



## The Soul is Not a Smithy

*David Foster Wallace, Sven Birkerts (Introduction)*

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## **The Soul is Not a Smithy** David Foster Wallace , Sven Birkerts (Introduction)

"[The Soul is Not a Smithy]" has a special place in my editor's heart, I won't deny it," writes Sven Birkerts, editor of AGNI (where this story originally appeared), in his introduction to this issue of Recommended Reading. "[David Foster] Wallace sent it to us as a way of wishing Godspeed—it was an act of kindness, one that we have since done everything we could to try to deserve. There is no flash summary possible, no shortcut I can offer through the bramble of it. I can only testify, as so many others have, that it is vintage Wallace, breaking expectation, compelling devoted attention, repaying in the way that the best art does: by letting us feel at the end that something has been rearranged and at a deep level."

### About the author:

David Foster Wallace was born in Ithaca, New York, in 1962 and raised in Illinois, where he was a regionally ranked junior tennis player. He received bachelor of arts degrees in philosophy and English from Amherst College and wrote what would become his first novel, *The Broom of the System*, as his senior English thesis. He received a masters of fine arts from University of Arizona in 1987 and briefly pursued graduate work in philosophy at Harvard University. His second novel, *Infinite Jest*, was published in 1996. Wallace taught creative writing at Emerson College, Illinois State University, and Pomona College, and published the story collections *Girl with Curious Hair*, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, *Oblivion*, the essay collections *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, and *Consider the Lobster*. He was awarded the MacArthur Fellowship, a Lannan Literary Award, and a Whiting Writers' Award, and was appointed to the Usage Panel for The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language. He died in 2008. His last novel, *The Pale King*, was published in 2011.

### About the Guest Editor:

Like so many other ventures that first saw light in the counter-culture era, AGNI (founded in 1972 by Askold Melnyczuk) set itself up as an alternative to the status quo, a fly in whatever was the going ointment. Though much has changed and evolved, and though captains and crews have grown a bit older, we like to think that the founding spirit survives. Not so much as a politics, more as a feisty eclecticism, a welcoming of spirits from all parts of the world (we prize fine translation), and as an insistent celebration of the literature that represents the thorny complexity, the complex thorniness, of making a self in a world become "hyper" in so many respects. We look for language that gets our moment, that achieves excellence through the integration of perspectives, that strikes the note of the new. Our avatar is the Vedic god of fire, our goal is literary combustion.

### About the Publisher:

Electric Literature is an independent publisher working to ensure that literature remains a vibrant presence in popular culture. Electric Literature's weekly fiction magazine, Recommended Reading, invites established authors, indie presses, and literary magazines to recommended great fiction. Once a month we feature our own recommendation of original, previously unpublished fiction, accompanied by a Single Sentence Animation. Single Sentence Animations are creative collaborations: the author chooses a favorite sentence and we commission an artist to interpret it. Stay connected with us through email, Facebook, and Twitter, and find previous Electric Literature picks in the Recommended Reading archives.

## **The Soul is Not a Smithy Details**

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## From Reader Review The Soul is Not a Smithy for online ebook

### Alex says

interesting plot device, but a weird way to go about telling a story. the whole time I kept thinking "get to the point!"

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### Fionnuala says

What we have here is a frame story inside of which nestle several substories, the frame story itself concerning an unexpected and sensational event in a 4th grade civics classroom in the United States in the 1960s with the kids all sitting quietly in rows, and the substories giving glimpses of the kids' backstories plus the backstories of their parents, some of whom sit in offices, at desks in rows not dissimilar to the classroom, while the narrator, who is recalling the frame story, the sensational event in the civics classroom, and also meditating on the substories, goes on to reveal another story within the story, another frame story in fact, itself divided into smaller stories, and the word frame is particularly apt because what he describes when he's not describing the original frame story complete with its substories, is what he remembers seeing through the classroom window frame, the glass of which is divided into rows of mesh squares which are like a story board allowing him to create a series of scenarios about what he sees through the window fleshed out with imaginary happenings not unrelated to the substories of the main frame story, all of which is told in one smooth flow of language, but with subtle shifts according to story theme..

