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## Abstract

David Foster Wallace famously characterized his first novel, *The Broom of the System*, as 'a conversation between [Ludwig] Wittgenstein and [Jacques] Derrida.' This comes as little surprise, given the ubiquity of the question of language in the works of these two thinkers, and given the novel's constant reflections on the relation between language and world. *Broom's* protagonist, Lenore Beadsmen – in search of her eponymous great-grandmother – is preoccupied with the dread that 'all that really exists of [her] life is what can be said about it,' that is to say, that reality is entirely coextensive with language. If, as Wittgenstein says, 'The limits of my language mean the limits of my world,' and, 'I am my world,' then it stands to reason that 'the limits of my language mean the limits of myself.' This is the fearful hypothesis that drives *The Broom of the System*.

Much of the scholarship surrounding the novel has interpreted Wallace's remark as an assertion that the novel constitutes a *debate* between Wittgenstein and Derrida, and has, more often than not, assumed that Wittgenstein 'wins' that debate for Wallace. In his groundbreaking work, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, Marshall Boswell writes that for Wallace, 'the job of the post-Barth [i.e., John Barth, with whom Boswell lumps Derrida] novelist is to '... overturn the related insistence that texts are "closed systems" that produce their own meaning through endless self-reference.' The 'self-conscious meta-fictional novel,' he writes, 'in David Foster Wallace's hands, becomes an open system of communication—an elaborate and entertaining game—between author and reader,' and Boswell credits Wittgenstein as the inspiration for this thought of the open system. Alternatively, some scholars have left Derrida out of the discussion entirely. Despite the oft-cited quotation from Lipsky's book, it remains the case, as Bradley Fest has noted, that Derrida's 'influence on Wallace's work still remains largely unexplored.'

There are a number of likely explanations for this privileging of Wittgenstein. The most obvious is the fact that Wallace himself addresses Wittgenstein far more frequently and directly than he does Derrida. Wallace famously wrote a review of David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, which includes a fair amount of broader commentary on Wittgenstein's project. While Derrida's name does not appear in *The Broom of the System*, Wittgenstein's name is mentioned multiple times, as the 'mad crackpot genius' who had been the inspiration for Gramma Lenore's philosophy, which is the source of Lenore's aforementioned dread. Wittgenstein was the author of the *Philosophical Investigations* and of an apparently esoteric *green book* without which Gramma Lenore never left her home at the Shaker Heights nursing facility. Indeed Wittgenstein, represented by the ever-elusive Gramma Lenore herself, wafts like a specter through the entirety of the novel. However, any simple valorization of Wittgenstein in the thinking of Wallace risks overlooking what Wallace characterizes as the 'horror' that Wittgenstein leaves us with. In the famous interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace cites Wittgenstein as 'the real architect of the postmodern trap,' the worry, indoctrinated into Lenore by her great-grandmother, that 'a life is words and nothing else,' that there is no 'extra-linguistic *anything*.' The dread that burdens Lenore *also* burdens Wallace, and it is this dread for which Wallace seeks a solution in his writing, both in *The Broom of the System* and beyond. As Wallace says to McCaffery, 'If the world is itself a linguistic construct, there's nothing "outside" language for language to have to picture or refer to. This ... leads right to the postmodern, poststructural dilemma of having to deny yourself an existence independent of language.' If the novel is indeed a 'conversation between Wittgenstein and Derrida,' and if it is *Wittgenstein*, and not Derrida, whose thinking points toward the 'postmodern trap,' then perhaps we should consider that Derrida may have been a source of hope for Wallace.

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In this essay, I therefore invite Derrida into this conversation, arguing that, contrary to popular intuitions, Derrida might just be the thinker who points the way in Wallace's system beyond the 'postmodern trap.' As noted, Wallace grapples with the 'horror' of language with no 'outside.' We can think of this 'anxiety of the outside' in two ways: (1) that my language belongs only to *me*, and so if there is no outside of language, there is no outside of *myself* – the problem of solipsism from the early Wittgenstein, about which Wallace worried extensively; (2) that the *world* itself is nothing more than language, and hence there is no outside of language that would constitute myself, nothing more to *me* than the language that is used to describe me – I am not truly a *self* at all. As Lenore's significant other – Rick Vigorous – says of Lenore, 'she simply felt ... as if she had no real existence ...' It is Derrida – the silent interlocutor in the book – and not Wittgenstein, who disrupts this double bind, with his famous 'non-concept' known as *différance*, the differential play of force at the heart of all language (and life). *Différance* points toward an essential exteriority at the heart of the self, thereby avoiding the solipsistic danger of the self-enclosed world. Moreover, *différance* also points toward an essential *outside* to language, according to Derrida, and in so doing, it points toward dimensions of human life – intensity, desire, affect, force – that elude the grasp of language, precisely because they too are part of the differential play. Before addressing these characteristics of *différance*, I shall first discuss Wallace's anxiety of the outside through the 'double bind' he sees in Wittgenstein.

**Keywords**

David Foster Wallace, The Broom of the System, Jacques Derrida, Ludwig Wittgenstein

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# ***The Poststructuralist Broom of Wallace's System: A Conversation Between Wittgenstein and Derrida***

**Vernon W. Cisney**

## **I. Introduction**

David Foster Wallace famously characterized his first novel, *The Broom of the System*, as 'a conversation between [Ludwig] Wittgenstein and [Jacques] Derrida.'<sup>[1]</sup> This comes as little surprise, given the ubiquity of the question of language in the works of these two thinkers, and given the novel's constant reflections on the relation between language and world. *Broom's* protagonist, Lenore Beadsmen – in search of her eponymous great-

grandmother – is preoccupied with the dread that ‘all that really exists of [her] life is what can be said about it,’<sup>[2]</sup> that is to say, that reality is entirely coextensive with language. If, as Wittgenstein says, ‘*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world,*<sup>[3]</sup> and, ‘I am my world,’<sup>[4]</sup> then it stands to reason that ‘the limits of my language mean the limits of myself.’ This is the fearful hypothesis that drives *The Broom of the System*.

