



## DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

"MY OWN PLAN FOR THE COMING FOURTEEN MONTHS  
IS TO KNOCK ON DOORS AND STUFF ENVELOPES.  
MAYBE EVEN TO WEAR A BUTTON. TO TRY TO ACCRETE  
WITH OTHERS INTO A DEMOGRAPHICALLY SIGNIFICANT MASS.  
TO TRY EXTRA HARD TO EXERCISE PATIENCE, POLITENESS,  
AND IMAGINATION ON THOSE WITH WHOM I DISAGREE.  
ALSO TO FLOSS MORE."

Elements of the new frontier of clear, lucid communication:

*Novelists who write empathically about political debates*

*Smart, competent IT technicians who can explain what they're doing in such a way that you could reproduce it*

*A new word for geniuses who can talk about stuff outside their area of expertise*

**D**avid Foster Wallace is from east-central Illinois, and this is a large part of his appeal. In addition, he has written a number of books. Among them are the story collections *Girl with Curious Hair* and *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, and the novels *The Broom of the System* and *Infinite Jest*. There is also *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, a collection of journalism and essays. It's fair to say that Wallace has shown himself to be capable of tackling any subject or genre he chooses; his versatility and his attention to detail—of the physical world and also the nuances of feeling and consciousness—have made him one of the most influential writers the United States has produced in the last twenty years. After spending many years living in Bloomington, Illinois, and teaching at Illinois State University—the sometime rival of but not the same as

the University of Illinois—Wallace accepted in 2001 a position as Roy E. Disney Professor of English at Pomona College, in southern California. October marks the release of *Everything and More: A Compact History of ∞*. Below is an email exchange with Wallace, though it wasn't quite that. Questions were emailed to Wallace, who then took them home, answered them on his home computer—which is not connected to the Internet—printed those answers, and put them in the mail. As you can see, the interview could have and maybe should have gone on much longer. Wallace and his interviewer were traveling a lot in the weeks before this issue went to press, so we did our best. I guess it is six thousand words or so. That's a good length.

—Dave Eggers

THE BELIEVER: I guess it would be fitting enough to start by asking what prompted you to write this book,

*Everything and More*. Was it your idea, or were you asked by the [W. W. Norton] Great Discoveries series to address the subject? And if you can answer this, you'd mentioned on the phone that you wrote *Everything and More* "two books ago," implying that there are two more finished Dave Wallace books in your desk drawer. Can you talk about those?

DAVID FOSTER WALLACE: I'll give you the short version. This is basically the same publishing outfit that had done Penguin Lives, and they were doing a new series where non-tech people wrote about seminal stuff in math and science, and they tracked me down in Texas (long story) and pitched me in I think the summer of 2000. I'd had a certain amount of philosophy of math in school, and had kept reading (unsystematically) in the field as a sort of half-assed hobby, so the idea of doing some nonfiction about math was not unappealing. (There's some grim and incidental data about how poorly other work was going in the summer of 2000, and how welcome was the idea of doing something else for a while, that for the most part I'll skip.) I'd also had an office at Illinois State just down the hall from a guy who taught technical writing, and from reading some of his classes' materials and eavesdropping on his student conferences I'd gotten interested in tech writing and the rhetoric of technical info. At first I think the Series people's idea was that I was going to do Gödel and the Incompleteness Theorems, but then it switched to Cantorian set theory because I'd actually had a set theory class in school once, and to be honest I thought I could pretty much knock the thing off in four or five months. Except—for a variety of reasons that won't fit in this short version—it turned out that the only way to present the whole thing interestingly or in a way that hadn't been done before was to try to explain not just what Cantorian set theory was and how it worked but exactly where it came from, which given the essential transitivity of where things come from eventually meant going all the way back to Zeno and Aristotle et al. and tracing out the ways Western math had tried and failed to deal with  $\infty$  from ancient Greece up through nineteenth-century analysis. All of which ended up taking a lot longer than five months, let me tell you.

