

## 172 QUOTATIONS



David Foster Wallace

(1962-2008)

David Foster Wallace died of Postmodernism. Called “the voice of his generation,” the precocious child of two liberal academics who fostered what T.S. Eliot would have called his “dissociation of sensibility,” the hip intellectual Wallace was born in the countercultural 1960s. His education by secular liberals dissociated his head from his heart, as Hawthorne would say. He had no spiritual resources. To him, God is merely an idea—and a bad one at that. Wallace was also deprived of a true literary education. He lived his entire life in the bubble of academic Postmodernism, where Feminist Political Correctness in particular made him feel like a fraud, a “hideous” man pretending to be righteous because he wanted to be accepted. He compensated by “intellectualizing everything,” becoming a drug addict and hanging himself. Most of his criticisms of others apply to himself, especially his disdain for other hip Postmodern writers who strive to be cool. Like many of them he remained in ways an arrested adolescent. Yet unlike them, Wallace was able to see outside the bubble and to turn around and see back into it and even to criticize himself with courageous honesty. A clever essayist, he is more a philosophical social critic with a baroque intellectual Expressionist prose style than he is a novelist. His only major work *Infinite Jest* (1996) is unreadable to most people, a footnoted monstrosity—too academic, abstract, obscure, pretentious, introverted, alienated, solipsistic, detailed, mundane, tedious, and long, long, long—the last gesture of a dying genre. As he says of other Postmodern novels, “It doesn’t engage anybody”—except his fans, mainly academic readers of his generation and liberals who still read *The New York Times*. Whatever its true causes, in literary history his suicide will symbolize the dead end of Postmodernism.

ORDER OF TOPICS: youth, maturation, loneliness, crisis, appearance, addiction, Americans, 1960s counterculture, hedonism, adolescence, arrested development, popular culture, masks of his generation, fear of being human, children of the me generation, Postmodern education, intellectual pride, teaching literature, critical theory, Postmodern sophists, purpose of education, thinking, Postmodern fiction, solipsism, ironic detachment, hostility to the reader, sucking up, commercial cool, hip ennui, Postmodernists of 1950s-60s, literary orphans, bad Postmodern writing, metafiction, minimalism, end of Postmodernism, bureaucracy, anarchism, politics, conservatism, liberals, Political Correctness, Feminism,

trying to love, orgasm, God, *Infinite Jest*, summing up, art, good writing, magical art, redemptive Realism, the new fiction, advice, death:

#### YOUTH

He had learned from hard artistic and academic experience that life instead of being a hard R, or even a soft R, actually rarely even makes it into distribution. Tends to be too slow.

I do things like get in a taxi and say, “The library, and step on it.”

Everything takes time. Bees have to move very fast to stay still.

#### MATURATION

Maturation and acquiescence to reality are gradual processes.

I'd like to be the sort of person who can enjoy things at the time, instead of having to go back in my head and enjoy them.

No wonder we cannot appreciate the really central Kafka joke: that the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from the horrific struggle. That our endless and impossible journey toward home is in fact our home.

The capital-T Truth is about life before death. It is about making it to 30, or maybe 50, without wanting to shoot yourself in the head.

#### LONELINESS

Fiction, poetry, music, really deep serious sex, and, in various ways, religion—these are the places (for me) where loneliness is countenanced, stared down, transfigured, treated.

To make someone an icon is to make him an abstraction...incapable of vital communication with living people.

#### CRISIS

The parts of me that used to think I was different or smarter or whatever, almost made me die.

I had a kind of midlife crisis at twenty which probably doesn't augur well for my longevity.

#### APPEARANCE

The teeth of the smile evidenced a clinical depressive's classic inattention to oral hygiene.

I started wearing bandannas in Tucson because it was a hundred degrees all the time. When it's really hot, I would perspire so much that I would drip on the page.

What's the point of washing if everything smells like I need another shower?

#### ADDICTION

An activity is addictive if one's relationship to it lies on that downward-sloping continuum between liking it a little too much and downright needing it...something is malignantly addictive if (1) it causes real problems for the addict, and (2) it offers itself as relief from the very problems it causes. A malignant addiction is also distinguished for spreading the problems of the addiction out and in interference patterns, creating difficulties for relationships, communities, and the addict's very sense of self and soul.

I'm screaming for help and everybody's acting as if I'm singing Ethel Merman covers.

It is statistically easier for low-IQ people to kick an addiction than it is for high-IQ people.