Much of the scholarship surrounding the novel has interpreted Wallace’s remark as an assertion that the novel constitutes a *debate* between Wittgenstein and Derrida, and has, more often than not, assumed that Wittgenstein ‘wins’ that debate for Wallace. In his groundbreaking work, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, Marshall Boswell writes that for Wallace, ‘the job of the post-*Barth* [i.e., John Barth, with whom Boswell lumps Derrida] novelist is to ‘... overturn the related insistence that texts are “closed systems” that produce their own meaning through endless self-reference.’ The ‘self-conscious meta-fictional novel,’ he writes, ‘in David Foster Wallace’s hands, becomes an open system of communication—an elaborate and entertaining game—between author and reader,’<sup>[5]</sup> and Boswell credits Wittgenstein as the inspiration for this thought of the open system. Alternatively, some scholars have left Derrida out of the discussion entirely.<sup>[6]</sup> Despite the oft-cited quotation from Lipsky’s book, it remains the case, as Bradley Fest has noted, that Derrida’s ‘influence on Wallace’s work still remains largely unexplored.’<sup>[7]</sup>

There are a number of likely explanations for this privileging of Wittgenstein. The most obvious is the fact that Wallace himself addresses Wittgenstein far more frequently and directly than he does Derrida. Wallace famously wrote a review of David Markson’s *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*, which includes a fair amount of broader commentary on Wittgenstein’s project.<sup>[8]</sup> While Derrida’s name does not appear in *The Broom of the System*, Wittgenstein’s name is mentioned multiple times, as the ‘mad crackpot genius’<sup>[9]</sup> who had been the inspiration for Gramma Lenore’s philosophy, which is the source of Lenore’s aforementioned dread. Wittgenstein was the author of the *Philosophical Investigations* and of an apparently esoteric *green book* without which Gramma Lenore never left her home at the Shaker Heights nursing facility.<sup>[10]</sup> Indeed

Wittgenstein, represented by the ever-elusive Gramma Lenore herself, wafts like a specter through the entirety of the novel. However, any simple valorization of Wittgenstein in the thinking of Wallace risks overlooking what Wallace characterizes as the ‘horror’ that Wittgenstein leaves us with.<sup>[11]</sup> In the famous interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace cites Wittgenstein as ‘the real architect of the postmodern trap,’<sup>[12]</sup> the worry, indoctrinated into Lenore by her great-grandmother, that ‘a life is words and nothing else,’ that there is no ‘extra-linguistic *anything*.’<sup>[13]</sup> The dread that burdens Lenore *also* burdens Wallace, and it is this dread for which Wallace seeks a solution in his writing, both in *The Broom of the System* and beyond. As Wallace says to McCaffery, ‘If the world is itself a linguistic construct, there’s nothing “outside” language for language to have to picture or refer to. This ... leads right to the postmodern, poststructural dilemma of having to deny yourself an existence independent of language.’<sup>[14]</sup> If the novel is indeed a ‘conversation between Wittgenstein and Derrida,’ and if it is *Wittgenstein*, and not Derrida, whose thinking points toward the ‘postmodern trap,’ then perhaps we should consider that Derrida may have been a source of hope for Wallace.

In this essay, I therefore invite Derrida into this conversation, arguing that, contrary to popular intuitions, Derrida might just be the thinker who points the way in Wallace’s system beyond the ‘postmodern trap.’ As noted, Wallace grapples with the ‘horror’ of language with no ‘outside’. We can think of this ‘anxiety of the outside’ in two ways: (1) that my language belongs only to *me*, and so if there is no outside of language, there is no outside of *myself* – the problem of solipsism from the early Wittgenstein, about which Wallace worried extensively; (2) that the *world* itself is nothing more than language, and hence there is no outside of language that would constitute myself, nothing more to *me* than the language that is used to describe me – I am not truly a *self* at all. As Lenore’s significant other – Rick Vigorous – says of Lenore, ‘she simply felt ... as if she had no real existence...’<sup>[15]</sup> It is Derrida – the silent interlocutor in the book – and not Wittgenstein, who disrupts this double bind, with his famous ‘non-concept’ known as *différance*, the differential play of force at the heart of all language (and life). *Différance* points toward an essential exteriority at the heart of the self,

thereby avoiding the solipsistic danger of the self-enclosed world. Moreover, *différance* also points toward an essential *outside* to language, according to Derrida, and in so doing, it points toward dimensions of human life – intensity, desire, affect, force – that elude the grasp of language, precisely because they too are part of the differential play. Before addressing these characteristics of *différance*, I shall first discuss Wallace’s anxiety of the outside through the ‘double bind’ he sees in Wittgenstein.