BLVR: Before we go deeper into infinity, let's back up a second and talk about where this book fits into your other stuff. Your books so far are all recognizable as yours, unmistakably so, but on the other hand you haven't revisited the same structural territory more than once. You've written two novels, but they're not similar in too many ways, at least in terms of their overall architecture. Similarly, *Girl with Curious Hair* and *Brief Interviews* are both collections of stories, but are wildly different, sharing arguably little structural DNA. You've written journalism, and essays, and now this new book about infinity. But rarely have you seemed to go back into forms you've already explored. I haven't, for example, seen any journalism from you since the John McCain piece [in *Rolling Stone*]. Maybe the question I have is this: Once you've explored a form, like the short story for example, do you reach a point where you think you've exhausted its possibilities, and thus have to move on? Or are you sampling many different forms before inevitably revisiting all of them?

DFW: Here's an example of a question that's deeper and more interesting than my response can be. I know that the reason has nothing to do with feeling that a form's been exhausted. Actually, I don't understand the whole concept of form and forms very well, nor the various ways different forms and genres get distinguished and classified. Nor do I much care, really. My basic MO is that I tend to start and/or work on a whole lot of different things at the same time, and at a certain point they either come alive (to me) or they don't. Well over half of them do not, and I lack the discipline/fortitude to work for very long on something that feels dead, so





they get abandoned, or put in a trunk, or stripped for parts for other things. It's all rather chaotic, or feels that way to me. What anybody else ever gets to see of mine, writing-wise, is the product of a kind of Darwinian struggle in which only things that are emphatically alive to me are worth finishing, fixing, editing, copyediting, page-proof-tinkering, etc. (I know you know this drill, and know the soul-fatigue of having to go over your own shit time after time for publication.) And it may be that in order to be really alive for me, a book-length thing has got to be different, feel different, than other stuff I've done.... Or, on the other hand, my whole answer here might be hooley: The new book of stories is not all that different, structurally, from *GWCH*, or from most other story collections.

BLVR: You mention this book of stories again, but we haven't discussed it. Did you want to talk about it? I don't know anything about it. Up to you.

DFW: By all means let's discuss it. It's a book of stories. The shortest is 1.5 pages and the longest about 100. It was due last January 1 and I was six months late with it. Barring some sort of editorial disaster, it ought to come out next spring.

BLVR: You covered John McCain for the 2000 election, and that piece, which was so fresh and honest and unvarnished, was made into a kind of book-on-demand. Do you keep up with politics, and if so, are there plans to do any more political writing? And do you have any comment on why, it seems, there are fewer young novelists around who also comment directly on the political world? Should novelists be offering their opinions on national affairs, politics, our current and future wars?

DFW: The reason why doing political writing is so hard right now is probably also the reason why more young (am I included in the range of this predicate anymore?) fiction writers ought to be doing it. As of 2003, the rhetoric of the enterprise is fucked. 95 percent of political commentary, whether spoken or written, is now polluted by the very politics it's supposed to be about. Meaning it's become totally ideological and reductive:

The writer/speaker has certain political convictions or affiliations, and proceeds to filter all reality and spin all assertion according to those convictions and loyalties. Everybody's pissed off and exasperated and impervious to argument from any other side. Opposing viewpoints are not just incorrect but contemptible, corrupt, evil. Conservative thinkers are balder about this kind of attitude: Limbaugh, Hannity, that horrific O'Reilly person. Coulter, Kristol, etc. But the Left's been infected, too. Have you read this new Al Franken book? Parts of it are funny, but it's totally venomous (like, what possible response can rightist pundits have to Franken's broadsides but further rage and return-venom?). Or see also e.g. Lapham's latest *Harper's* columns, or most of the stuff in the *Nation*, or even *Rolling Stone*. It's all become like Zinn and Chomsky but without the immense bodies of hard data these older guys use to back up their screeds. There's no more complex, messy, community-wide argument (or "dialogue"); political discourse is now a formulaic matter of preaching to one's own choir and demonizing the opposition. Everything's relentlessly black-and-whitened. Since the truth is way, way more gray and complicated than any one ideology can capture, the whole thing seems to me not just stupid but stupefying. Watching O'Reilly v. Franken is watching bloodsport. How can any of this possibly help me, the average citizen, deliberate about whom to choose to decide my country's macroeconomic policy, or how even to conceive for myself what that policy's outlines should be, or how to minimize the chances of North Korea nuking the DMZ and pulling us into a ghastly foreign war, or how to balance domestic security concerns with civil liberties? Questions like these are all massively complicated, and much of the complication is not sexy, and well over 90 percent of political commentary now simply abets the uncomplicatedly sexy delusion that one side is Right and Just and the other Wrong and Dangerous. Which is of course a pleasant delusion, in a way—as is the belief that every last person you're in conflict with is an asshole—but it's childish, and totally uncondusive to hard thought, give and take, compromise, or the ability of grown-ups to function as any kind of community.

