***David and Dutch: Wallace, Reagan and the US Presidency***

In 1985 the political biographer and writer Edmund Morris told his publisher Random House that “I want to make literature out of Ronald Reagan.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Morris had been commissioned by the White House to write the president’s official biography after the success of his 1979 book *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*. However, the making of literature out of Reagan proved to be surprisingly difficult. The book, *Dutch*, was eventually released in 1999, over a decade after the end of Reagan’s tenure. Morris admitted that his writing problems were connected to the president’s character, telling friends that:

Ronald Reagan is a man of benign remoteness and no psychological curiosity […] He gives nothing of himself to intimates […] believing that he has no self to give […] Any orthodox quest for the real “Dutch”, then, is bound to be an exercise in frustration […] Since Reagan has been primarily a phenomenon of the American imagination […] he can be re-created only by an extension of biographical technique[[2]](#footnote-2)

Instead of a conventional biography, Morris wrote a partly fictionalised memoir into which he wrote himself as a contemporary of Reagan. Morris’ lateral approach to the depiction of the president – one that confronts the impossibility of faithfully or engagingly presenting him as anything other than cultural or psychological phenomenon – recalls J.G. Ballard’s ‘Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan’ from *The Atrocity Exhibition*, in which the pre-presidential Reagan is described in similar terms to Morris:

Fragments of Reagan’s cinetized postures were used in the construction of model psychodramas in which the Reagan-figure played the role of husband, doctor, insurance salesman, marriage counselor, etc. The failure of these roles to express any meaning reveals the nonfunctional character of Reagan. Reagan’s success therefore indicates society’s periodic need to re-conceptualize its political leaders. Reagan thus appears as a series of posture concepts.[[3]](#footnote-3)

During Reagan’s presidency, these posture concepts came, unsurprisingly, to fascinate certain postmodern theorists preoccupied with what Fredric Jameson famously referred to as “a new depthlessness.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Jean Baudrillard described Reagan’s public image as a triumph of advertising: “Governing today means giving acceptable signs of credibility. It is like advertising and it is the same effect that is achieved – commitment to a scenario, whether it be a political or an advertising scenario. Reagan’s is both at once.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

It is in the context of advertising and salesmanship that David Foster Wallace makes a lengthy reference to Reagan in his essay on John McCain, ‘Up, Simba’, outlining the difference between two kinds of presidential candidate. The first figure, a “leader”, has the ability whatever their moral foibles to “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” (*CL*, 225). The second figure is a “salesman”, whose “ultimate, overriding motivation”, despite having the charisma of a leader, is “self-interest” (*CL*, 226). Wallace suggests that rather than being a leader, Reagan was instead “a great salesman” who was effective at selling “the idea of himself as a great leader”.[[6]](#footnote-6) Writing in 2000, over a decade after the end of Reagan’s administration, Wallace believes that young voters can now “smell a marketer a mile away” because they came of age with the kind of political salesmanship that Reagan represents.[[7]](#footnote-7) Back in the 1980s, though, his own sense of smell was not so acute. As DT Max reports in *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story*, Wallace voted for Reagan in 1980.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Between the 1980s and the early 1990s Wallace’s political position changed substantially. This shift is illustrated perhaps most directly in his comments about consumerism in a 2006 interview:

America, as everybody knows, is a country of many contradictions, and a big contradiction for a long time has been between a very aggressive form of capitalism and consumerism against what might be called a kind of moral or civic impulse […] Sometime—I’m not sure whether it was the 1990s or 1980s in America—half of that conflict really sort of disappeared[[9]](#footnote-9)

This quote is an amended rephrasing of the leader/salesman split raised in the McCain essay, and when taking a long view of Wallace’s career it becomes increasingly evident how the acts of the Reagan administration exposed Wallace to a convergence between social conservatism and neoliberalism, one which formed the basis of much of Wallace’s subsequent political writings, particularly those regarding the presidency and the question of leadership. Wallace’s disquiet at this convergence manifests itself in the fiction as early as the mid-1980s, in the story ‘Lyndon’, before turning into a more full-blown critique of neoliberal economics in *The Pale King*, much of which takes place during Reagan’s second term. However, this doesn’t preclude Wallace retaining a socially conservative position on civics until the end of his career, one based upon a rather idealised image of a pre-neoliberal unified nation. Wallace’s fiction also enacts Morris and Ballard’s model of Reagan as a “nonfunctional character” with “no psychological curiosity”; this is staged through a series of tangential portraits of Reagan or Reagan’s America without direct depiction of the president and exploring this nonfunctionality indirectly through analogy or parody. Wallace breaks with this tradition in his late and unfinished story ‘Wickedness’, in which Reagan is at least nominally the subject.