## II. Wittgenstein and the ‘Double Bind’ of Language

The early Wittgenstein, seeking to resolve the inherited problems of the Western philosophical tradition, attempts to determine the limits of, as well as the relations between, thought, logic, language, and the world. Beginning from the claim that ‘The world is all that is the case,’<sup>[16]</sup> Wittgenstein then asserts that ‘The world is the totality of facts, not of things.’<sup>[17]</sup> With this claim, Wittgenstein makes an ontological assertion regarding an epistemic principle – the ‘world’ is not a collection of *objects*, but rather, a collection of *facts*, or states of affairs. These facts are represented in the form of propositions,<sup>[18]</sup> and propositions – if well formulated – break down atomistically in such a way as to isomorphically mirror their corresponding states of affairs,<sup>[19]</sup> and ‘The totality of propositions is language.’<sup>[20]</sup> Since language is logically structured, so too is the world, and language and the world, for Wittgenstein, share the same logical structure. But as we have seen, the world is *all that is the case*. This leads to a horrifying problem. The language of any given individual will necessarily be limited by the fact that she is a finite being, with finite capacities for knowledge, and hence, a finite grasp of the language that pictures the world for her. But she is not *capable* of transcending the language whereby she structures the world, because the very mechanism with which she would *do* so (i.e., language), is limited in her own specific ways. And since language structures what we think, and ‘We cannot think what we cannot think,’<sup>[21]</sup> it follows that language acts as a rigid boundary of my *experience* of the world, which is, as far as is available to me, *the world itself*. Hence, as we have seen, ‘*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world,*’<sup>[22]</sup> and Wittgenstein goes on to

say that 'The world is *my* world,'<sup>[23]</sup> arguing that there is truth to the claims of the solipsist. We should note, moreover, that philosophical solipsism of the sort that Wittgenstein theorizes, though seemingly absurd, is difficult to argue one's way out of: as Anscombe writes, 'It is difficult to get rid of such a conception once one has it.'<sup>[24]</sup> Wallace refers to Wittgenstein's solipsism as 'a real Book-of-Genesis-type tragic fall. The 'loss of the whole external world,'<sup>[25]</sup> and it is, in a sense, the position against which Wallace spends his entire life writing.

In shifting from the apparently private, solipsistic language of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* to the language-games model of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein begins to emphasize the intrinsically *communal* aspects of language, a shift that Wallace himself acknowledges and affirms: 'Wittgenstein argues that for language even to be possible, it must always be a function of relationships between persons...'<sup>[26]</sup> Marshall Boswell acknowledges this communal function as well, writing that 'A language-game in Wittgenstein must be played by more than one participant...'<sup>[27]</sup> However, Boswell then goes further, writing, 'The point here is that for Wittgenstein, language does not displace us from the world but rather takes place "in" that world, specifically among people in language-game situations.'<sup>[28]</sup> The key here, and the point with which I am not confident Wallace would agree, is Boswell's assertion that *language takes place in the world* – this 'in' amounts to a distinction between language and the world. Wallace almost seems to explicitly reject this point, at least as it pertains to Wittgenstein. For Wallace, Wittgenstein's shift from the *Tractatus* to the *Investigations* indeed points to a solution to the Tractarian problem of solipsism, but it does so by essentially expanding the language of the individual to the language of the community – the limits of the *private* world simply become the limits of the *communal* world. What Wittgenstein's shift does *not* do, according to Wallace, is alter the view that *the world is itself linguistic*. This passage bears a lengthy citation:

'This was Wittgenstein's double bind: you can either treat language as an infinitely small dense dot, or you let it become the world—the exterior and everything in it. The former banishes you from the Garden. The latter seems more promising. If the world is itself a linguistic construct, there's nothing



“outside” language for language to have to picture or refer to. This lets you avoid solipsism, but it leads right to the postmodern, poststructural dilemma of having to deny yourself an existence independent of language. Heidegger’s the guy most people think got us into this bind, but when I was working on *Broom of the System* I saw Wittgenstein as the real architect of the postmodern trap. He died right on the edge of explicitly treating reality as linguistic instead of ontological. This eliminated solipsism, but not the horror. Because we’re still stuck. ... If I were separate from language, if I could somehow detach from it and climb up and look down on it, get the lay of the land so to speak, I could study it “objectively,” take it apart, deconstruct it, know its operations and boundaries and deficiencies. But that’s not how things are. I’m *in* it. We’re *in* language.’<sup>[29]</sup>

Just prior to this, Wallace says that ‘we’re stuck in here, in language, even if we’re at least all in here together.’<sup>[30]</sup> This passage of text reflects Wallace’s understanding of the two modes of the ‘anxiety of the outside,’ mentioned above: at one pole, the problem of solipsism; and at the other pole, the fear that the world itself, and my life with it, are nothing more than words – the *infinitely small dense dot* versus *the exterior and everything in it*. But it must be noted, Wallace ascribes *both* of these modes to Wittgenstein; Wittgenstein does not get us out of them. Contrary to Boswell, on Wallace’s understanding of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy, language is not *in* the world; language *is* the world. The all-consuming capacity of language is embodied in *Broom* by Norman Bombardini, whose ‘Project Total Yang,’<sup>[31]</sup> the goal of which is to consume the entire universe, ‘literalizes the option’<sup>[32]</sup> of the pervasiveness of language, the linguistic exhaustibility of the world, according to Wallace.

Given that the ubiquity of the linguistic construct is the primary concern of *Broom*, and given that Wallace clearly associates this worry with Wittgenstein, the question then becomes, where is Derrida in this so-called ‘conversation’? It is worth noting, the assumption of the ubiquity of language or of the world as nothing but language and texts, is a view often casually (and carelessly) ascribed to Derrida himself. Clayton Crockett speaks critically of such interpretations of Derrida as ‘some late-twentieth-century linguistic idealism and subjectivist constructivism that just plays with language.’<sup>[33]</sup> From Derrida’s famously provocative and notoriously untranslatable

formulation, '*Il n'y a pas de hors texte*,'<sup>[34]</sup> (rendered subtly by Gayatri Spivak as '*There is nothing outside of the text*' and as 'there is no outside-text'),<sup>[35]</sup> we get John Searle's bastardization, 'There exists nothing outside of texts,'<sup>[36]</sup> a forceful misreading (pluralizing a singular noun to amplify its effect) designed to commit Derrida to the position that the *only* things that exist are words and texts. But the sinister aura surrounding Derrida extends far beyond the ivory towers of academic philosophy to the culture writ large, and many scholars outside of philosophy departments associate the most pernicious forms of an ill-defined postmodernism with Derrida. Indeed, Boswell writes of Derrida that 'Amid all this multiplicity and fecundity, however, the one thing that is lost is the world itself; rather, the text displaces the outside world in exchange for the self-referential universe of signs.'<sup>[37]</sup> But Wallace explicitly ascribes this view to Wittgenstein – not to Derrida – so if *Broom* really is a *conversation* between Derrida and Wittgenstein, it would seem Derrida would have to contribute something *other* than this, as a basic feature of any 'conversation' is that both interlocutors contribute *something*.