My own belief, perhaps starry-eyed, is that since fic-



tionists or literary-type writers are supposed to have some special interest in empathy, in trying to imagine what it's like to be the other guy, they might have some useful part to play in a political conversation that's having the problems ours is. Failing that, maybe at least we can help elevate some professional political journalists who are (1) polite, and (2) willing to entertain the possibility that intelligent, well-meaning people can disagree, and (3) able to countenance the fact that some problems are simply beyond the ability of a single ideology to represent accurately.

Implicit in this brief, shrill answer, though, is obviously the idea that at least some political writing should be Platonically disinterested, should rise above the fray, etc.; and in my own present case this is impossible (and so I am a hypocrite, an ideological opponent could say). In doing the McCain piece you mentioned, I saw some stuff (more accurately: I believe that I saw some stuff) about our current president, his inner circle, and the primary campaign they ran that prompted certain reactions inside me that make it impossible to rise above the fray. I am, at present, partisan. Worse than that: I feel such deep, visceral antipathy that I can't seem to think or speak or write in any kind of fair or nuanced way about the current administration. Writing-wise, I think this kind of interior state is dangerous. It is when one feels most strongly, most personally, that it's most tempting to speak up ("speak out" is the current verb phrase of choice, rhetorically freighted as it is). But it's also when it's the least productive, or at any rate it seems that way to me—there are plenty of writers and journalists "speaking out" and writing pieces about oligarchy and neofascism and mendacity and appalling short-sightedness in definitions of "national security" and "national interest," etc., and very few of these writers seem to me to be generating helpful or powerful pieces, or really even being persuasive to anyone who doesn't already share the writer's views.

My own plan for the coming fourteen months is to knock on doors and stuff envelopes. Maybe even to wear a button. To try to accrete with others into a demographically significant mass. To try extra hard to exercise patience, politeness, and imagination on those with whom I disagree. Also to floss more.

BLVR: Maybe that's a good segue into your work processes, which I guess I've begun to be fascinated with. If you want to talk about how, how often and where you write, I'm sure people would be interested.

DFW: Maybe you could talk briefly about your own work processes first. Why? (a) Because people'd be at least as interested in yours as mine. (b) Because you always have so much going on, both writing-wise and administration-wise. (c) So that I'd have a better idea of what you mean by "work processes."

BLVR: Right now I'm writing from a tiny library outside of San Francisco, in a carrel deep in their fiction stacks. I change my routine every four months or so, when my natural need to distract myself overcomes whatever routine-strategy I've been using to allow myself to work undistracted. This is my new thing, just begun last week and so far successful. After writing at home, in my brother's bedroom, for six months, now I go here. I have a small desk at 826 Valencia, but I can't do any actual writing there—it's in the middle of the office, so that's just for teaching, talking with staff and volunteers, meeting with people, etc. Given the different things going on at McSwys/826, it gets hard—as it does, I'm sure, for anyone who teaches—to carve out the uninterrupted blocks of time you need to get quality work done. I taught (high schoolers) last night until 9:30 p.m., and was supposed to teach (fifth graders) this morning at 10 a.m., and I had to give today's field trip to another McSwys staffer/826 teacher, because I teach again tonight and I was just feeling too squeezed, given that I've got four deadlines this week. I'm a wuss, though. I'm sure there are tons of writers who teach a hell of a lot more than I do. But I guess like a lot of writers I need to isolate myself to the degree that I can't use the phone or email or lawn mower or bike, even if I need to—you have to distance yourself from distractions.

Anyway, I remember you once actually answering your phone by saying not "Hello" but "Distract me," which struck me as the truest way to put it—when you pick up the phone, you're leaving the submersion of good writerly concentration. You've also said that you work on various things concurrently. Can you talk about



finding the time you need, whether you write at night or by day, every day or in binges, do you work on a PC/laptop/Commodore 64, how often you teach, etc.?

