
'This isn't one to be told / in the third person': Wallace's Life-Stories

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This isn't one to be told
in the third person,
though we keep on trying to.
(*'Intervals' TSPG*)

The stories we tell ourselves determine a great deal: what we understand of our past, how we view our present, what we think is possible or impossible.
(Wallace in *KWS* 21 February 1989)

I. Prologue: in the first person

It is Wednesday night, December 6, 1989. With the supper dishes cleared away and the kids finally in bed, I return to the pile of newspaper articles on my desk. A former student now living in Kingston has photocopied for me the entire run of Wallace's 'In Other Words' column in the *Kingston Whig Standard*, and having read the columns for May through August 1987 that afternoon, I now eagerly resume my reading. Wallace's column for 14 September 1987 is entitled 'Double-edged fun' and tells of a nightclub in Toronto where the major entertainment used to be a gold-fish swallowing contest, until an inspector for the Ontario Humane Society intervened, and suggested that instead of 'exploiting fish for the purpose of creating business' the club 'get into a wet T-shirt contest.' 'And if you thought *that* was entertaining,' Wallace moves right on, 'you oughta love this piece, also sent to me by a reader...It's about what's referred to as an "upscale strip club" in Dearborn Mich., where they have a wet T-shirt contest with a twist. In this one, the men in the club are given pretend Uzi submachineguns filled with water to shoot at the dancers. Yes, you read it right. The men shoot water guns at the dancers. For fun.' The owner of the club, it is reported, sees this form of entertainment as a chance for his customers to relax, and doesn't think his 'entertainment' has anything to do with hostility towards women: "I don't think these guys are hostile to women. Look at the expressions on their faces. *They're smiling.* It's all a game and women are part of the game — they're the object that's up there" (emphasis added [with great sadness, anger, and apprehension]).

I'm staring at Wallace's concluding words 'Having fun ... Shooting women for fun,' when the phone rings, and within seconds a gasp from the TV room, I rush

in, only to find myself staring at images of the nightmare turned reality, the figure literalized. This time the horrific game had been played in earnest. The same relaxed attitude, though, the same smile, only with a real gun, and leaving a death toll of fourteen. Engineering students, all women. A male witness tells the journalists a few hours later: 'He came in quietly, ... And he told us to stop what we were doing. Everyone thought it was a joke. He was smiling at us. He was very calm.... He then told the students to separate into two groups. Women on one side, men on the other. *He was still smiling*' (*The Gazette* 7 December 1989; emphasis added [as above, now also with grief and the resolve to heed Wallace's feminist call: 'keep on keeping on'])).¹

II. *After the date, the place*

A poet of place... a poet of her own place. (Dennis Lee)

Wallace has given us words to rejoice in, words to live by and mourn with:

Some people are a country
and their deaths displace you.
Everything you shared with them
reminds you of it: part of you in exile
for the rest of your life.
(*'Coming Through'* CM)

Wallace's words. Words that tell a 'story in a foreign language' we come to recognize as another's life ('The Town Where I Grew Up' CM); words with which to speak of the places 'we come to call home' ('Distance from Harrowsmith to Tamworth' CM); words disfigured by the horror of lives like Marilyn's 'aged 7, / her arm crushed because she caught it / in a wringer washer, where she was left, / alone like that, for three days' ('Intervals' TSPG); paradoxical words that speak of 'the silence words get lost in / after they've been spoken' ('Into The Midst of It' CM); words pregnant with 'that kind of love that's partly tenderness / and partly a sort of confidence / you can't put words around' ('Into The Midst of It' CM); the kind of love 'we risk for each other' ('Mexican Sunsets' CM), the kind of 'gentleness we learn / from what we can't heal' ('What it Comes to Mean' CM). Borrowing and re-framing Wallace's words, I begin to introduce myself into the conversation. The conversation at Bronwen's place²: where women enter 'each other's lives / as if they were countries'; where we are drawn into 'the very centre' of each other's 'words / where the real stories [live]' ('Coming Through' CM).