This brings us to the title of the novel – *The Broom of the System*. An onion of significance, the title reportedly refers to the phrase that Wallace's mother used to describe roughage;<sup>[38]</sup> it nominally refers to an example used in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*;<sup>[39]</sup> and in *Broom*, the broom story is used to illustrate Wittgenstein's claim that 'the meaning of a word is its use in the language.'<sup>[40]</sup> Lenore's father tells her the story of when, as a child, his grandmother, Lenore Sr., sat him in the kitchen and questioned him about which part of the broom were 'more elemental, more *fundamental*,'<sup>[41]</sup> the bristles or the handle. He responded that the bristles were more essential, because one could sweep by hand, using only the bristles, but could not do so using only the handle. Her father then says:

'...she tackled me, and knocked me out of my chair, and yelled into my ear something like, "Aha, that's because you want to *sweep* with the broom, isn't it? It's because of what you want the broom *for*, isn't it?" Et cetera. And that if what we wanted a broom for was to break windows, then the *handle* was clearly the fundamental essence of the broom, and she illustrated with the kitchen window, and a crowd of domestics gathered; but that if we wanted the broom to sweep

with, see for example the broken glass, sweep sweep, the bristles were the thing's essence.<sup>[42]</sup>

This example, however, does not *merely* illustrate Wittgenstein's point about 'meaning as use'. Any number of examples could be adduced to support this principle – for instance, if using a credit card to shop, the *numbers* are the essence; however, if trying to jimmy a lock, the *physical card* itself – its specific size, shape, and thickness – is essential. More precisely, what makes the broom example so interesting is that the meanings of the broom are oppositional in nature; the very structure whereby we *purify*, (removing the foreign particles of glass from the floor), is also that whereby we *contaminate* – the thing that cleans the mess is also the very thing that created the mess in the first place.

Furthermore, the concept of the 'system' plays an important role in the novel, as Lenore cites Gramma Lenore as saying that 'Every telling creates and limits and defines,' and that 'any telling automatically becomes a kind of system, that controls everybody involved.'<sup>[43]</sup> Moreover, there are multiple references throughout the novel to the concept of the self, and questions of whether the self is merely a *node* in a system or network, or whether the self is itself a system, in relation with other systems.<sup>[44]</sup> The system is a linguistic construct, and the broom in the novel plays a dually, constituting-shattering role in that construct. It is this bifurcation of meaning that here interests me. Like Derrida's 'non-concept' of *différance*, the broom both enables and disables; it purifies and impurifies. Let us now turn to a discussion of Derrida's *différance*.

### III. Derrida and the Non-Concept of *Différance*

Derrida creates the concept of *différance* as a way of addressing foundational philosophical problems that he discovers in the course of his nearly two decades spent immersed in the work of Edmund Husserl, founder of the monumentally important, early twentieth-century philosophical movement known as phenomenology. At the core of Husserl's project is the necessity to examine the essences and meaning-making structures of consciousness, because the constitution of meaning lies at the basis of all

human knowledge, and like his intellectual forebear – René Descartes – Husserl seeks to once again restore philosophy to its ‘rightful place’ as the ground, or the queen, of the sciences. Borrowing language from Heidegger, we can say that philosophy for Husserl is to be the fundamental ontology on which are to be based all other ‘regional’ ontologies. Also like Descartes, Husserl wants to abolish every shred of uncertainty in this endeavor, so that philosophy can be the quintessentially rigorous science. But so long as there is mediation or interpretation of any sort involved in the constitution of knowledge, the assurance of certainty is precarious. With this in mind, Husserl performs a series of philosophical ‘reductions’ whereby he ‘brackets’ (or puts in suspension) all questions concerning the so-called ‘reality’ of both the external world, and the psychological ego with which it interacts, isolating the ‘transcendental ego’<sup>[45]</sup> – a purely interior sphere of analysis, uncontaminated by any externals, and unmediated by any foreign consciousnesses. Here we should note the parallels between the problems of Husserl and Derrida and those of Lenore, specifically that, in both cases, the fundamental problem is the question of how and where to locate the truest identity of the ‘self.’

Any passage of time within this interiority brings the issue of *memory* into play, insofar as the self-who-now-is must, in a sense, relate to a self-who-is-no-more, a past self. Even this seemingly insignificant gap in the experience constitutes mediation, and thereby compromises the attainment of certainty on the part of the subject. Simply put, memory is notoriously unreliable. Therefore, Husserl’s emphasis on pure, unmediated interiority depends upon an atomistic punctuatedness of the ‘now,’ an at least ideal moment of impression as a discrete and self-contained nucleus of time and experience. However, beginning in 1905, Husserl began formulating a component of his philosophy that would be central to his thought for the rest of his life – an essential framework of internal time-consciousness known as the ‘living present,’<sup>[46]</sup> designed to provide a phenomenologically or experientially faithful account of the subject’s relation to time. The living present consists of the atomized now-point, referred to as the ‘primal impression,’ and also contains as a structural component a mode known as ‘retention,’ a non-representational memory of a *previous* impression, still living and still attached to

the *current* impression. One of Husserl's favorite examples to illuminate this structure is the experience of listening to a piece of music. To truly *hear* a song as a song (as notes and tones in sequence and relation with each other) requires that, in addition to the sound we are currently hearing, we have a *memory* of the preceding series of notes; otherwise, we would hear only a random, discontinuous series of discrete sounds, not a *song*. Moreover, the memory required in order to hang onto these notes is not forceful or deliberate; without trying, without intentionally representing the notes to ourselves, our consciousness hangs onto them.