Have I succeeded in confusing you? Unlike me, Wallace never slips up, successfully connecting the narrative of his many stories into a unified whole. The reader is never confused. It has to be the most cleverly constructed piece of writing I've ever read.

And the sensational event in the civics classroom around which everything seems to revolve turns out to be not what the story is about at all.

You can read The Soul is not a Smithy here - and yes, the title is a reference from Joyce:  
<http://recommendedreading.tumblr.com/...>

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### Anni says

I am emotionally wrung out to dry after reading this - yet another masterclass of short story writing from the literary genius DFW. Is 'genius' too generous a description you may ask? The answer is no.

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### Lemar says

David Foster Wallace brings back elementary school in vivid sensory detail in the Soul is not a Smithy. It made me realize that those memories are still extant and complete in me and that thank God they don't boil near the surface of my brain as they did for him.

The soul of a child is like a pure flowing molten metal and when it is doused with the icy water of cruelty and deprivation the result is a screaming deformation that is painful to witness and experience.

DFW and I were born in the same year and his work has always struck me as scarily accurate and it's ability to evoke time periods I lived through, like college dorm life in the Broom of the System or any number of scenes in Infinite Jest. My hesitancy to fully embrace this short story as I did those novels, which are among my favorite all-time reads, probably has more to do with my discomfort. And yet, like a sad blues, I needed this story, it helps.

The story made me think about childhood and war and breaking points and the fantastic ability it is that this great author can transmit states of mind , time and place in a package my brain can unlock like a scent. DFW, a man who I perceive as having a huge heart it was not easy, or possible or desirable to defend.

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### **Alex Linschoten says**

This is a short story, originally published in AGNI, about a boy who witnesses a teacher having some sort of breakdown while in class. The plot isn't really the point of this story. Rather, Wallace writes a series of stories in stories that function a little like a medieval-era triptych; Wallace uses a different way to describe what these stories-in-stories are like. The story culminates at almost 20,000 words in a vision of the modern workplace - a nightmare - that adds perspective to the breakdown and to the sense of dread facing the students who don't manage to escape out of the classroom along with some others. I just finished reading it, so it's still a bit fresh, but I think I'll be returning to this one to figure out just how Wallace puts it all together.

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### **Diane says**

my head hurts from holding so many simultaneous things in it! :-)

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### **E.W. Harrington says**

I wanted to read The Soul is Not a Smithy having worked Joyce's Lit 101 line into my own writing. David Foster Wallace, a modern, stream of consciousness writer questioning the Irish master's premise, who perfected the technique.

The quote, you may recall, is from Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man:

'Welcome, O life, I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.'

How then, is the soul not a smithy?

Joyce's creative domain may be seen as a place of promise and demiurgic fecundity, even though it sounds like a lot of work. Wallace's workshop, however, may have been a hellish place--think open flames and dropped anvils.

Or, perhaps being a Writer should only temporarily stress out a person.

On the other hand, is it about the uncontrollable, ultimately chaotic nature of Experience that Joyce (falsely) believes he has the power to master with Art?

(Forgive me...Wallace studied philosophy in college, as did I. He was a graduate student of philosophy at Harvard, but did not complete that degree).

There's mastery enough in Wallace's prose, here, an exploration of the inescapable effect of image. The slow learner learns this lesson, whose normal means of escape from the boredom of 4th grade Civics class had been to composite a new, framed reality, from outdoor images in the wire mesh of a nearby window, 'which divided the window into 86 small squares with an additional row of 12 slender rectangles...'

The imaginative child has learned how to make his own movie out of the window's individual frames. On the day in question, Civics class was not boring. The traumatic things seen that day in class are matched, if not exceeded, by the horrors the child witnesses outside, scenes of savage brutality, or meaningless violence. Curiously, everything bad that happens outside, is happening to a single family. It's the Universe having a joke, I guess, since God is nowhere present.

It was the early sixties, when normal life strove unquestioningly to escape chaos, ordered into the unrelieved matrices of Levittown, not unlike the window's wire mesh: "The Civics classroom at R. B. Hayes consisted of six rows of five desks each. The desks and chairs were bolted securely to each other and to the floor and had hinged, liftable desktops..."