There is a landscape I love, the yellow-brown dune plains of the Negev, Israel's southern desert, and that love has taught me the beauty of maps and their uses. Texts of our desire to 'belong somewhere' ('Lonely for the Country' CM), maps keep records of our dislocations and relocations; negotiating for us the indifference of topography, they measure the distances we chose to live by. I think of the

Negev as I follow Wallace back to her 'place of origin,' as I embrace the lessons her love of that place has taught her: that 'there's always another coming to terms' ('Place of Origin' *CM*), that it's what we have never seen before that we recognize,³ that experience is accidental – overdetermined yet subject to change (changing and changed by the subject) – in the sense of being 'that juncture between / what happens to you / and what you have to meet it with' ('Burn-Out' *TSPG*). It is of this experience and that juncture that Wallace writes in an idiom that explores a subject's positioning – both literal and figurative – in the world. Hers is a rich and suggestive tropography – a landscape of tropes, a figuring of space – in which a road curves 'without warning / like a change of heart' ('In the Midst of It' *CM*), in which a chance gesture 'Reveals the intricate countries / Deep within' another's eyes ('Common Magic' *CM*). The powerfully evocative penultimate poem of *The Stubborn Particulars of Grace* is paradigmatic in this respect, celebrating a subject who lives by continuously challenging and interrogating her relation to a space that is always only half given, half waiting to be made up:

Re-mapping my life

...

... bright filaments

of light or sound the body moves to

in the dance it makes through what it's given

what it's trying to become,

just as I dance on a Saturday afternoon

in an empty house, for hours sometimes,

all the selves I am ambiguous

and incomplete, as always,

as the same old rhythms rise

and change and relocate themselves,

keeping it up, keeping on

for as long as I do.

('Lifelines' *TSPG*)

What follows are observations about some of these dance steps, notes from chance meetings with some of these selves, and only the faintest echoes of a desire to be transported by the dance.

III. Why Wallace didn't (always) write short stories: the voice of the narrative poem

In an essay Wallace wrote in 1988, suggestively entitled 'Why I Don't (Always) Write Short Stories,' she explores her interest in story-telling and examines her practice as a narrative poet. Commenting on her poem 'Appeal' (the prologue poem of *The Stubborn Particulars of Grace* which serves as an example in the essay),

Wallace identifies with its speaker; like the poem's narrator who remembers herself as a young girl trying to make sense of an alien adult world, Wallace the poet-essayist puzzles over childhood stories, remembering not so much 'the stories themselves' as 'the way in which they were told' (72). In the remembered 'laughter, response, contradiction, argument' she recognizes the raw materials of her art: to them she has been bearing testimony, through them she has sought, in her turn, to solicit the laughter and argument of others.

John Berger's essay 'The Story Teller' articulates for Wallace a vision she also embraces as her own. It is a vision of storytelling as fulfilling a vital function within the community, representing the community to itself by testifying, in Berger's words, to 'the always slightly surprising range of the possible.' Like the stories told in the peasant communities Berger describes, the stories Wallace remembers and wants to write invite their listeners to respond and encourage them to tell their own tales; the aunts and uncles in 'Appeal' are such prototypical listeners / readers, 'used / to make an anecdote or a bit of gossip / into the story of their lives.' Wallace quotes Berger at some length in her essay, weaving his words into the fabric of her particular argument, and in the process enacting the very dialogism of which he speaks.⁴ She cites Berger:

The story involves comment. Indeed it creates it...the comments, which add to the story, are intended and taken as the commentator's personal response – in the light of that story – to the riddle of existence. Each story allows everyone to define himself. (73)

'Or herself,' Wallace adds, modifying Berger's narrative by embedding it in her own. With this gesture, Wallace defines her own community and identifies the particular (yet common) 'riddle of existence' with which this community presents her – 'I write from what I am given' (77) – and which gets her poems 'to move' (74). The stories she heard and now writes are stories about 'women's lives *and* women's bodies'; stories that move differently:

around *things* and tasks. Was the turkey done? Do you think I should add more sat to these peas?...the story's ability to move through and use these diversions was itself a testimony to the power of the teller as well as of the listener...The atmosphere of those kitchens was always, as I remember it, electric. A sense of subversion was clearly palpable. And this had to do, not only with the events of the story, but with how the telling moved through it, picking up the diversions and interruptions, comments and digressions, as it went along. That is what I hear when I am writing my poems. And that is how I try to write them. (74)

The power Wallace perceives in the women's talk and from which she draws for her poetry is the power of an individual life framed by a shared experience, that of a singular voice in conversation with others. Wallace says of this voice:

the voice of the narrative poem – as I hear and try to write it – is *somewhat* collective. I say somewhat collective, because I recognize that it is also private, specific to a particular person in a particular place, at a particular time. I say *collective* because I want to convey that it is most emphatically not ‘universal’, in the sense of Universal Human experience.... But we do have a collective experience... in which the whole grows from, but does not transcend, its separate parts. (76)