At the nexus of these two equally important Husserlian impetuses – (the discrete punctuatedness of the now, and the comet's tail of retention) – Derrida discovers an essential and irreducible tension. The necessities of Husserl's project – which, for Derrida, embodies the 'most modern, critical, and vigilant form'<sup>[47]</sup> of Western metaphysics – dictate that the moment of impression is to be purely interior, unmediated, and hence, related to *no outside whatsoever* – the primal impression must be the punctuated source-point and the *causa sui wellspring* of what *will* become, *a posteriori*, the *retention*. However, the fact that Husserl's comprehensive model of time-consciousness is itself an essential and ideal *structure* entails that whatever *is* stamped in the impression *will necessarily*, i.e., *a priori*, be retained; and this means that it must already be repeatable, *prior to its being impressed*, and as a *condition* of its being impressed in the first place. If the content is not repeatable, it will not be retained; but given the essential ideality of the time-consciousness structure, it *will* be retained; therefore, it *must* be repeatable. Rather than the impression being the condition of repetition, with the repetition being a secondary and deficient copy of the 'first', Derrida's analyses of Husserl demonstrate that *repetition is the condition of impression*; repetition is 'present' already in the impression. But since, all along, we were seeking the punctuated, purely interior and unmediated nucleus of time as the core of the ego, we can now see that, despite Husserl's efforts, this interiority or 'presence' is only possible by relating to an outside, or 'non-presence.' Derrida writes, 'This relation to non-presence, once more, does not take by surprise, surround, or even dissimulate the presence of the originary impression; it allows its upsurge and its ever reborn

virginity.’<sup>[48]</sup> This relationality or repetition is essential, not accidental, and this relationality – productive and creative – is what Derrida refers to under the name of *différance*. Derrida writes that ‘the possibility of re-petition in its most general form, the trace in the most universal sense, is a possibility that not only must inhabit the pure actuality of the now, but must also constitute it by means of the very movement of the *différance* that the possibility inserts into the pure actuality of the now.’ A few lines later, he writes that ‘the concept of pure solitude ... is *split open* by its own origin, by the very condition of its self-presence.’<sup>[49]</sup> Put more simply, Derrida argues that the *outside* is the condition of the *inside*, that to be a *self* requires a relation to *otherness*, but an otherness at the heart of self-identity. Like the G.O.D. in *Broom*, the ‘Other for Ohio’s Self,’<sup>[50]</sup> or the fact that Lenore is searching for Lenore, and in so doing, is searching for *herself*, there is always an *otherness* at the heart of self-identity, and this is predicated upon the productive play of force that Derrida calls *différance*. Let us now look at how Derrida’s contribution operates in *The Broom of the System*.

#### IV. Somewhere Outside the Double Bind

*Différance*, Derrida writes, is the ““active,” moving discord of different forces,<sup>[51]</sup> and ‘the non-full, non-simple, structured and differentiating origin of differences.’<sup>[52]</sup> Force, the play of which constitutes *différance*, is, Derrida says, ‘the other of language without which language would not be what it is.’<sup>[53]</sup> ‘...[E]very process of signification,’ he writes, is ‘a formal play of differences. That is, of traces.’<sup>[54]</sup> There are two very important implications of this structure. First, because this play of force is in *play*, it not only makes meaning *possible*; it also essentially ensures slippages of meaning such that language can never completely secure the stasis of signification that it desires. The differential play that enables meaning-making and communication also ensures failure – not as an empirical *accident* of language, but as part of its *nature*. The second implication of *différance* is the following: the conditions of signification<sup>[55]</sup> that make language possible cannot themselves be put into words. Force is the *basis* of language, and it is the *outside* of language. This is why, vexing though it may be to some of Derrida’s critics

(and even some of his most loyal fans), Derrida's own descriptions are frequently so non-committal. *Différance*, as he says, is 'neither a word nor a concept'<sup>[56]</sup> and 'is never presented as such.'<sup>[57] [58]</sup> But the corollary is the acknowledgement that, if the conditions of meaningfulness cannot be put into words, it is because a vast portion of intensive, affective life lies beyond the grasp of language. Call it 'mystical' if you like. Language may be the only descriptive, explanatory mechanism we have to grasp these dimensions of life, but it is insufficient. Indeed, Wittgenstein himself appears to acknowledge this principle, even if he does not provide the 'ultra-transcendental'<sup>[59]</sup> concepts to foster the thinking of it: 'There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical.'<sup>[60]</sup> The primary reason that Derrida appears to be the more instrumental of Wallace's two interlocutors is that both of these features of *différance* can be seen on display throughout *The Broom of the System*. Let's look first at the breakdowns of language.