DFW: I'm still not sure I've got much to relate. I know I never work in whatever gets called an office, e.g., a school office I use only for meeting students and storing books I know I'm not going to read anytime soon. I know I used to work mostly in restaurants, which chewing tobacco rendered impractical in ways that are not hard to imagine. Then for a while I worked mostly in libraries. (By "working" I mean doing the first few drafts and revisions, which I do longhand. I've always typed at home, and I don't consider typing working, really.) Anyway, but then I started to have dogs. If you live by yourself and have dogs, things get strange. I know I'm not the only person who projects skewed parental neuroses onto his pets or companion-animals or whatever. But I have it pretty bad; it's a source of some amusement to friends. First, I began to get this strong feeling that it was traumatic for them to be left alone more than a couple hours. This is not quite as psycho as it may seem, because most of the dogs I've ended up with have had shall we say hard puppyhoods, including one past owner who went to jail... but that's neither here nor there. The point is that I got reluctant to leave them alone for very long, and then after a while I got so I actually needed one or more dogs around in order to be comfortable enough to feel like working. And all that put a crimp in outside-the-home writing, a change that in retrospect was not all that good for me because (a) I have agoraphobic tendencies anyway, and (b) home is obviously full of all kinds of distractions that library carrels aren't. The point being that I mostly work at home now, although I know I'd work better, faster, more concentratedly if I went someplace else. If work is going shitty, I try to make sure that at least a couple hours in the morning are carved out for this disciplined thing called Work. If it's going well, I often work in the p.m. too, although of course if it's going well it doesn't feel disciplined or like uppercase Work because it's what I want to be doing anyway. What often happens is that when work goes well all my routines and disciplines go out the window simply because I don't need them, and

then when it starts not going well I flounder around trying to reconstruct disciplines I can enforce and habits I can stick to. Which is part of what I meant by saying that my way of doing it seems chaotic, at least compared to the writing processes of other people I know about (which now includes you).

BLVR: You said it better than I did. I should say that it works the same way for me—a routine is just there for when you're less inspired, or, in my case, when I'm trying to do the last 7/8ths of something, which is always the toughest. But because you mentioned tobacco in your answer, I want to ask about that. When I first met you, in New York about five years ago, you were enjoying chewing tobacco at a restaurant—that is, you had a dip-cup just beneath the table, in which you deposited juice at a regular interval. Do you want to talk about your history with various forms of tobacco?

DFW: Let's acknowledge first that this Q actually preceded the last one, and that you just inserted an artful little bridge-sentence in your question-text to suggest otherwise. I know you're interested in tobacco and the covert gradual suicide that is habitual tobacco use. My own situation is not all that different from Tom Bissell's, who had some article about chewing tobacco in *Timescent Male Monthly* or something last year that I resonated with on many frequencies. I started smoking at twenty three after two years of dabbling in clove ciga-





rettes (which were big in the early eighties). I liked cigarettes, very much, but one thing I did not like was how hard they were on the lungs and wind in terms of sports, stair-climbing, coitus, etc. Some roofer friends back home got me started on chew as a cigarette-substitute at I think age twenty eight. Chew doesn't hurt your lungs (obviously), but it also has massive, massive amounts of nicotine, at least compared to Marlboro Lights. (This, too, is all very condensed and boiled down; sorry if it's terse.) I have tried probably ten serious times to quit chewing tobacco in the last decade. I've never even made it a year. Besides all the well-documented psychic fallout, the hardest thing about quitting for me is that it makes me stupid. Really stupid. As in walking into rooms and forgetting why I'm there, drifting off in the middle of sentences, feeling coolness on my chin and discovering I've been drooling. Without chew, I have the attention span of a toddler. I giggle and sob inappropriately. And everything seems very, very far away. In essence it's like being unpleasantly stoned all the time... and as far as I can tell it's not a temporary withdrawal thing. I quit for eleven months once, and it was like that the whole time. On the other hand, chewing tobacco kills you—or at the very least it makes your teeth hurt and turn unpleasant colors and eventually fall out. Plus it's disgusting, and stupid, and a vector of self-contempt. So, once again, I've quit. It's now been a little over three months. At this moment I have in gum, a mint, and three Australian tea-tree toothpicks that a Wiccan friend swears by. One reason you and I are chatting in print rather than in real time is that it's taken me twenty minutes just to formulate and press the appropriate keys for the preceding ¶. Actually speaking with me would be like visiting a demented person in a nursing home. Apparently I not only drift off in the middle of a sentence but sometimes begin to hum, tunelessly, without being aware of it. Also, FYI, my left eyelid has been twitching nonstop since August 18. It's not pretty. But I'd prefer to live past fifty. This is my Tobacco Story.