One thing TV does is help us deny that we're lonely.

Morning is the soul's night.

#### AMERICANS

Today we're so rich, we own much more than we need, we have liberties unknown before, even though they are endangered in the current political climate in the U.S.—and we forget how wonderful it nevertheless is, compared to most other political and economic systems.

American experience seems to suggest that people are virtually unlimited in their need to give themselves away, on various levels.

A flight from in the form of a plunging into.

To be a mass tourist, for me, is to become a pure late-date American alien, ignorant, greedy for something you cannot ever have, disappointed in a way you can never admit... As a tourist, you become economically significant but existentially loathsome, an insect on a dead thing.

#### 1960s COUNTERCULTURE

The problem with young people, starting sometime in about the 1960s, is that they tend to live too intensely inside their own social moment, and thus tend to see all existence past age thirty or so as somehow postcoital.

#### HEDONISM

Pleasure becomes a value, a teleological end in itself.

#### ADOLESCENCE

Our present culture is, both developmentally and historically, adolescent.

We yearn inside for a return to the same childish oblivion we pretend to scorn.

TV didn't invent our aesthetic childishness here any more than the Manhattan Project invented aggression.

#### ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT

I have pointed rhythmically at the ceiling to the two-four beat of the same disco music I hated pointing at the ceiling to in 1977.

#### POPULAR CULTURE

I think "The Simpsons" is important art. On the other hand, it's also, in my opinion, relentlessly corrosive to the soul and everything is parodied and everything is ridiculous.

An act of violence in an American film has, through repetition and desensitization, lost the ability to refer to anything but itself.

Celebrities were not actually functioning as real people at all, but...like symbols of themselves.

Modern party-dance is simply writhing to suggestive music. It is...silly to watch and excruciatingly embarrassing to perform... Right out of Kafka: the person who does not want to do the ridiculous thing is the person who is ridiculous.

Rap's conscious response to the poverty and oppression of U.S. blacks is like some hideous parody of sixties black pride.

#### MASKS OF HIS GENERATION

My own terror of appearing sentimental is so strong that I've decided to fight against it, some.

Like many Americans of his generation in the awkwardest of post-Imperial decades, an age suspended between exhaustion and replenishment, between input too ordinary to process and input too intense to bear, Sternberg is deeply ambivalent.

We're all—especially those of us who are educated and have read a lot and have watched TV critically—in a very self-conscious and sort of worldly and sophisticated time, but also a time when we seem terribly afraid of other people's reactions to us and very desperate to control how people interpret us.

We are shown how to fashion masks of ennui and jaded irony at a young age where the face is fictile enough to assume the shape of whatever it wears. And then we're stuck there, the weary cynicism that saves us from gooey sentiment and unsophisticated naivete. Sentiment equals naivete on this continent.

#### FEAR OF BEING HUMAN

What passes for hip cynical transcendence of sentiment is really some kind of fear of being really human, since to be really human...is probably to be unavoidably sentimental and naïve and goo-prone and generally pathetic, is to be in some basic interior way forever infantile.

This weird conflict between what my girlfriend calls the "inner sap," the part of us that can really wholeheartedly weep at stuff and the part of us that has to live in a world of smart, jaded, sophisticated people and wants very much to be taken seriously by those people.

#### CHILDREN OF THE ME GENERATION

The young educated adults of the 90s—who were, of course, the children of the same impassioned infidelities and divorces Mr. Updike wrote about so beautifully—got to watch all this brave new individualism and self-expression and sexual freedom deteriorate into the joyless and anomic self-indulgence of the Me Generation. Today's sub-40s have different horrors, prominent among which are anomie and solipsism and a peculiarly American loneliness: the prospect of dying without once having loved something more than yourself.

Most of us will still take nihilism over neanderthalism.

#### POSTMODERN EDUCATION

Mediocrity is contextual.

Our intelligentsia distrust strong belief, open conviction.

Educating yourself was something you had to do in spite of school, not because of it.

#### INTELLECTUAL PRIDE

I consume libraries.

[I thought that] the world is words.

I bet I've read everything you've read.

I had four hundred thousand pages of continental philosophy and lit theory in my head. And by God, I was going to use it to prove to him that I was smarter than he was.

Worship your intellect, being seen as smart—you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out.

Probably the most dangerous thing about an academic education, at least in my own case, is that it enables my tendency to over-intellectualize stuff, to get lost in abstract thinking instead of simply paying attention to what's going on in front of me.