We must keep in mind that the fearful hypothesis of *The Broom of the System* is that '...life is what can be said about it,<sup>[61]</sup> or that reality is coextensive with and exhausted by language. But in the novel we see language fail in a number of very important ways. First, we see failure on the part of speakers. In particular, we see failure in the oversaturation of signification, as when David Bloemker – Administrator of the nursing facility – announces to Lenore that her great-grandmother is the ringleader of the facility's residents:

'There is in addition the fact that the resident whose temporary unavailability is relevant to you, that is to say, Lenore, enjoyed a status here—with the facility administration, the staff, and, through the force of her personality and her evident gifts, especially with the other residents—that leads one to believe that, were the mislocation a result of anything other than outright coercion on the part of some outside person or persons, which seems unlikely, it would not be improper to posit the location and retrieval of Lenore as near assurance of retrieving the other misplaced parties.'<sup>[62]</sup>

When Lenore says to Bloemker, 'I didn't understand any of that,' his response is simply, 'Your great-grandmother was more or less the ringleader around here.' Now, if the fearful hypothesis were correct – that reality is coextensive with language – then it would seem that the *more* language one used to *describe* a fact about the world, the more *real* or the more *understood* the fact would be. Wallace, however, demonstrates that this is not necessarily true. Our failure to understand Bloemker's very simple point does not reside in the mere vocabulary – each individual word of the sentence is comprehensible to most English-speaking adults with at least a secondary education. Moreover, the sentence is grammatically correct. The breakdown occurs because of the sheer oversaturation of language; this *excess* of signification actually results in a breakdown or incapacity of interpretation.

Likewise, we see the failures of language in the opposite direction, where a proposition, meaningful on its face, lacks any locutionary intention or context, but is interpreted by the listener as oversaturated with signification. This type of failure is most evident in Lenore's loquacious cockatiel, Vlad the Impaler. Having apparently been fed the experimental cattle-endocrine-derivative-infused Stonecipheco baby food, Vlad suddenly begins to speak, at first mimicking the vulgar and sexually charged words of Lenore's roommate, Candy. Lenore, fearing the wrath of the landlady in the event she were to hear Vlad's utterances, begins reciting passages from the Bible for him to memorize. The sensationalist televangelist, Reverend Sykes, later interprets Vlad's words as 'a manifestation of the earthly intervention and influence of the Almighty comparable in significance to the weeping fir tree of Yrzc, Poland, and the cruciform tarpit formations of Sierra Leone!'<sup>[63]</sup> Later, when Sykes has made Vlad (renamed as Ugolino the Significant) the co-host of his 'Partners With God Club' television program, we see Sykes expanding upon Vlad's meaningless utterances, conveying them to his viewers as touched by the hand of God. In one particularly interesting exchange, Vlad, repeating a line from Candy's earlier break-up speech rehearsal says, 'You fill me up. You satisfy me like no man did before. I can't deny it. God.'<sup>[64]</sup> Sykes then 'interprets' this line for his viewers in the following way: 'Yes friends I stand before you on national prime-time *television* talking about the *satisfaction* of your every *need*. The fulfillment of



your every *wish*.<sup>[65]</sup> There are several other examples of this overinterpretation of Vlad's meaningless words on the part of Reverend Sykes. Vlad's utterances are words, every bit as much as they were when Candy spoke them, but they are little more than hollow shells, lacking significance, until they are laced with the overwrought interpretations of Sykes, fed to a spiritually bankrupt viewership.

Now, let us look at the ways in which the novel points to aspects of life that are unencapsulable by language, the second implication of Derridean *différance*, evident in a few key passages. The first is where Rick is attempting to coerce Lenore into saying the words, 'I love you.' Rick, sensing Lenore's reticence at using the word 'love' to characterize her feelings, says, 'Some words have to be explicitly uttered, Lenore. Only by actually uttering certain words does one really *do* what one says. "Love" is one of those words, performative words. Some words can literally make things real.'<sup>[66]</sup> A 'performative' is, as Rick says, a word or proposition the truth of which is established in its utterance. Examples include a clergy person's proclamation that 'I now pronounce you husband and wife,' a person's saying, 'I promise,' or a parent's saying, 'You're grounded.' These phrases become *true*, in virtue of the fact that the person uttering them possesses the *authority* to make them true on the basis of their utterance alone. Rick then goes on to demand of Lenore that she list in detail the exact characteristics of Rick's personality that she loves: 'I need to know, so that I might try desperately to reinforce those features of me on the basis of which you love me. So that I can have you inside myself, for all time.'<sup>[67]</sup> Leaving aside the disturbingly possessive elements of Rick's demand, his insistence raises an interesting problem/question. If the fearful hypothesis at the root of Gramma Lenore's philosophy – that the world is nothing more than language – were indeed correct, then not only is Rick correct, that *some* words are performatives; rather, it is one hundred percent the case that *all* words are performatives. If reality is only linguistic, then *nothing* is true *unless* it is put into words. Likewise, this being the case, it would also follow that love, being only what can be said, would have to correspond to or fixate upon characteristics that are themselves linguistically formulated. In other words, if Gramma Lenore is right, then Rick is right as well, and love *just is* what we can say about it. This is why Lenore says to Rick, 'You

and Gramma Lenore should get together, is who should get together.’<sup>[68]</sup> So if the fearful hypothesis were true, then Lenore should be persuaded by Rick’s pleas; but what is interesting is that she’s not.

Lenore goes on to characterize love in a way that denies outright that it can be truly characterized by language, saying to Rick, ‘I think you and I maybe just have a different conception of this, you know, this “love” thing.’<sup>[69]</sup> She goes on to describe love – deep and meaningful love – as a sort of ‘reversal,’ wherein we first experience attraction to another person on the basis of defined characteristics, such as their physical appearance, their intelligence, their personality, or some specific combination of some of these or other features. But as that attraction grows into affection, and we cross the threshold into loving the person, ‘everything sort of reverses. It’s not that you love the person because of certain things anymore; it’s that you love the things about the person because you love the person. It kind of radiates out, instead of in.’<sup>[70]</sup> Not only can Lenore not say exactly what ‘love’ is, it is further the case that she cannot conceive of love as corresponding to a set of identifiable (nameable) characteristics about a person. In every way, language falls short of the task of characterizing love. Hence, in this passage, we see that Lenore cannot possibly subscribe to Gramma Lenore’s theory, the fearful hypothesis, that ‘all that really exists of my life is what can be said about it.’<sup>[71]</sup> Language fails.