This negotiation between the common and the particular, the personal and the collective – which is at the heart of Wallace’s poetics and which is my particular concern in this paper – shapes Wallace’s essay-cum-poetic-manifesto as well. In a move towards the end of her essay that intriguingly parallels a crucial shift in the narrative positionality of the speaker in ‘Appeal’ (the poem contained within this essay), Wallace turns to address her reader directly. An illustration of her grandmother’s ‘home-grown’ story-telling conventions (which Wallace christens ‘the Classical Geneological Digression’ and ‘the Past History Digression’) turns into a conversation in which the reader finds herself gently and reassuringly interpellated: ‘*you* know what I mean, I’m sure... *You* also recognize, by this time I hope, that that too is part of the story... Get it? That’s how I try to get my poems to move. That’s what I want *you* to hear – and encounter – in your own life’ (74; emphasis added). The added emphasis is the beginning of my appropriation of Wallace’s story as I respond to her invitation to join the conversation (and pursue my own stubborn argument). ‘You also recognize, by this time I hope, that that too is part of the story.’ What is part of which story? (A shifty shifter will do it every time). Wallace’s digressive prose becomes a breeding ground for referents which soon have us surrounded by proliferating hermeneutic possibilities: ‘that’ are the digressions which ‘too [are] part of [the grandmother’s] story’; ‘that’ is also the story – about the grandmother’s digressions – which ‘too is part of [Wallace’s] story [about why she doesn’t always write short stories]’; finally, for me, ‘that [you] too is part of the story.’ The ‘you’ in Wallace’s story is, in fact, an important part of the story I want to tell.

‘You’ figures in stories which aren’t to be ‘told / in the third person’ nor exclusively in the first. The ‘you’ we encounter in the concluding passages of Wallace’s essay has been anticipated by the figure which makes its appearance in the last verse-paragraph of ‘Appeal,’ the poem, we remember, which is ‘at the beginning’ (70) of this essay (its textual mother). ‘At night I offer you,’ speaks the narrator, and ‘you’ is brought into existence (a new character is born) through a literal act of generosity – an offering – and in a manner which startles us into a recognition of the slippery boundaries of the category of the person in this poem.

A night I offer you, those faces
cupped by darkness, lake and shoreline

as a hand cups a match for a moment
 it is needed, even in a light wind,
 unable to tell you more or why.

The intimacy shared by 'I' and 'you' is illuminated by other, recollected, intimacies, and in turn illuminates yet another intimacy, that between speaker and reader. The 'match' sends us back to the face of the mother 'laughing in the match flare,' and the lit-up faces of the two couples (mother and father, Helen and Frank the Americans). The remembered faces which 'burn through [the speaker's] memory,' bring with them a knowledge of love: love which is the rediscovery of that 'something we thought we'd lost / to the work of simply getting by.' Love watched on the faces of others which teaches one; love which is

the weariness
 and caring and surprise that brought me here
 and from which I watch my own kid
 take his bearings from some act of mine,
 caught briefly, at a distance
 further than that night seems now.

Measuring distances, the poem invokes and identifies them not as hostile barriers but rather as enabling forces: travelling these distances is the very movement of life. The rekindled match becomes our beacon, guiding us along paths that link past and present, childhood and adulthood, the daughter's inquiring gaze and the mother's watchful scrutiny. Travelling, we are gently guided along different positions of the subject: I, we, you, they. By the end of the poem we have come not so much full circle as around and up a winding spiral. The poem opens with a collectivity – 'all of us for dinner at Grandma's' – from which an individual is released to claim membership and filiation ('my dad,' 'my grandmother'), as well as autonomy and separateness of vision ('I look at my mother,' 'I watch my own kid'). As 'we' begets 'I,' 'I' begets 'they' and 'you,' and by the end of the poem, a certain porousness of the category of the person is intimated, promising a freer flow of lived stories and told lives. No longer the discreet entities of the opening family tableau, the individuals who make up the 'we' of the poem's closing lines know the hope of moving through another's life to reach deeper into their own:

As if they hoped to find
 that opening in each of us
 from which, long after we'd been told
 what happened next, they could begin
 their slower, more miraculous
 returns.