**‘Lyndon’: Reagan’s Civic Failures**

‘Lyndon’ is partly modelled on a true story – the life of Lyndon Johnson’s aide Walter Jenkins, who resigned his post after an arrest for cottaging in 1964, an event homophobically exploited by Barry Goldwater in his unsuccessful election campaign against Johnson. Jenkins was, like David Boyd in ‘Lyndon’, extremely close to the first family. ‘Lyndon’ presents an alternative history of Johnson’s presidency, with Wallace’s most striking historical alteration being Johnson’s death in 1968 on the eve of the election he declined to contest (Wallace includes a fictional eulogy by Jack Childs) when in reality he died five years later in 1973 (*GCH*, 108-9). The story’s other major anachronism is the controversial decision to depict Boyd and his lover Duverger as suffering from AIDS at a time before the condition had been formally identified in the US. ‘Lyndon’ was most likely written during Reagan’s second term as it was first published in *Arrival* in 1987, and I read it here as an analogy, at least in part, for the social legacy of Reagan’s presidency. In ‘Lyndon’, Johnson’s false death in 1968 coincides with the election won by Nixon which signalled the beginning of the end of the former’s so-called Big Society, which was one of the final iterations of the New Deal in American politics.[[10]](#footnote-10) While the New Deal didn’t wither immediately upon Nixon’s victory, the beginnings of deregulation gathered momentum under his administration. It was in Reagan’s presidency, though, that neoliberalism really began to bloom. By writing about Johnson in the Reagan era, Wallace analogously situates an early version of the civic leader/salesman split at the political moment between the end of the New Deal and rise of neoliberalism.

Wallace also incorporates into ‘Lyndon’ a largely unchallenged socially conservative political commentary on the counterculture of the 1960s. Watching Vietnam war protestors, Johnson suggests to Boyd that the youth of America have “had it too goddamn easy”, and people need to “need some suffering to even be Americans inside” (*GCH,* 106*)*. Suffering, an increasingly prevalent motif across Wallace’s fiction, is often aligned with social responsibility; that is, a commitment to certain civic tasks that are unpleasant to carry out, but which selflessness is important to understanding that societies operate altruistically. Here Johnson defines protest as an empty, performative suffering when set against civic responsibility, and in a monologue unanswered by Boyd he states that the protestors are complaining because they lack “genuine stimulation” due to “these careful domestic programs” (106). While this sentiment is in the mouth of a character, it’s not the last time Wallace voices disdain for the lack of responsibility in 1960s counterculture. In his controversial 1996 essay ‘Hail the Returning Dragon, Cloaked in New Fire’ Wallace argues that the devastation wrought by AIDS could be the ‘salvation of sexuality’ in the 1990s:

Civil Rights, rebellion as fashion, inhibition-killing drugs, the moral castration of churches and censors. Bikinis, miniskirts. “Free love.” Sex could finally be unconstrained, “Hang-up”-free, just another appetite: casual. (*BFN*, 170)

Wallace’s queasy position on AIDS is strikingly socially conservative, incorporating a tin-eared equation of sincere and longstanding political positions and stylish poses; civil rights is analogous here with “rebellion as fashion”. Wallace places emphasis here on the importance of the individual’s responsibility, framing suffering as the virtue of not being “casual” but retaining a civic duty to not infect your fellow citizens with a deadly virus. If we read ‘Hail the Returning Dragon’ alongside the very different treatment of AIDS in ‘Lyndon’, while considering Lyndon as a response to Reagan’s presidency, we can begin to better understand the gradual development of the civic/salesman split in Wallace’s writing.

The Reagan administration became notorious in its second term for its failure to acknowledge HIV and AIDS, which had by then developed into a full-blown national health crisis. Reagan famously only mentioned AIDS unprompted in a speech in 1986, around the time Wallace was writing ‘Lyndon’. By having the dying Johnson welcome the AIDS-stricken Duverger into his bed in a gesture of companionship at the climax of the story, Wallace implicitly positions the current president’s negligent stance on AIDS as a failure of civic duty. Dr Paul Volberding, who treated some of the first AIDS patients in America, excoriated Reagan for his slow response, believing that “it was a political calculation. This wouldn’t sell to Republican voters.”[[11]](#footnote-11) While suffering itself might be a noble pursuit, letting those with AIDS suffer because it didn’t play well with voters is, for Wallace, an unconscionable act. This is perhaps the first major example of the divergence between civic leadership and salesmanship in Wallace’s writing, where the well-being of the population is subjugated to the saleable image and act of the presidency.