It took years after I'd graduated from Amherst to realize that people were actually far more complicated and interesting than books, that almost everyone else suffered from the same secret fears and inadequacies as I, and that feeling alone and inferior was actually the great valiant bond between us all. I wish I'd been smart enough to understand that when I was an adolescent.

### TEACHING LITERATURE

Listening to most people's English feels like watching somebody use a Stradivarius to pound nails.

One has only to spend a term trying to teach college literature to realize that the quickest way to kill an author's vitality for potential readers is to present that author ahead of his time as "great" or "classic." Because then the author becomes for the students like medicine or vegetables, something the authorities have declared "good for them" that they "ought to like."

### CRITICAL THEORY

There are some interesting parallels between postmodern crank-turners and what's happened since post-structural theory took off here in the U.S., why there's such a big backlash against post-structuralism going on now. It's the crank-turners' fault. I think the crank-turners replaced the critic as the real angel of death as far as literary movements are concerned, now.

Take a look at some of the critical-theory Ph.D. dissertations being written now. They're like de Man and Foucault in the mouth of a dull child. 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. It's a surreal inversion of the death-by-neglect that used to kill off prescient art. Now prescient art suffers death-by-acceptance. We love things to death, now. Then we retire to the Hamptons.

### POSTMODERN SOPHISTS

The Sophists had this idea: Forget this idea of what's true or not—what you want to do is rhetoric, you want to be able to persuade the audience and have the audience think you're smart and cool. And Socrates and Plato, basically their whole idea is, "Bullshit. There is such a thing as truth, and it's not all just how to say what you say so that you get a good job or get laid.

### PURPOSE OF EDUCATION

And I submit that this is what the real, no-shit value of your liberal arts education is supposed to be about: How to keep from going through your comfortable, prosperous, respectable adult life dead, unconscious, a slave to your head and to your natural default setting of being uniquely, completely, imperially alone, day in and day out.

### THINKING

Logical validity is not a guarantee of truth.

Being scared is caused mostly by thinking.

99% of the head's thinking activity consists of trying to scare the living shit out of itself.

There's good self-consciousness, and then there's toxic, paralyzing, raped-by-psycho-Bedouins self-consciousness. [possible allusion to *The Sheltering Sky* by Paul Bowles]

I have come to understand that the liberal arts cliché about teaching you how to think is actually shorthand for a much deeper, more serious idea: learning how to think really means learning how to exercise some control over how and what you think. It means being conscious and aware enough to choose what you pay attention to and to choose how you construct meaning from experience. Because if you cannot exercise this kind of choice in adult life, you will be totally hosed.

#### POSTMODERN FICTION

Hell hath no fury like a coolly received postmodernist.

Literary fiction and poetry are real marginalized right now.

The diagnosis can be done in about two lines. It doesn't engage anybody.

There's a fallacy that some of my friends sometimes fall into, the 'ol "The audience is stupid. The audience only wants to go this deep." Poor us, we're marginalized because of TV, the great hypnotic blah, blah. You can sit around and have these pity parties for yourself. Of course this is bullshit. If an art form is marginalized it's because it's not speaking to people.

#### SOLIPSISM

Solipsism binds us together.

It's like a fugue of evaded responsibility.

The disease of consumer capitalism. The complacent solipsism.

We all have our little solipsistic delusions, ghastly intuitions of utter singularity.

Everything in my own immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the absolute center of the universe, the realest, most vivid and important person in existence.

One of the things that makes Wittgenstein a real artist to me is that he realized that no conclusion could be more horrible than solipsism.

#### IRONIC DETACHMENT

The American penchant for absolution via irony.

The great thing about irony is that it splits things apart, gets up above them so we can see the flaws and hypocrisies and duplicates.

Postmodern irony and cynicism's become an end in itself, a measure of hip sophistication and literary savvy. Few artists dare to try to talk about ways of working toward redeeming what's wrong, because they'll look sentimental and naïve to all the weary ironists. Irony's gone from liberating to enslaving. There's a great essay somewhere that has a line about irony being the song of the prisoner who's come to love his cage.

The problem is that once the rules of art are debunked, and once the unpleasant realities the irony diagnoses are revealed and diagnosed, "then" what do we do?

And make no mistake: irony tyrannizes us. The reason why our pervasive cultural irony is at once so powerful and so unsatisfying is that an ironist is impossible to pin down.