IV. 'In each voice, many other voices speak': Wallace's Other Words

Each voice is both the expression of what is unique in the speaker and the evocation of what is shared with others....In each voice, many other voices speak.⁵

Wallace's weekly column in the *Kingston Whig Standard*, 'In Other Words,' appeared on Mondays from May 1987 to September 1988, and from January 1989 to February 1989. Wallace's first column, entitled 'Feminists, like explorers, spend their lives venturing into unknown territory' (4 May 1987), perfectly exemplifies the concerns, overall design, and voice that will become characteristic of the column. The essay begins and ends in the dialogic mode, establishing this space of writing as a site of conversation and dialogue, a contestatory space that calls upon writer and reader alike to engage in an ongoing process of interrogation and self-scrutiny. This is how this first piece opens:

NOT LONG AGO, someone asked me how I became a feminist. We had just met and were having our first conversation during a coffee break, in the middle of a busy day. I tried to answer her, but 15 minutes just wasn't enough.

'Think about it,' my new friend said, as she got up to rinse her cup, 'maybe you could write me a letter sometime.'

She was half joking, but now that I have thought about it, a letter seems a very good idea.

Dear Susan,

Wallace's inaugurating gesture does much more than announce the column's explicitly feminist orientation. It immediately interpellates us as interlocutors, new friends / participants in a conversation that has started with a question addressed to the writer (by that other 'new friend' who stands in for us), is continuing now as the writer responds to that question in her readers' / our presence, and will close, open-endedly, with an invitation urging us to keep the conversation going: 'Now, how do you respond to my answer?' The essay is dialogic not only in form but in content as well. Wallace's answer to Susan is that she hasn't so much become a feminist as is 'becoming one,' and that the process involves both a commitment to venturing into the unknown territories of women's past and possible futures, and a commitment to safeguarding the integrity of such an exploration by constantly putting conviction to the test of experience. Here, as often elsewhere in her poetry and journalistic prose, Wallace uses the figurative cluster 'unknown territory / map' to underscore these twin imperatives and to reiterate a plea for a more mobile, less fixed positioning of the subject in the world. She writes:

strong convictions are a lot like maps. They guide us through the world, certainly, but they have to be checked, constantly, for accuracy. There's a lot of

unknown territory out there; new routes have to be charted, whole countries named...[as a woman poet] I have very few models to learn from. There are no maps here; each poem is an entrance into an uncharted territory ... In that sense, feminism is a relocation; you take up a new place in the world.

The strong markers of Wallace's voice and vision are clearly present in this first column. Hers is the voice and vision of an individual agent (a 'discerned' subject),* shuttling between the personal and the collective, thinking through individual experience to reach out to the lives of others, recognizing in the changing patterns of social life and one's embeddedness in them the forces that mould a particular existence. Wallace speaks of her involvement in the 60s with the Student Union for Peace Action, of getting involved in 1973, when pregnant with her son, with a Lamaze group, of being a mother; and a poet, and a counsellor at Kingston Interval House. This account of the past privileges interrogation over assertion; 'we started with questions,' she writes, and proceeds with a long list that touches on issues from childbirth to university curricula and incest, and opens with 'Why does no one listen to us?' It is also an account that privileges dialogue over statement, one that recognizes difference and encourages inclusiveness. Speaking in the feminist first person singular, Wallace moves freely between a number of subject positions: as the addressee of another woman's speech, as an 'I' contained by the communal identities of various 'we's (including an inclusive human one: 'For each of us, male or female, asking such questions opens new perspectives'), as a teller and an instigator / solicitor of the discourses of others ('Now, how do you respond to my answer?').

The conversation continues the following Monday, and every Monday after that (with one hiatus) for two years. It is indeed a conversation, with Wallace often taking her cue from the words of another – words spoken in anger or joy, serenity or puzzlement, pain or exhilaration – adding hers to theirs and provoking ours in the process. Wallace's column for 11 May 1987, for example, is generated by a conversation that gains in momentum as Wallace allows herself to be challenged into some hard thinking about the prospect of subsidized transition housing for abused women and children:

'*WHY DON'T* you write about Block D?' Elizabeth suggested when I asked for ideas for this column, 'You know, a feminist proposal for Block D.' My first reaction was unenthusiastic. ... Still, it was worth asking other women what they thought. At a party a few weeks ago I tried... What this conversation *did* do was make me ask some serious questions.