**Performing Reagan: *Infinite Jest***

Johnny Gentle, the dysfunctional germophobe president of ONAN in *Infinite Jest,* is an amalgam of presidential caricatures, with elements of his character recalling the portraits of Nixon in Robert Coover’s *The Public Burning* and Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow,* along with an explicit parody of George Bush Sr.’s infamous “read my lips-no new taxes” speech (*IJ*, 441). However, the emphasis on Gentle’s former career as an entertainer allows Wallace to explore more directly the cultural dissemination of Baudrillard’s ‘synopsis of performance and enterprise’ that accompanied Reagan’s presidency. The description of Gentle is littered with covert references to Reagan’s career; his stewardship of the “Velvety Vocalists Guild” evokes Reagan’s presidency of the Screen Actors Guild in the 1940s and 50s, and the account of Gentle’s bringing of General Electric “to heel” recalls Reagan’s tenure as spokesperson for General Electric, a position that biographer Garry Wills credits with Reagan’s transition from Democratic to Republican politics.[[12]](#footnote-12) (*IJ*, 382) Finally, Gentle’s promise of “novel sources of revenue” speak to the “trickle-down” economic policies that Wallace will later critique in *The Pale King*. (*IJ*, 383)

The future America depicted in *Infinite Jest* is suffused with indirect references to the amalgamation of entertainment, salesmanship and politics that characterised Reagan’s vision. In the world of ONAN, this has become forcibly animated in national institutions; a simulated presidency has prefigured a simulated nation. The assassins of the AFR recall one of Reagan’s most celebrated roles from the 1942 melodrama *King’s Row*, in which his character Drake McHugh has his legs amputated after a train accident. McHugh’s famous cry of “Where’s the rest of me?”, which Reagan would subsequently use as the title of his autobiography, is also enacted in the repeated motifs of disembodiment throughout the novel. More broadly, the generational appeal of Reagan’s pragmatic pre-method approach to acting and his generic matinee-hero roles are implicitly invoked in the pre-postmodern figure of action valorised by James Incandenza’s father, who criticises the way in which Marlon Brando ruined “two generations’ relations with their own bodies” (*IJ*, 157). One might also see Reagan in the heroic pre-postmodern screen idol of lawman Steve McGarrett in *Hawaii Five-O*, whose “field of action is bare of diverting clutter” according to Hal Incandenza’s essay; Reagan was notable for almost exclusively playing heroes onscreen. (*IJ*, 141)

This synthesis of enterprise and performance is most clearly stated when Gentle tells the citizens of ONAN to “sit back and enjoy the show”, having promised that he will make “tough choices” on behalf of the nation (*IJ*, 383). Of course, making tough choices for us is not the same as asking us to suffer or to carry out those tough choices ourselves. In the McCain essay, Wallace explicitly associates this latter quality with his leader figures like JFK, who can inspire citizens to do better and more difficult things; Gentle, then, is a salesman writ large.[[13]](#footnote-13)

**Reagan’s Legacy: *The Pale King* and ‘Up Simba’**

*The Pale King* and ‘Up Simba’ develop this view of the Reagan era as a desacralizing moment for American civics. However, what sets these works apart from *Infinite Jest* and ‘Lyndon’ is that they approach it in a more explicitly dialogic fashion, with the McCain essay being constructed as an appeal to the young voter, and chapter 19 of *The Pale King* taking the form of an extended dialogue on politics. In Wallace’s later work, the question of suffering also takes on increased significance. Lyndon Johnson’s suggestion that Vietnam protestors should ‘go be responsible for something for a second’ is echoed in Wallace’s portrait of McCain, who was a Vietnam POW for over four years (*GCH*, 107). Wallace holds up this suffering as a supreme example of behaviour “opposed to [one’s] own self-interest” (*CL*, 164). This quality, he suggests, could make an ideal leader, but Wallace’s problem with McCain is that he is unsure whether this campaign is genuinely based on altruism or cynically using McCain’s suffering to sell him as a candidate.[[14]](#footnote-14) That merging of political persona and neoliberal politics that concretised under Reagan has, Wallace implies, impaired our ability to gauge the sincerity of a presidential campaign, and essentially reduced voter choice to a leap of faith. This position also explains Wallace’s tentative hopes about McCain, a politician who underwent suffering for a cause other than himself before the neoliberal era proper, and who therefore might somehow be immune to its excesses.