Most likely, I think, today's irony ends up saying: "How totally banal of you to ask what I really mean."

#### HOSTILITY TO THE READER

I often think I can see it in myself and in other young writers, this desperate desire to please coupled with a kind of hostility to the reader.

#### SUCKING UP

It can become an exercise in trying to get the reader to like and admire you instead of an exercise in creative art.

#### COMMERCIAL COOL

You want your art to be hip and seem cool to people, but a great deal of what passes for hip and cool is now highly commercially driven.

#### HIP ENNUI

The lively arts of the millennial U.S.A. treat anhedonia and internal emptiness as hip and cool. It's maybe the vestiges of the Romantic glorification of Weltschmerz, which means world-weariness or hip ennui. Maybe it's the fact that most of the arts here are produced by world-weary and sophisticated older people and then consumed by younger people who not only consume art but study it for clues on how to be cool, hip.

#### POSTMODERNISTS OF 1950s-60s

This might be one way to start talking about differences between the early postmodern writers of the fifties and sixties [Kerouac, Pynchon] and their contemporary descendants.

The old postmodern insurgents risked the gasp and squeal: shock, disgust, outrage, censorship, accusations of socialism, anarchism, nihilism.

Irony and cynicism were just what the U.S. hypocrisy of the fifties and sixties called for. That's what made the early postmodernists great artists.... Sarcasm, parody, absurdism and irony are great ways to strip off stuff's mask and show the unpleasant reality behind it.

#### LITERARY ORPHANS

The postmodern founders' patricidal work was great, but patricide produces orphans, and no amount of revelry can make up for the fact that writers my age have been literary orphans through our formative years. We enter a spiritual puberty where we snap to the fact that the great transcendent horror is loneliness, excluded engagement in the self. Once we've hit this age, we will now give or take anything, wear any mask.

#### BAD POSTMODERN WRITING

Look man, we'd probably most of us agree that these are dark times, and stupid ones, but do we need fiction that does nothing but dramatize how dark and stupid it is?

You can defend [*American*] *Psycho* as being a sort of performative digest of late-eighties social problems, but it's no more than that.

If what's always distinguished bad writing—flat characters, a narrative world that's cliched and not recognizably human, etc.—is also a description of today's world, then bad writing becomes an ingenious mimesis of a bad world. If readers simply believe the world is stupid and shallow and mean, then [Bret] Ellis can write a mean shallow stupid novel that becomes a mordant deadpan commentary on the badness of everything.

We seem to require of our art an ironic distance from deep convictions or desperate questions, so that contemporary writers have either to make jokes of them or else try to work them in under cover of some formal trick like intertextual quotation or incongruous juxtaposition, sticking the really urgent stuff inside asterisks as part of some multivalent defamiliarization flourish or some shit.

I just think that fiction that isn't exploring what it means to be human today isn't art.

#### METAFICTION

It is increasingly hard to find valid art that is about stuff that is real.

Metafiction is untrue, as a lover.... It's the act of a lonely solipsist's self-love.... Robbe-Grillet and McElroy and Barthelme can fuck themselves awfully well.

Co-optation might actually be a good thing if it helped keep younger writers from being able to treat mere formal ingenuity as an end in itself. MTV-type co-optation could end up a great prophylactic against cleveritis—you know, the dreaded grad-school syndrome of like "Watch me use seventeen different points of view in this scene of a guy eating a Saltine." The real point of that shit is "Like me because I'm clever"—which of course is in itself derived from commercial art's axiom about audience-affection determining art's value.

#### MINIMALISM

It looks like you can write a minimalist piece without much bleeding. And you can. But not a good one.

#### END OF POSTMODERNISM

For me, the last few years of the postmodern era have seemed a bit like the way you feel when you're in high school and your parents go on a trip, and you throw a party. You get all your friends over and throw this wild disgusting fabulous party. For awhile it's great, free and freeing, parental authority gone and overthrown, a...Dionysian revel. But then time passes and the party gets louder and louder, and your run out of drugs, and nobody's got any money for more drugs, and things get broken and spilled.

We're kind of wishing some parents would come back. And of course we're uneasy about the fact that we wish they'd come back—I mean, what's wrong with us?

I believe I want adult sanity, which seems to me the only unalloyed form of heroism available today.

#### BUREAUCRACY

I learned that the world of men as it exists today is a bureaucracy.

Tell them there are no holes for your fingers in the masks of men.

It's no accident that in a bureaucracy getting fired is called "termination," as in ontological erasure.