What this documented conversation does for us, in turn, is to recreate a process by which new perspectives open up and a new self-understanding emerges: '[studies have found that] women who are the primary caregivers of young children have extremely complex mental maps of the cities they live in, more complex, in fact,

than men who work at full-time jobs....women with young children are very aware of the dangers of their urban surroundings.' It is a process that is forward-looking as well as introspective; in this case, it leads the women to collectively consider what an hospitable urban environment for women and children might look like. Most significantly, perhaps, it is a process that is dialogic in form and community-oriented in character; Wallace's concluding lines symptomatically foreground 'community,' 'conversation,' and a communicative gesture meant to ensure that the process will be on-going: 'The fact that our ideas stressed feelings of community, as sharing space with children *as equals* is important....My conversations made me look at the city I live in in a new way. And I'd like to pursue the idea of a Feminist Proposal for Block D further. Any suggestions, anyone?'

It is interesting to note here that Wallace's self-description as a writer is similarly inspired by the imperatives of responsiveness and responsibility which characterize the conversational model. In a piece entitled 'Reader response makes the "isolated" writer feel integral to community' (19 October 1987), Wallace speaks of the affinities between writing and conversation. Even in the case of the more solitary experience of poetry writing, there is, for Wallace, at the time of her work's reception, 'a sense of a conversation, begun years ago, finally completing itself as words or questions that I put forward earlier finally receive a response.' This self-positioning in a dialogic chain that continuously renews itself, and that continuously renews the vital links binding individual and community, is facilitated by the format of the weekly column: 'My sense of being involved in an *extended communal conversation* grows weekly as readers respond to what I say and I incorporate their ideas into my next piece and they have something to say about that....The conversation we are having expands, grows more complex. It could go on for quite a while' (emphasis added).

'Women's talk,' which Wallace takes up in her column of 4 August 1987 entitled 'Children add piquancy to flow of conversation wherever women gather,' provides Wallace with a model for a feminist intersubjective mode of communication and interaction. In the first instance, women's talk is embedded in the fabric of everyday existence, it moves to the rhythm of 'the nitty gritty facts of dirty dishes and hungry babies,' and is marked by a flexibility 'that allows it to keep flowing around a thousand interruptions without anything being missed.' A communicative mode rooted in experience, it significantly allows for the expression of both individual difference and collective identity. Women's talk inhabits that discursive space where plurality can be recognized, but where that recognition does not come at the expense of solidarity or a sense of community:

There is seldom any arguing, for one thing; no need to debate or to interrupt each other; judgments or direct advice are seldom dished out; Instead, what happens is a kind of piecing together, from each woman's individual experience, a larger whole. The image that comes to mind is that of a patchwork

quilt... Each of us had different experiences, of course, but there was also a common thread, a recognition that what was happening to each of us was not simply private and personal. It was also part of a change in women's lives.

As Wallace's reflections, in another column, on the complex intersections of class, race and gender make clear, her understanding of collective identity and women's experience acknowledges differences among women. Drawing on the work of black American feminists like Bell Hooks and Angela Davis, Wallace reasserts that while women share an experience of male domination,

We must also recognize the diversity of experience if we are to be successful in altering the conditions that oppress women... [we must] enter the harder, more complex regions where women's experience begins to diverge and differ. I believe such journeys are necessary in order that that imagined world may become possible and whole – for all of us. (*KWS* 11 April 1988)

For Wallace women's talk, or gossip – 'that word used so often to denigrate women's conversation' (*KWS* 7 March 1988) – is more than an expressive medium suited to women's lives; it constitutes an alternative discourse and a strategy of resistance. In *Gossip*, Patricia Meyer Spacks explores a view of 'serious gossip' as a mode of communication that supports close alliance by assuming the importance of particularities but also of relationship. Drawing on thinkers like Immanuel Kant, Hannah Arendt, and Carol Gilligan, Spacks argues that this kind of gossip not only exemplifies a humanizing attention to the world and freedom in relationship, but is also of special use to subordinated classes: 'It embodies an alternative discourse to that of public life, and a discourse potentially challenging to public assumptions; it provides language for an alternative culture.... A rhetoric of inquiry, gossip questions the established' (Spacks 46). Wallace, too, sees in women's talk a crucial survival strategy, a form of resistance, and a way of circumventing a dominant idiom that subjects and subjugates: 'I prefer to see it [gossip] as the oral tradition by which women explore our collective lives. I like to think that it was gossip – those few precious minutes in the kitchen, while the men talked politics in the front room – that kept my foremothers strong and sane. Like any oral tradition, gossip is necessary when you can't read about yourself in the books your society produces' (7 March 1988).