Reading this short book is at times difficult, painful. There are sentences here I may never choose to finish reading; I had to look away. Yet the writing itself is great. The challenge seems to have been to evoke deeply sad or horrific images, and strive to achieve redemption through mastery of technique, the precision, and beauty of art. Content should not matter.

I expect there are volumes in aesthetics on this last point.

If Wallace's furnace was fueled by indignation, it is that in our life, we learn that we will have no choice but to see, and remember. By the time we've left the movie theatre, we have already been subjected to the frightening, indelible image:

'Later, when I was in my 20's and courting my wife, the traumatic film *The Exorcist* came out, a controversial film that both of us found disturbing—and not disturbing in an artistic or thought-provoking way, but simply offensive—and walked out of together at just the point that...

...the response was both disturbing and unforgettable. Suffice to say we have not seen it since. And yet the lone moment of *The Exorcist* that has stayed so emphatically with me over the years consisted only of a few frames, and had precisely this rapid, peripheral quality, and has obtruded at odd moments into my mind's eye ever since.'

The other matter Wallace wants to be indignant about is the horror of adulthood. (A result of horrible images we can't expunge?) There's the meltdown of the substitute teacher writing KILL THEM ALL over and over on the blackboard. He tries to erase the words, then rewrites them.

And, there's the horror of his father's work. The character's father is an insurance actuary, and the boy

experiences repeated nightmares with images of a gray, interminable job, sitting at a desk in rows similar to those of his classroom, only there are more of them.

‘...the actual specifics of his job were always vague.’

There's a youtube video of Wallace discussing the work. The interviewer says it reminded him of Kafka (he did not say Kafkaesque). Wallace said yes, but inverted Kafka; the final horrors are not surreal, but described in banal detail.

Wallace's formatting style, one I've seen in his other work, is of a tall block of text the eye can easily lose its foothold on, if one isn't careful, like free climbing a sheer rock face. Reading with a device, there's always the option to increase font size, which I did. I wondered what it was like on paper. And then there are these

PARAGRAPH SEPARATED BLOCKS OF ALL CAPITALS, WHICH MIMIC SCREAMING HEADLINES, OBSERVATIONS EX CATHEDRA, OR THAT RECALL SOME SORT OF CHORAL EMPHASES.

I usually enjoyed these, even though the eye's reflex is to duck.

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**Liz Simmons says**

**What is trauma?**

This incisive glimpse into an obsessive and sensitive kid who is held hostage in his 3rd grade Civics class was my first introduction to the writing of David Foster Wallace. If his own mind was as nearly obsessive and in touch with the pain of the world, it's no wonder he had to exit early.

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**Lynn says**

Not my favorite of his, but there are those moments of sheer brilliance that shine through :)

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**Vishal Raj says**

The story is supposedly, a "short story" , but encompasses themes and ideas and scenarios which are more varied, deep and insightful than best of novellas. The whole story has a hallucinative quality where the most unspoken horrors of life, real life, are presented from viewpoint of a kid. There are layers to the story where it is presented as a recollection of transformation of a naive daydream of a kid, sitting in an unremarkable substitution class in junior section at school, into a nightmare as his teacher starts to have a breakdown and how it has a kind of psychic affect on all those who are around him including the boy who seems to be recounting his experience.

And the story, instead of leaving it at that, tries to, no matter how superficial it may read, find the underlying reasons for the banal evil that exist in the world. Apart from all this layered and deep meanings, or rather than reading, of the material, there is the unique style of DFW which never lets you rest and take the story for granted, and always keep you engaged in a way that, despite the horrid premise of the story, keeps you not only hooked, but entertained, as you read through the syntactically tough and twisted stuff that he has constructed.

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### **Graciele Marim says**

Very good. The narrative is substantial and interesting. I do recommend this book to everyone.

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### **John says**

4.5 out of 5.0 stars.

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### **Luke Crawford says**

Nice, surreal sort of short. Maybe not his best work? but a little vignette; a moment in school, perhaps something of a metaphor for the trauma of childhood. Certainly enjoyable enough.

Did you know his mother wrote a beginning English composition text? "Practically Painless English." - my copy came in the mail today.

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