They can kill you, but the legalities of eating you are quite a bit dicier.

#### ANARCHISM

Nuclear weapons and TV have simply intensified the consequences of our tendencies.

I'm starting to see just why turn-of-the-century Americans' biggest fear was of anarchists and anarchy. For if anarchy actually wins, if rulelessness becomes the rule, then protest and change become not just impossible but incoherent. It'd be like casting a ballot for Stalin: you are voting for an end to all voting.



## POLITICS

You remember “No new taxes” and “Out of the loop” and...”Did not inhale” and “Did not have sex with that woman” and etc., etc. It’s depressing and painful to believe that the would-be “public servants” you’re forced to choose between are all phonies whose only real concern is their own care and feeding and who will lie so outrageously with such a straight face that you just know they have to believe you’re an idiot.

The likeliest reason why so many of us care so little about politics is that modern politicians make us sad, hurt us deep down in ways that are hard even to name, much less talk about.

Real leaders are people who help us overcome the limitations of our own individual laziness and selfishness and weakness and fear and get us to do better, harder things than we can get ourselves to do on our own.

## CONSERVATISM

The basics of adulthood—that life owes you nothing, that suffering takes many forms, that no one will ever care for you as your mother did, that the human heart is a chump.

Truly decent, innocent people can be taxing to be around.

## LIBERALS

True empathy’s impossible.

99% of compulsive thinkers’ thinking is about themselves.

Can the decision to be less selfish ever be anything other than a selfish decision?

Material passion is one thing, but ideological passion disgusts us on some deep level.

Any possible human redemption requires us first to face what’s dreadful, what we want to deny.

Progressive liberals seem incapable of stating the obvious truth: that we who are well off should be willing to share more of what we have with poor people not for the poor people’s sake but for our own; i.e., we should share what we have in order to become less narrow and frightened and lonely and self-centered.

## POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

Are we total pussies?

My whole life I’ve been a fraud.

Of course you’re a fraud, of course what people see is never you. And of course you know this, and of course you try to manage what part they see if you know it’s only a part. Who wouldn’t? It’s called free will, Sherlock.

Am I a good person? Deep down, do I even really want to be a good person, or do I only want to seem like a good person so that people (including myself) will approve of me?... How do I ever actually know whether I’m bullshitting myself, morally speaking?

I think I’m very honest and candid, but I’m also proud of how honest and candid I am—so where does that put me?

A Democratic Spirit’s constituent rigor and humility and self-honesty are, in fact, so hard to maintain on certain issues that it’s almost irresistibly tempting to fall in with some established dogmatic camp and to follow that camp’s line on the issue and to let your position harden within the camp and become inflexible

and to believe that the other camps are either evil or insane and to spend all your time and energy trying to shout over them.

There's a grosser irony about Politically Correct English. This is that PCE purports to be the dialect of progressive reform but is in fact—in its Orwellian substitution of the euphemisms of social equality for social equality itself—of vastly more help to conservatives.

PCE acts as a form of censorship, and censorship always serves the status quo.

#### FEMINISM

Choose your temple of fanaticism with great care.

Sometimes human beings have to just sit in one place and, like, hurt.

Tell them how could you ever even hope to love what you can't grab onto.

Almost nothing important happens to you happens to you because you engineer it.

Worship power—you will feel weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to keep this fear at bay.

Having a kneejerk attitude to anything is a mistake, especially in the case of women, where it adds up to this very limited and condescending thing of saying they're fragile, breakable things that can be destroyed easily. Everybody gets hurt and violated and broken sometimes. Why are women so special?

Existence in life breaks people in all kinds of awful fucking ways all the time, trust me I know. I've been there.

You will become way less concerned with what other people think of you when you realize how seldom they do.

Sitting here beside this girl as unknown to him now as outer space, waiting for whatever she might say to unfreeze him, now he felt like he could see the edge or outline of what a real vision of hell might be.

I didn't get laid on this tour.

#### TRYING TO LOVE

A deep need for anything from other people makes us easy pickings.

99% of all the interhuman manipulation and bullshit gamesmanship that goes on goes on precisely because the idea of saying this sort of thing straight out ["Do you like me? Please like me"] is regarded as somehow obscene.

In the beginning it's I guess what you call features of the person that make you feel certain ways about this person.... But then if you get to where you, you know, love a person, everything sort of reverses. It's not that you love the person because of certain things about the person anymore, it's that you love the things about the person because you love the person. It kind of radiates out, instead of in.