Women's conversation thus becomes for Wallace a prototypical feminist political discourse. Such discourse engages with 'the politics of everyday,' a politics which 'involves every aspect of our 'ordinary' lives, from the food we eat to the choices we make about education or jobs' (*KWS* 31 August 1987). The 'politics of everyday' is also a 'politics of seeing', a revisionary politics that denaturalizes received ideas and re-describes the world:

the 'givens' of our culture are so deeply rooted that we accept them without question. We see the world through the eyes of our culture without question... For me, the politics of everyday involves the realization that none of these 'givens' are 'given' at all. They were created out of certain historical developments and they can be changed. They *are* changing, all the time. (KWS 31 August 1987)

A concrete example of such feminist politics, and further testimony to the need for and power of women's talk, is a support group like Mothers for Change, to which Wallace devotes her column of 18 April 1988. In the column Wallace characteristically moves from the intimate to the shared, speaking of her own experience as a mother and recording the words of other mothers, giving voice to the isolation, the mixed feelings of tenderness, desperate fatigue, anger, love, and helplessness, that are experienced by mothers of young children. The column itself, again characteristically, mixes personal account, social commentary, the narratives of other women, and information for prospective members about the activities and location of the group.

Wallace concludes a column on the pornography debate with a statement that could stand as a motto for much of her journalistic writing: 'In our conversation, we explore our differences; we don't come to any final conclusion. That's up to you' (15 June 1987). The statement captures well the multi-dimensionality of Wallace's vision: it reaffirms her commitment to collective reflection understood as a process that resists closure and depends for its vitality on the continuing presence of individual and contingent interventions. Conversation involves a negotiation of needs and interests in a life-enhancing context; reflecting on her son's education, Wallace expresses the hope that he will learn 'that "conversation" carries within it the meaning of exploring ideas *together*, rather than that of mounting a debate in which only one point of view can "win"' (8 September 1987). As Wallace sees it, the stakes are high, for conversing is nothing other than a manner of being and becoming in the world: 'According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the original meanings of the words converse and conversation carried the sense of "living or having one's being in or among" others, as well as talking with them. And there is a feeling of that, still, in the best conversations' (4 August 1987). In a follow-up article which clarifies her position against pornography legislation, Wallace pursues further this intimate interdependence of story and life, narrative and experience, the told life and the lived tale:

I see my job as a writer as trying to give expression to as much human experience as I can. Since I am a woman, much of this experience will be female and for that reason a lot of it will be previously unexpressed experience. When I look at what other women artists are doing, I know that a lot of what we have to say is going to be disturbing, frightening, ambiguous and therefore open to many interpretations. But I think we need to be able to say it, so

that other women can look at it and decide how it relates to their own lives. I know that the fear of being sued, self-censorship, would prevent some of that from happening.

We come back again and again to the opportunity for women to tell their stories. (*KWS* 22 June 1987)

Wallace's is a faith in the power of language and storytelling to serve as instruments of self-fashioning, means by which we come to understand, shape, and change our lives. Quoting American writer Jessamyn West's observation that 'fiction reveals truths that reality obscures,' Wallace comments: 'I think of it as a statement of faith in *the power of language, especially in the power of the story, to touch and change us*' (16 January 1989; emphasis added). For Wallace, the individual subject is shaped by the stories with which a culture represents itself to itself, these life-stories functioning in much the same way as 'ideology' does for Althusser: 'ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence ... it is not their real conditions of existence, their real world, the "men" "represent to themselves" in ideology, but above all it is their relation to those conditions of existence which is represented to them there' (Althusser 153-4). The possibility for resistance and change thus lies in a revisionary practice of representation, in the telling of new stories. One such story, which Wallace begins to tell through the elaboration of the oppositional and contestatory communicative model of 'women's talk,' and which she pursues further in her poetry, traces the emergence of a new feminist subject. Teresa de Lauretis's formulation of 'the subject of feminism' in *Technologies of Gender* is particularly suggestive here:

[it is] a conception or an understanding of the (female) subject as not only distinct from Woman with the capital letter, the *representation* of an essence inherent in all women ... but also distinct from women, the real, historical beings and social subjects who are defined by the technology of gender and actually engendered in social relations. The subject of feminism ... is in progress. ... [it] is at the same time inside *and* outside the ideology of gender, and conscious of being so, conscious of that twofold pull, of that division, that doubled vision (9-10)

The rhetorical model of 'conversation' which Wallace theorizes and experiments with in her feminist journalism and poetry constitutes an important oppositional strategy meant to accommodate 'that twofold pull...that double vision' which marks the subject of feminism.