In *The Pale King*, set in Reagan’s birth state of Illinois, the relationship between neoliberalism and civics forms the basic structure of the plot. Wallace dramatizes what he sees as a split between civic government and corporate-led government in the implementation of the fictional Spackman initiative, a neoliberal attempt to deregulate the IRS. This deregulation occurs – as Marshall Boswell, Richard Godden and Michael Szalay have argued – as a direct response to Reagan’s first-term tax policy.[[15]](#footnote-15) This policy, often referred to as trickle-down economics, suggests that cutting tax rates will encourage investment and growth due to job creation, which will lead to increased tax revenue. The failure of this policy instead created a massive deficit and subsequent recession, though Reagan later took credit for the natural economic recovery by framing it as an outcome of his earlier plan. Garry Wills suggests that through this “malign neglect of governmental machinery rather than legislative abolition of it”, Reagan solidified post-Watergate public distrust as he “governed by discrediting government”.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Accordingly, while the distrust or hatred of government in ‘Lyndon’ is staged as a failure by young voters to understand certain civic values of the previous generation, the scepticism in *The Pale King* is directed at the *government’s* failure to uphold those same civic values. The early signs of disillusionment with Reagan in ‘Lyndon’ blossom in *The Pale King* into a full-blown critique of neoliberal deregulation, which Wallace frames as the very definition of self-interest. Most of this critique is rehearsed in Chapter 19 of the novel, which takes place in the months before Reagan’s election in 1980. Wallace returns here to the matter of the Vietnam protests, but frames them now, in dialogic fashion, against the rise of neoliberalism:

But how did this alienated small selfish make-no-difference thing result from the sixties, since if the sixties showed anything good it showed that like-minded citizens can think for themselves […] there can be real change; we pull out of ’Nam […]

Because corporations got in the game and turned all the genuine principles and aspirations and ideology into a set of fashions and attitudes—they made Rebellion a fashion pose instead of a real impetus. (*TPK*, 140)

The discussion then moves to the political candidate who can harness this moment:

Look for us to elect someone who can cast himself as a Rebel, maybe even a cowboy […] Look for a candidate who can do to the electorate what corporations are learning to do, so Government—or, better, Big Government, Big Brother, Intrusive Government—becomes the image against which this candidate defines himself.

At which point another voice answers:

This describes Reagan even better than Bush (*TPK*, 147)

This is a clear example of how Wallace’s social conservatism has altered in his fiction since ‘Lyndon’. Protest, unlike in the earlier story, is now depicted as holding a prelapsarian quality of civic citizenship, which has *then* become hopelessly compromised by incipient neoliberal deregulation. By placing the most explicitly political section of the novel in Reagan’s election year, it’s clear that Wallace sees 1980 as year zero for the full blown civic/salesmanship split in American politics, a point which is then made in flatly undramatized fashion:

Of course the marvellous double irony of the Reduce Government candidate is that he’s financed by the corporations […] who are going to benefit enormously from the laissez-faire deregulation Bush-Reagan will enable the electorate to believe will be undertaken in their own populist interests (*TPK*, 149)

In *The Pale King,* Wallace’s conservative squeamishness about 1960s protest migrates instead to the liberal culture of the 1970s, which is explored in highly ambivalent fashion in the chapter that depicts the perpetually stoned Chris Fogle and the break-up of his parents. That “rebellion as fashion” which Wallace chides in ‘Hail the Returning Dragon’ has now become manifest in the afterimages of 60s counterculture which are now, on Wallace’s timeframe, more directly linked with the rise of neoliberalism.

**Reagan as Character: ‘Wickedness’**

Around the same time that Wallace was writing *The Pale King*, he was working on a short story called ‘Wickedness’ which was to feature Reagan as a character. The draft of ‘Wickedness’ is messily handwritten and is only 11 pages long, with no ending and no strong indication of a planned structure. What does exist tells the story of an undercover reporter, Chet Skyles, who is employed by a website named Filth.com. Skyles is being interviewed for a job at the San Placido Institute, where the Alzheimer’s-afflicted Reagan is being cared for. Skyles is being paid by Filth.com to take photographs of Reagan for the website, a situation for which the Institute have prepared by offering any employee who is approached by a media outlet a matching fee to preserve Reagan’s privacy. The premise of a journalist meeting the ailing Reagan is so similar to the epilogue to *Dutch*, published the year before Wallace wrote ‘Wickedness’, in which Edmund Morris visits a clearly unwell Reagan, that it is not unreasonable to suggest that it may have influenced this story.