Just now he felt her two small hands on his, to turn him. What if he is just afraid, if the truth is no more than this, and if what to pray for is not even love but simple courage, to meet both her eyes as she says it and trust his heart?

#### ORGASM

And as her eyes, you know, widen to their widest point and as she begins to climax and arch her back, they close. You know, shut, the eyes do. And I can tell that she's closed her eyes to shut me out. You know, I

become like an intruder. And behind those closed lids, you know, her eyes are now rolled all the way around and staring intently inward into some void where I, who sent them, can't follow.

The base frees and condenses, compresses the whole experience to the implosion of one terrible shattering spike in the graph, an afflated orgasm of the heart that makes her feel, truly, attractive, sheltered by limits, devilled and loved, observed and alone and sufficient and female, full, as if watched for an instant by God.

## GOD

God seems to have a kind of laid-back management style I'm not crazy about. I'm pretty much anti-death. God looks by all accounts to be pro-death. I'm not seeing how we can get together on this issue, he and I.

The compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship...is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive.

### *Infinite Jest* (1996)

The truth is it's hard for me to know what I really think about any of the stuff I've written.

I wanted to do something that is real experimental and very strange, but it's also fun. And that was of course very scary. Because I thought maybe that couldn't be done—or that it would come off as just a hellacious flop. But I'm sort of proud of it, because I think it was a kind of brace and right-headed thing to do.

There is an ending as far as I'm concerned. Certain kind of parallel lines are supposed to start converging in such a way that an "end" can be projected by the reader somewhere beyond the right frame. If no such convergence or projection occurred to you, then the book's failed for you.

What goes on inside is just too fast and huge and all interconnected for words to do more than barely sketch the outlines of at most one tiny part of it at any given instant.

My chest bumps like a dryer with shoes in it.

## SUMMING UP

My whole life I've been a fraud. I'm not exaggerating. Pretty much all I've ever done all the time is try to create a certain impression of me in other people. Mostly to be liked or admired.

The really important kind of freedom involves attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day.

## ART

Entertainment provides relief. Art provokes engagement.

What the really great artists do is they're entirely themselves...they've got their own vision, they have their own way of fracturing reality, and if it's authentic and true, you will feel it in your nerve endings.

## GOOD WRITING

A good book teaches the reader how to read it.

Dostoevski informs everybody; or he ought to.

Good fiction's job is to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable.

The job of the first eight pages is not to have the reader want to throw the book at the wall.

[If] the writer does his job right, what he basically does is remind the reader of how smart the reader is.

My instincts concerning syntax and mechanics are better than your own, I can tell, with all due respect.

I've gotten convinced that there's something kind of timelessly vital and sacred about good writing...the big distinction between good art and so-so art lies somewhere in the art's heart's purpose, the agenda of the consciousness behind the text.

#### MAGICAL ART

In dark times, the definition of good art would seem to be art that locates and applies CPR to those elements of what's human and magical that still live and glow despite the times' darkness. Really good fiction could have as dark a worldview as it wished, but it'd find a way both to depict this dark world AND to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in it.

I have this unbelievably like five-year-old's belief that art is just absolutely magic. And that good art can do things that nothing else in the solar system can do. And that the good stuff will survive, and get read, and that in the great winnowing process, the shit will sink and the good stuff will rise.

#### REDEMPTIVE REALISM

If a piece of fiction can allow us imaginatively to identify with a character's pain... [Realism] This is nourishing, redemptive; we become less alone inside.

To be willing to sort of die in order to move the reader, somehow. Even now I'm scared about how sappy this'll look in print, saying this.

The reader becomes God, for all textual purposes. I see your eyes glazing over, so I'll hush.

#### THE NEW FICTION

What we need...is seriously engaged art that can teach again that we're smart.

The next real literary "rebels" in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels...who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who...treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue.... Real rebels, as far as I can see, risk disapproval.

I guess a bit part of serious fiction's purpose is to give the reader, who like all of us is sort of marooned in her own skull, to give her imaginative access to other selves.

#### ADVICE

Talk out of the part of yourself that can love instead of the part that just wants to be loved.

In life, the microphone passes your lips but once...you had better be ready to sing.

If you've never wept and want to, have a child.

#### DEATH

When the flames get close enough, falling to death becomes the slightly less terrible of two terrors.

The truth will set you free. But not until it is finished with you.