We see language fail in this way again in the episode that takes place between Lenore and Andy Lang as they lay on Lang’s bed:

‘Lenore and Wang-Dang Lang were on Lang’s bed, on their sides, facing each other, amid shirts and socks in their plastic wrappers. Lenore had on her bra and panties and socks; Lang had on just his chinos and belt. Lenore’s legs were together, and Lang had one of his legs thrown over her hip. Lang was looking at Lenore’s breasts, in her bra. Being on her side was pressing them together, and they were pushing partway over the bra, which Lang obviously liked. He looked at Lenore, and touched her. He rubbed the back of her neck for her. And from time to time he would trace lines on her body with his finger. He would trace a line down the center of her lips, her chin, her throat, and down the line where her breasts pressed together, and over the bottom of the bra, and onto her stomach, where his hand would spread out and cover her, making Lenore need to blink,

every time. He would also shift a bit and trace the line where her legs pressed together, from the bottom of her panties to the tops of her knees. He would press his finger deep into the line between her legs, and Lenore knew her legs felt soft and hot to him, from being pressed together. Lang had an erection in his slacks, Lenore could tell.<sup>[72]</sup>

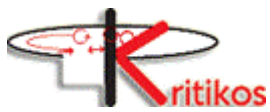
What's happening in this passage feels out of keeping with much of the rest of the novel's zany Pynchonesque nomenclature and meandering, conspiratorial plots. The passage says a great deal. But it is even more interesting for what it does *not* say. It is a purely external description of the event, making no pretense at describing the internal states or affects of the two participants. More than anything else, particularly in what remains of the passage, what is described are the words and actions of the two, but no effort is made, either on the part of the characters themselves or of the narrator, to characterize their feelings. But it does not matter. The reader *knows* what they are feeling, without having it described to them. No person above a certain age, no one who has ever felt the pangs of desire, or who has ever brushed a finger across the near-naked flesh of their beloved, or had their beloved brush their skin in this way, or been vulnerable in this way with another human being; no one who has ever been in a similar situation in life is without a clear sense of what Lang and Lenore are feeling. But Wallace does not put it into words; nor would his *trying* to put it into words be likely to succeed. Sexual arousal is not reducible to the conjunction of the words 'sexual' and 'arousal', or to the word 'erection' as it appears in the text. And not even what we call 'sexual' arousal aptly encapsulates what is taking place between the lines of this passage, because we know that it is not merely the mechanical impulse for reproduction, but an ineffable, dare I say mystical, confluence of excitement, sexuality, transgression, anxiety, tenderness, compassion, and so on, none of which aptly characterizes any single component of the experience. Language fails in this case. It fails not because of an oversaturation of signification on the part of the speaker, or because of an overinterpretation on the part of the listener, as in the cases we saw above. Rather, language fails because it is bound by static categories, and of its very nature it tries to fix, to freeze, to hold still, what can only be understood in terms of

intensity, affect, or force. It fails because force is the other of language, its outside; and force, as well as its intensive plays that often go under the insufficient names of intensity, affect, and desire, constitute us and arguably the vast majority of our lives. It fails because there are innumerable aspects of the human experience that cannot be characterized linguistically. They are, as Wittgenstein says, 'the mystical.' *The Broom of the System* seems, like Derrida's *différance*, to point toward an essential *outside* to language, in the form of force and intensity. We are not merely linguistic, because language itself is the product of plays of force, which also express themselves in and through our being.

## V. Conclusion

In this way, though his name never appears in *The Broom of the System*, it is Derrida, and not Wittgenstein, who points beyond the double bind that we characterized above as the 'anxiety of the outside.' If, as Wittgenstein thought, 'The limits of my language mean the limits of my world,'<sup>[73]</sup> and, 'I am my world,'<sup>[74]</sup> the implication is that I am nothing more than the language used, by myself or others, to characterize me – my life is purely linguistic. In its most horrifying form, my language is specific to me, and I am trapped alone, forever inside my own head, the infinitely small dense dot. Wittgenstein corrected this problem with his communal notion of the language-game, but in doing so, he left untouched, according to Wallace, the principle that the world itself, and everything in it, is linguistic. I am, as Wallace dreaded, 'stuck.' When we take more seriously Wallace's remarks to Lipsky about *The Broom of the System* as a conversation between Wittgenstein and Derrida, it seems clear that Derrida's is the voice that offers Wallace a way out of the double bind. First, as *différance* illustrates that the self is always constituted by a relation to the outside, there can be no absolute limit drawn to the 'I' to constitute a solipsistic microcosm. On this, (the later) Wittgenstein and Derrida agree. Second, given that this differential play of force operates *outside* the limits of language, as the *other* of language for Derrida, it cannot be the case that the world is merely a linguistic construct. On the contrary, the forces of thought that make up the movements of signification whereby language becomes possible are in commerce

with the affective and intensive forces that make up the flows of the world and of our very lives. As *The Broom of the System* attempts to signal, there are countless aspects of the human experience that lie beyond the reach of language. Thus, despite Wallace's assertion that 'there's a lot of stuff in that novel I'd like to reel back in and do better,'<sup>[75]</sup> *The Broom of the System* appears to succeed in characterizing, through extensive engagement with certain dangerous temptations of language, 'what it is to be a fucking human being.'<sup>[76]</sup>