Reagan’s visibility, or lack of it, is central to ‘Wickedness’, in which Nancy Reagan wants Reagan to “disintegrate in total private”.[[17]](#footnote-17) Reagan’s Alzheimer’s removed his primary presidential quality; the ability to perform publicly. Perhaps as a result of this, Reagan does not himself appear in the story, and is referred to only through secondary reports, in a form that recalls the lateral descriptions by Ballard:

The president no longer recognised loved ones. The president wept for hours at a time. The president threw fits and had to be restrained […] The president had bitten an RN. The president had become incontinent. The president sat cross-legged in the corner playing with his feet and making sounds like a litter of puppies.[[18]](#footnote-18)

In a sense, ‘Wickedness’ performs the same scenario as ‘Lyndon’ – the relationship between a protagonist and a president in private. But Skyles’ threat to make Reagan’s indignity public changes the balance of power from ‘Lyndon’, where presidential idiosyncrasies are always presented firmly behind closed doors. In ‘Wickedness’ the intimacy of ‘Lyndon’s final tableaux, involving the dying president, is non-consensually converted into public property in the world of the story.

In ‘Wickedness’ Wallace draws together those motifs of suffering, responsibility and salesmanship in a new configuration. The story flips the fixation on the necessary suffering of the citizen from ‘Lyndon’ by giving Skyles the power to unnecessarily make public the suffering of the ex-president. It’s clear that Wallace sees this public commodification – essentially, being a salesman of suffering – as a fundamental betrayal of the understanding and empathy that suffering affords. I suspect that one of the reasons that ‘Wickedness’ remained unfinished is because Wallace found a better home for its concerns – the journalist protagonist, the public commodification of pain – in ‘The Suffering Channel’.

However, in ‘The Suffering Channel’ the images of pain are not focused around a single figure, and in conclusion I want to suggest that the use of Reagan in ‘Wickedness’ dramatizes the metastasising of Reagan’s salesmanship into all corners of public and private life. In the description of Filth.com we can infer that the unregulated market that produces mercenaries like Skyles is at least in part a product of the Reagan era itself. Nobody knows “who or what owned filth.com”, and the Institute is engaged in a continuous battle to prevent employees taking pictures of Reagan to be sold to the highest bidder.[[19]](#footnote-19) In the story, the major tabloids have all refused to consider publishing photos of Reagan but the internet, which is presented here as effectively stateless and bodiless, offers a platform for publication. In effect, the publishing of photos of Reagan by filth.com represents a complete separation between civics and salesmanship by positing the public debasement of the former head of state for money.

It would be glib to suggest that ‘Wickedness’ is Wallace’s revenge on Reagan for his facilitation of the slow separation between the civic and the neoliberal. Instead, to close, I think it’s important that when we think about Wallace’s ‘presidential’ writing, we consider that separation as fundamental to Wallace’s political ethics, and that Reagan is an immensely important figure in the development of those ethics. Reagan’s victimhood in ‘Wickedness’ is, on this view, *proof* of the inertia of neoliberal commodification and its erosion of the civic. While this position does not necessarily make Wallace a liberal, it does help us to understand how crucial the Reagan era is to his fiction and his ideas of political leadership.

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1. Morris, *Dutch*, pp.vii-viii [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Morris, *Dutch*, pp.viii-ix [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ballard, *Atrocity* , p.167 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p.6 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Baudrillard, *America*, p.109 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid, p.227 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid, p.227 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Max, Every Love Story, p.259 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Karmodi, Frightening Time [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Jeffrey Severs has produced the fullest analysis of Wallace’s relationship to the New Deal in *Fictions of Value*, in which he believes that Wallace’s interest relates to a time ‘when the nation relearned the meaning of monetary value and submitted to its profound intertwining with the civic’ (63). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. La Ganga, First Lady [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Wills, *Reagan’s America,* p.305 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. It is also useful to read Gentle’s stewardship of ONAN in the context of Wallace’s decision to vote for Ross Perot, who opposed the North American Free Trade Agreement (or NAFTA), which ONAN clearly parodies. While it was Clinton, and not Reagan, who implemented NAFTA, the movement toward international free trade agreements that is lampooned in ONAN, and Wallace’s vote for Perot, make it clear that in the mid-90s he was still occupying a broadly conservative but anti-neoliberal position. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. On this score, Wallace’s position on Vietnam seems not to have shifted too much since the late 1980s. He still seems more comfortable with the selflessness of the soldier, and in both this essay and in ‘Lyndon’ Wallace doesn’t spend significant time considering the plight of the Vietnamese citizen. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Godden and Szalay, ‘The Bodies in the Bubble’ and Boswell, ‘Trickle Down Citizenship’ [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Wills, *Innocents at Home*, p.xxii [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Wallace, *The Pale King*. Draft Materials. Box 39.5. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
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19. Wallace, *The Pale King*. Draft Materials. Box 39.5. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)