

## Pull-Quotable

I am forgoing writing about a novel by Curtis White *Memories of My Father Watching TV*, having realized I'm not cut out for that – close textual analysis isn't easy people. I found out about the novel in the author's byline punctuating 'The Wrong Idea', an article of White's I read in *Bookforum*. The gist of it is that postmodern academia way-overemphasized the Derrida-derived edict 'Thou shall not essentialize', resulting, ironically, in a diminished interest in close textual analysis. My decision to purchase and subsequently read White's novel was affirmed by the praise on its cover, a quote by novelist David Foster Wallace (whom I shamelessly idolize) who has written a brilliant essay about TV watching,<sup>1</sup> and who most recently has wooed me with another genius chunk of journalism addressing the potentially drab topic of lexicography.

White's *Bookforum* essay seemed to end too soon. Maybe it was zealously edited; you never know. I once had the phrase, 'fuck the system and the media' reduced to 'fuck the system', maybe to save three millimeters of space, who can say. I heard that at least one contributor to MOCA's *Public Offerings* catalogue had substantial portions of their writing deleted in order to accommodate the design – a downsizing of content due to an up-sizing in font size. The huge fonts end up pull-quotifying a good portion of the essays, and despite the down-with-content message it sends, the girth of some sentences may end up being rather useful, for the re-readers and mere skimmers alike.

Say you were merely skimming through White's article, you probably wouldn't miss the following pull quote: 'What is surprising is the degree to which professional literary critics, especially academics, have substantially abdicated their role as analysts and theorists of an art form.' I started to consider White's pull-quote in relation to the almost entirely pull-quoted texts of *Public Offerings*, specifically the ones by Lane Relyea and editor Howard Singerman. These art historians theorized about an art world rather than art forms per se, and, incisive results aside, I got a vague feeling that the move away from art forms toward art careers was a big downer. (Lane Relyea even admitted his essay was depressing

– not after the fact, he actually wrote it in his essay.) I don't know a lot about the critics and academics White was referring to, but my guess is that as far as art writers are concerned, it may be less about giving up responsibility and more about such responsibility being phased out.

In his online magazine *Context*, Curtis White suggests that in lieu of serious aesthetic judgements, our options have been reduced to liking and not liking – 'a perfect state of affairs for a culture that thrives on thoughtless and ephemeral enthusiasms.' Would you say he's overexaggerating? Did you know 'overexaggerating' is not a word? I used to use it constantly until someone called my attention to the fact that it was not only redundant, but incorrect. After this didactic demonstration, I stand corrected – and so should you, especially if you go around saying 'orientated' when what you really mean is 'oriented.' For stuff like this there are dictionaries of English usage. I have never used one (perhaps you've noticed), but I found David Foster Wallace's discussion of them to be riveting.<sup>2</sup>

As you might expect, there's way more in his article, 'Tense Present: Democracy, English, and the Wars over Usage,' than I'm willing to take on, but one of the basic themes involves the two kinds of dictionary writers, those who prescribe and those who describe. The structural linguists are the 'descriptives.' Wallace says they're 'census-takers who happen to misconstrue the importance of observed facts – it's not scientific phenomenon they're tabulating but rather a set of human behaviors and a lot of human behaviors are – to be blunt – moronic.' More generally speaking, 'prescriptives' are involved with the rules of language, its standards. As we know, words and rules are not hard-and-fast, and morph over time through usage. It would behoove us to dedicate some time, however, to considering the differences between morphing and erosion.

A forest-y path of footnotes runs along the bottom of 'Tense Present', from start to finish. Way down there, Wallace demonstrates Wittgenstein's assertion that there is no such

1 Published in David Foster Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never do Again*, Little, Brown & Co., 1997

2 D.F. Wallace, 'Tense Present: Democracy, English, and the Wars over Usage', (*Harper's*, April 2001, pp.39-58)

thing as private language by way of a flashback inducing rumination on what he calls *Cannabic Solipsism*.<sup>3</sup> A footnote also explains how he became a language snob, what he terms 'a SNOOT,' which in many ways is the driving force of the essay, graciously tempered, however, with a very respectable and informative 'Democratic Spirit', something that can be described as intellectual fairplay for the sake of avoiding blind, camp-based advocacy. As a youngster, Wallace was forced to play certain grammar-related games MC'd by his mother, a composition teacher. This scenario suggests a brainy coziness reminiscent of J.D. Salinger's Glass family of smarties, all of whom competed on a quiz show called 'It's a Wise Child.' Incidentally, Wallace has a story called 'Little Expressionless Animals'<sup>4</sup> which deals explicitly with the TV quiz show *Jeopardy!* and the freakishly long and impressive winning streak of a factoid-rich lesbian. Recently I had access to something called the Game Show Channel. I watched as many reruns of a '70s show called *Matchgame* as I could – however, I found that I had to sit through way too many episodes of *Hollywood Showdown*. (Had to?) The object of *Matchgame* is to come up with a word to fill a blank in order to most artfully complete a quip with said blank in it. A panel of comedic celebrities, in various stages of intoxication, do the same, and then answers are compared in hopes of obtaining matches. The object of *Hollywood Showdown*, a '90s show, is to know anything and everything about the entertainment industry. What this means is nobody ever wins because there's such a startlingly wide spectrum of completely inconsequential trivia. The point and subsequent humor of the somewhat salacious *Matchgame* is in the relative proximity between the least and most meaningful answers – between a total 'boner' (in the original sense) and a 'definitive answer' – definitiveness being contingent on concise funniness. With *Hollywood Showdown*, a contestant either knows, for example, the second-best grossing romantic comedy from the summer of 1988, or they don't. The recurrent juxtaposition of these two diametrically opposed programs reinforced my suspicion that forming sentences that don't serve a PR purpose is becoming less and less necessary, less and less joyful, and more and more

distrusted. This suspicion is not alien to the aforementioned catalogue essays and you could even say it surfaces, at least in the footnotes, in Wallace's *Tense Present*.

Demonstrating what Habermas called a 'crisis of legitimation' Singerman asks a question we artists may be quietly posing: '...how can the name "art" still be meaningful, still necessary in the face of its freedom, in the face of "everything?"' David Foster Wallace refers to this as a climate of anything goes, calling it 'the bequest' of postmodern and post-structuralist critics; such a climate leaves a good many artists rushing forward toward no goal. Wallace also makes an interesting point about the relationship between TV and art: 'I think TV promulgates the idea that good art is just art which makes people like and depend on the vehicle that brings them the art.'<sup>6</sup> Sitting in on a MOCA gallery talk at *Public Offerings* I started to wonder if much of the frustration the audience members exhibited was due to their not being helped to comprehend what the show added up to, what it all meant, aside from the metaphorical implications of its Wall Street-oriented title. My sense is that for many, the exhibition and much of the work points to its own system of delivery, not unlike *Hollywood Showdown*, leaving it with no reason, or airtime for that matter, to meander in the uncharted grounds between wrong and right, popular and unpopular, between being liked or not.

So, in the end, how could I, or why should you, possibly sympathize with a language snob like Wallace? When you read his essay, and you really should, you too may aspire to SNOOTitude. Think of it this way: when you play tennis with someone who is better than you, you play better; when you play with someone who isn't so good, you play worse, get frustrated, and chase more balls than you hit. So, whom exactly do we expect to take responsibility for making a challenging and satisfying game possible?

3 Cannabic meaning pot-induced

4 David Foster Wallace, *Girl With Curious Hair*, W.W. Norton & Co., New York, 1999

5 Vocabulary I learned in Wallace's essay; fancier word for this is 'solecism'

6 Interview by Larry McCaffery, n.d.