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## NOTES

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- [1] David Lipsky, *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace* (New York: Broadway Books, 2010), 35.
- [2] David Foster Wallace, *The Broom of the System* (New York: Penguin, 1987), 119. Hereafter referred to as 'Broom'.
- [3] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness (London and New York: Routledge, 1961), 5.6. (References to the *Tractatus* will hereafter refer to 'Tractatus,' and will use Wittgenstein's propositional numbering).
- [4] *Tractatus*, 5.63.
- [5] Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 31. Lance Olsen, as well, in what was for a time *the* main scholarly piece on *Broom*, argues in favor of a Wittgensteinian approach. See Lance Olsen, 'Termite Art, or Wallace's Wittgenstein,' *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1993), 199-215.
- [6] See also Patrick O'Donnell, 'Almost a Novel: *The Broom of the System*,' in ed. Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn, *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 1-22.
- [7] Bradley Fest, "'Then Out of the Rubble": David Foster Wallace's Early Fiction', in ed. Marshall Boswell, *David Foster Wallace and 'The Long Thing': New Essays on the Novels* (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 85-105; 87.
- [8] David Foster Wallace, 'The Empty Plenum: David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*,' in *Both Flesh and Not: Essays* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2012), 73-116.
- [9] *Broom*, 73.
- [10] See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1953). This 'green book' almost certainly hearkens to the famous *Blue and Brown Books*, which formed the gestational

philosophical reflections that later went into Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Oxford: Blackwell, 1960). This reference appears in *Broom*, 40.

[11] Larry McCaffery, 'An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace,' in ed. Stephen J. Burn, *Conversations with David Foster Wallace* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 21-52; 45.

[12] McCaffery, 'Interview,' 45.

[13] *Broom*, 120-121.

[14] McCaffery, 'Interview,' 45.

[15] *Broom*, 67.

[16] *Tractatus*, 1.

[17] *Tractatus*, 1.1.

[18] *Tractatus*, 4.1.

[19] *Tractatus*, 4.04.

[20] *Tractatus*, 4.001.

[21] *Tractatus*, 5.61.

[22] *Tractatus*, 5.6.

[23] *Tractatus*, 5.62.

[24] G.E.M. Anscombe, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1959), 168.

[25] McCaffery, 'Interview,' 44.

[26] McCaffery, 'Interview,' 44. For this reason, I cannot agree with Bradley J. Fest when he writes that 'For the Wallace of *Broom*, Wittgenstein's thinking in *The Philosophical Investigations* has unintended apocalyptic implications: namely, the horrors of complete solipsism.' Fest, "Then Out of the Rubble," 89.

[27] Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 29.

[28] Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 30-31.

[29] McCaffery, 'Interview,' 45.

[30] McCaffery, 'Interview,' 44.

[31] *Broom*, 91.

[32] McCaffery, 'Interview,' 45.

[33] Clayton Crockett, *Derrida After the End of Writing: Political Theology and New Materialism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 1.

[34] Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1967), 227.

[35] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 158.

[36] John Searle, *Mind, Language, and Society: Philosophy in the Real World* (New York: Basic Books, 19). This is an extraordinarily poor translation of this passage.

[37] Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 30.

[38] Hugh Kennedy and Geoffrey Polk, 'Looking for a Garde of Which to be Avant: An Interview with David Foster Wallace,' in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, 11-20; 12.

[39] *Philosophical Investigations*, 60.

[40] *Philosophical Investigations*, 43.

[41] *Broom*, 149.

[42] *Broom*, 150.

[43] *Broom*, 122.

- [44] See *Broom*, 344, 351.
- [45] For a critical analysis of this transcendental ego, it is difficult to beat Jean-Paul Sartre's *The Transcendence of the Ego: An Existentialist Theory of Consciousness*, trans. Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989).
- [46] See Edmund Husserl, *Zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins (1893-1917)*. *Husserliana Band X* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1992); trans. John Barnett Brough, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time (1893-1917)* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992).
- [47] Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 4-5.
- [48] Jacques Derrida, *Voice and Phenomenon*, trans. Leonard Lawlor (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 56.
- [49] Derrida, *Voice and Phenomenon*, 58-59.
- [50] *Broom*, 54. See also, Vernon W. Cisney, 'In G.O.D. We Trust: The Desert of the Religious in *The Broom of the System*', in ed. Martin Brick and Michael McGowan, *Both Fiction and Not: The Religious Worlds of David Foster Wallace* (forthcoming, Bloomsbury Academic Publishing).
- [51] Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 18.
- [52] Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 11.
- [53] Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 27.
- [54] Derrida, *Positions*, 26.
- [55] Or 'meaningfulness'.
- [56] Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 3.
- [57] Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 6.
- [58] This is because 'words' are linguistic constructs that designate specific contents, typically understood as 'concepts', but the concepts themselves are fleshed out using the signs of language, all of which is made possible by what Derrida calls *différance*.
- [59] Derrida, *Voice and Phenomenon*, 13.
- [60] *Tractatus*, 6.522.
- [61] David Foster Wallace, *The Broom of the System* (New York: Penguin, 1987), 119. Hereafter referred to as 'Broom'.
- [62] *Broom*, 36.
- [63] *Broom*, 276.
- [64] *Broom*, 461. The original occurrence of the phrase is found on p. 101.
- [65] *Broom*, 461.
- [66] *Broom*, 285.
- [67] *Broom*, 286.
- [68] *Broom*, 286.
- [69] *Broom*, 287.
- [70] *Broom*, 287.
- [71] *Broom*, 119.
- [72] *Broom*, 409-410.
- [73] *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 5.6.
- [74] *Tractatus*, 5.63.
- [75] McCaffery, 'Interview,' 32.
- [76] McCaffery, 'Interview,' 26.