BLVR: Another nice segue, about brains. [I say this while pasting together the interview, which wasn't actually conducted in anything like the order it's now presented. But I keep finding these nice segues, and

wanted to share my contentment with you, the BLVR reader.] You allude in *Everything and More* to the fact that mathematicians have taken on a somewhat sexy role in popular mythology, with *A Beautiful Mind*, among other stories, helping to put them in a place where, in the conventional wisdom, they might even be supplanting artists as the presumed sufferers of a sort of "mad genius" syndrome, the idea being that they push the boundaries of their work so far that normal life, and eventually their sanity, falls away. First, can you comment on this assumption that to achieve, for example, mathematical greatness, one might need to sacrifice his or her sanity? (I realize that's a straw man.) Second, the G. K. Chesterton quote you cite: "Poets do not go mad; but chess players do..." echoes something my Evolution prof said at U of Illinois (where your dad taught). He was talking about something called the homeostatic envelope, loosely defined (I think) as the limits of one's normal experience, from joy to depression—he drew a long rectangle and made a zig-zag lie-detector kind of line inside—with the ideal being that one would stay within this envelope, avoiding the lines exceeding it with too much joy or too much sadness. Anyway, the point he also made was that artists tend to stay more within the envelope, because of what I'm presuming he meant as the natural vents and releases built into their work, whereas the cashiers of the world might not have those. (Boy, I wonder if this makes any sense!) I guess I would ask whether you could comment on this vis-à-vis Chesterton's quote and the misperceptions about Cantor's own sanity or lack thereof, and also on your own mental journeys with your work. I tell my students that they should all try a novel at some point in their lives, given how irrevocably their mind will expand in the process. Having written an 1,100-page novel and now *Everything and More*, can you talk about your own brain-expansion/self-discovery/forays into temporary "madness"?

DFW: Well, hmm. I think what I'll do is spell out the very specific contexts in which the madness-v.-genius thing gets mentioned in the book. It may be too specific to provide the sort of answer your question seems to invite. The real answer's too heavy to get into generally



in this sort of context, even if I had the equipment for it. (I suspect what I'd do in a general discussion is spray a lot of verbiage and finally end up saying I don't think anybody's ever really improved on Nietzsche's stuff about the Apollo-Dionysus interplay as a way to conceive both the madness-v.-genius thing and our Western fascination with it.)

There are two reasons for mentioning the genius-v.-madness stuff at the start of *E&M*. One is to introduce the idea of abstractness as both a feature of math and an engine of neurosis, which intro then enables §1's whole long thing on just what abstraction is and why it's so important to talking about math. I can't recall whether it got cut during any of the book's myriad editorial snafus and reworkings, but at one point there was a short, 100% true bit in like §5 about math's symbolism being so intimidating to most people not because it's hard to understand per se (which it really isn't) but because it's such a perfectly abstract compression of massive amounts of information. Anyway...

The other reason calls for some tact on my part. It so happens that just as initial work for *E&M* got underway, a certain book came out, a pop bio of Cantor by a certain author whom I won't name except to say that his initials are the same as those of a well-known commercial airline. For a certain publisher whose own name sounds like an autistic person's description of a room. This unnamed book had two main theses about Cantor's work on  $\infty$ : one was that it was intimately bound up with mystical Judaism and the metaphysics of the kabala; the other was that  $\infty$  was such a mind-blowing math concept that grappling with it drove Cantor mad, which madness's symptoms, hospitalizations, etc. then got detailed and lingered over with all kinds of anecdotes and photos. The kabala stuff was mildly interesting, although there wasn't much in the way of actual argument for any of the connections the book alleged. But the  $\infty$ -drove-Cantor-mad stuff was dreck, the very worst kind of appeal to a flabby, unconsidered pop version of what you just now called the "mad genius' syndrome." The origin, motives, and contexts of Cantor's actual achievement got little serious treatment in this unnamed book, basically I think because airline-initials and/or autistic-room-description felt the math

