's detailed notes for a class on the topic of "place" in literature, which he may very well have taught alongside Martone's essay on the midwestern landscape, titled "A Place of Sense," since a heavily annotated photocopy of this piece is also included in Wallace's teaching files.

But it is Wallace's posthumous novel that I am preoccupied with in my own dissertation chapter, which is why most of my time at the Harry Ransom Center was spent reading through the entire series of Wallace's documents that covers the "Additional *Pale King* Materials, 1990-2007." These materials include various notebooks, pieces of freewriting, handwritten zero drafts of sections of *The Pale King*, and clean typescripts of more or less finished parts of the novel. While working my way through them, it became clearer and clearer to me how much Wallace seemed to have struggled with writing the kind of "post-postmodern," sincere, anti-rebellious prose that, judging by his seminal essay "E Unibus Pluram," his later work was ostensibly meant to be.

For the purpose of this report, I will limit myself to giving one relevant example that has broadened my understanding of Wallace's artistic struggles with sincerity and doubts about how to capture his fellow midwesterners' rich interior lives, namely *The Pale King's* "Good People" chapter. I had always regarded this chapter as one of the rare instances in which Wallace was able to mute that self-conscious, experimental part of himself in order to write in an uncharacteristically direct prose style that is aimed at bespeaking the protagonists' sincerity. It surprised me, therefore, to find that at multiple stages of his writing process, Wallace expressed severe doubts about this direct style, could not resist the urge to provide ironic commentary on its air of sentimentality, and was constantly looking for ways to embellish it by giving his characters rather scandalous and spectacular back stories full of lies, manipulation and, in one case, an abortion gone horribly wrong.

Finally, during my research stay, I received an e-mail to notify me that a paper I presented at last September's "Infinite Wallace" conference at the Universities of Paris III and VII will be collected in a book slated for publication by Bloomsbury Academic. This essay, which concerns Wallace's "post-secular" conversion narratives in *The Pale King*, will also greatly benefit from my access to the Wallace Papers as well as a selection of the author's books on pop-spirituality and self-help that I managed to read during my last two days in Austin. So I already have one short-term opportunity to publish some of my recent findings that, to end on a note of gratitude, I would not have been able to make without the generous support offered to me by both the European Association for American Studies and the Harry Ransom Center.

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