would be too dull for a mainstream audience. What math there is in that book is sexed up by making it seem like  $\infty$  was some transcendent forbidden terrain that Cantor lost his mind trying to negotiate. Whereas the fact is that it's all but certain that Cantor was bipolar, that his professional insecurities and travails aggravated the illness but didn't cause it, that most of his worst episodes and hospitalizations occurred when he was older and his best work was long behind him. Etc., etc.—some of the unsexy truth gets talked about in *E&M*. What was most irksome to me about this unnamed prior book, though, was the author's/publisher's apparent assumption that Cantor's theories themselves were not beautiful or accessible or important enough in their own right to base a general-interest book around (which in fact they are), and thus that the math of  $\infty$  had to be recast as some kind of intellectual Lost Ark that made Cantor's face melt off when he looked inside it. I hope I'm still being tactful. The truth is that this unnamed book really bugged me: It managed at once to insult Cantor and his work, the reader, and the very possibility of writing honestly about technical stuff for a general audience. Anyway, to the limited extent that *E&M* does mention the "mad genius" thing, just about all these mentions are meant to be direct, emphatic replies to this unidentified prior book.

BLVR: According to one of the more science-oriented people at the *Believer*, there is a wave of new "pop" math books. Which ones do you think are worthwhile? Do you like *Flatland*? *Gödel, Escher, Bach*? I think you've



TOO QUICK  
FOR CHARLEY



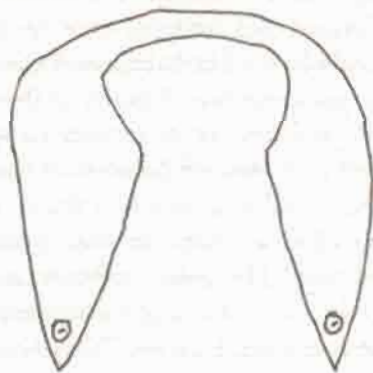
mentioned that you like *A Mathematician's Apology*...

DFW: It depends, of course, what you mean by "pop." Hardy's *Apology* is pop in the sense of being totally accessible to anybody with a twelfth-grade vocabulary, but it's not pop in that only people with enough of a math background to give a bright blue fart about the psychology and aesthetics of pure math will care very much about the book's subject. So hmmm. *G, E, B* is a great book, but it's hard: I personally don't think Hofstadter does enough teaching of the basic concepts to make his riffs and dialogues come alive for people who didn't have a lot of basic logic and recursion-theory in college (I actually shoved this book excitedly at people in the eighties who thought it was a drag; it turned out they didn't have the prep.) And so on. Your science guy would have to ask me on a book-by-book basis, almost. In general, things that sell really well, e.g. Aczel's, are usually dreck. Actually, most Four Walls Eight Windows pop tech stuff sucks; what they seem really good at is marketing their dreck. But not all major-house stuff is bad. Seife's book about zero for Viking a few years ago was surprisingly good, although it was also accessible as hell. In general, I think the whole pop-math genre is confused and confusing because nobody's exactly sure who the audience is or how to pitch the discussion.

BLVR: Here's a big, broad-implication type of question from Gideon, a copyeditor and assistant editor here: You note that throughout mathematical (and, by extension, mathematico-philosophical or philo-mathematical or whatever) history, the concept of infinity was regarded as not just elusive & confusing & confounding in terms of various mathematical taxonomies, but downright dangerous: The closest thing that the Greeks had to a concept of infinity was essentially the idea of messiness, of chaotic Dionysian disorganization. So infinity challenged their rigorously maintained ideas of logical law & order, etc.; the Christians and the Scholastics feared the concept of infinity in mathematics because it somehow defied the omnipotence & uniqueness of the one God. But then, when we finally get this workable, interesting, courageous attempt to understand and define the concept of infinity in the latter half of the

nineteenth century, the concept that falls out is fascinating and clever and mathematically revolutionary and really a tremendous poetic achievement, but, as far as I can tell, it hasn't had much relevance outside of a narrowly circumscribed math world, and hasn't been particularly dangerous, or, if it has been relevant and/or dangerous, you don't really go into what any of the extra-mathematical implications have been. Is there anything to say on this subject? Are there interesting infinity-related extra-mathematical implications of Cantor and his discoveries?

DFW: Probably the quickest, most efficient way to respond is to say that this question leads nicely into the whole reason why pop-tech books might have some kind of special utility in today's culture. The big difference is that things are vastly more compartmentalized now than they were up through, say, the Renaissance. And more specialized, and more freighted with all kinds of special context. There's no way we'd expect a world-class, cutting-edge mathematician now also to be doing world-class, cutting-edge philosophy, theology, etc. Not so for the Greeks—if only because math, philosophy, and theology weren't coherently distinguishable for them. Same for the Neoplatonists and Scholastics, and etc. etc. (This is a very, very simple answer, of course, maybe right on the edge of simplistic.) By the time Cantor weighed in on  $\infty$  in the 1870s, it was part of an extremely specialized technical discipline that took decades to master and be able to do advanced work in. For Cantor and R. Dedekind (and now this is





all just condensed way down from the book (sort of the same way the question is)), the math of  $\infty$  is derived as a way to solve certain thorny problems in post-calc analysis (viz., the expansions of trig functions and the rigorous definition of irrational numbers, respectively), which problems themselves derive from K. Weierstrass's solutions to certain earlier problems, and so on. It's all so abstract and specialized that large parts of *E&M* end up getting devoted to unpacking the problems clearly enough so that a general reader can get a halfway realistic idea of where set theory and the topology of the Real Line even come from, mathematically speaking. The real point, I think, has to do with something else that ends up mentioned only quickly in the book's final draft. We live today in a world where most of the really important developments in everything from math and physics and astronomy to public policy and psychology and classical music are so extremely abstract and technically complex and context-dependent that it's next to impossible for the ordinary citizen to feel that they (the developments) have much relevance to her actual life. Where even people in two closely related sub-sub-specialties have a hard time communicating with each other because their respective s-s-s's require so much special training and knowledge. And so on. Which is one reason why pop-technical writing might have value (beyond just a regular book-market \$-value), as part of the larger frontier of clear, lucid, unpatronizing technical communication. It might be that one of the really significant problems of today's culture involves finding ways for educated people to talk meaningfully with one another across the divides of radical specialization. That sounds a bit gooey, but I think there's some truth to it. And it's not just the polymer chemist talking to the semiotician, but people with special expertise acquiring the ability to talk meaningfully to us, meaning ordinary schmoes. Practical examples: Think of the thrill of finding a smart, competent IT technician who can also explain what she's doing in such a way that you feel like you understand what went wrong with your computer and how you might even fix the problem yourself if it comes up again. Or an oncologist who can communicate clearly and humanly with you and your wife about what the available treat-

ments for her stage-two neoplasm are, and about how the different treatments actually work, and exactly what the plusses and minuses of each one are. If you're like me, you practically drop and hug the ankles of technical specialists like this, when you find them. As of now, of course, they're rare. What they have is a particular kind of genius that's not really part of their specific area of expertise as such areas are usually defined and taught. There's not really even a good univocal word for this kind of genius—which might be significant. Maybe there should be a word; maybe being able to communicate with people outside one's area of expertise should be taught, and talked about, and considered as a requirement for genuine expertise.... Anyway, that's the sort of stuff I think your question is nibbling at the edges of, and it's interesting as hell.

BLVR: I'm just noticing that we didn't get to talk about your teaching much. I've met a few students who attended Pomona in large part because you were teaching there. What's the title of your class? What's on your reading list? Do you use chalk or wipe-away markers?

DFW: Packed into this Q is the idea that what I'm really talking about w/r/t people communicating with each other across specialties is people becoming better teachers, which I'm not sure whether I was saying that or not. Teaching is different, I think, since the students are there voluntarily, and are by definition young and labile and pre-specialized. Anyway, I know that's not what you're asking. I have a lottery-prize-type gig at Pomona: The formal duties are light, the students all have way better SAT scores than I did, and I get to do more or less what I want. I'm doing Intro Fiction right now, which is fun because it's a chance to take kids who are very experienced in literary criticism and paper-writing and to show them there's a totally—in some ways diametrically—different way to read and write. Which would all take a long time to talk about, but for the most part it's big fun, and now that I don't stop and spit brownly into a coffee can every two minutes my credibility with the kids has gone way up; and as long as I don't do something really egregious I think I get to stay as long as I want. ★