V. 'You means Us': Wallace's Common Particulars

Now the tale is over and ordinary life begins. You means Us. (Wallace in *KWS* 15 August 1988)

you...the one up close i address as you and you others i cannot foresee but imagine 'you' reading in for. and then there's the you in me, the you's you address in me, writing too. not the same so much as reciprocal, moving back and forth between our sameness and differences. (Marlatt and Warland 80)

Wallace's penultimate 'In Other Words' essay – inspired by a talk given by Angela Davis which Wallace found profoundly transformative – opens with an observation about her writing voices which again articulates for us the vital negotiation between the individual and the collective, the particular and the common, so central to her vision: 'As a poet who writes rhetorical essays, I appreciate the public voice that that craft requires, a way of articulating a clear position on events and issues. As a political person who writes poetry, I know the need for the intimate, inner argument that is the centre of a poem' (21 February 1989). In either expressive mode, Wallace deals with the precious materials of told lives and lived tales, foregrounding the 'ongoing process itself, of narrating their lives as they live them,' working and reworking experience into expression, claiming for her writing 'the freedom to orchestrate chunks of separate story-lives into a larger whole' (Dennis Lee). Wallace would comment: 'I'm fascinated with how we tell the stories of our lives, how those stories finish in different ways as we retell them, relive them and rediscover their meanings' (quoted in Lacey). Using the terminology of narrative theory, we might say that it is not story or narrative – complete, unified, enclosed – that Wallace is in pursuit of, but narration – the act or process of producing such life-stories.⁷ Narration, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan has pointed out, suggests '(1) a *communication* process in which the narrative as message is transmitted by addresser to addressee and (2) the *verbal* nature of the medium used to transmit the message' (Rimmon-Kenan 2). Both these aspects are central to Wallace's poetry, to the vision and voice that shape and colour it, and to the faith that sustains it. The vision which informs the poetry explores and celebrates language and storytelling as the very medium of experience, as the materials and means with and by which we come to make sense of our lives: making and telling our life-stories to ourselves, to and with each other. The voice which speaks through it is the voice of the story-teller, that private voice through which many other voices speak: both addresser and addressee, initiator of discourse and gatherer of narratives, teller, listener, and enabler of the speech of others.

In storytelling, as in 'women's talk' or gossip – both forms which lend themselves to communal myth-making – the vitality of the exchange depends on a process of relatedness among the participants in the conversation; as Patricia Meyer Spacks observes, 'gossip's 'I's inevitably turn into a *we*' (261). In Wallace's poetry both aspects of 'women's talk' – as means of personal and communal self-representation, and as a dialogic form which moves freely between the different poles of the person (first and second person, singular and plural) – are explored. Another 'in Other Words' piece suggests the range of thematic and formal concerns which this vision involves and which informs Wallace's poetry.

Halfway through a column entitled 'Shielding secrets: A moral tale,' Wallace startles us out of our readerly detachment by pronouncing: 'You means Us' (15 August 1988). This moment of double exposure – in which writer and reader find themselves similarly implicated in those 'messy details by which most of us live our lives' (6 July 1987) – and the narrative in which it is embedded exemplify a crucial dimension of Wallace's vision and voice. The column opens with the soothingly formulaic 'Once upon a time, in the little town of Anywhere, was a street called Couldbeyours. On this street lived several families of various shapes and sizes.' It proceeds to tell the stories of some of these families who 'like you and me' share the joys and irritations of an ordinary existence, 'and something else: secrets. Every family had one. And every family worked very hard – harder than they worked at anything else, really – at making sure that no one else knew their secret.' The B. Family hides Mr. B.'s alcoholism, Mrs. C's secret is her daughter's lesbianism, the K.'s their son's drug problem, and so on. Wallace's authorial intervention in mid-column alerts us to her use of a particular rhetorical strategy calculated to both communicate a message and bring about a re-positioning of the projected receiver of that message:

You'll notice I've started saying 'you' now, instead of talking about the C.s and the Y.s and the others on Couldbeyours St. I started out writing this like a moral tale but now the tale is over and ordinary life begins. You means Us.

In this column the non-personal narrative featuring 'them' is framed by the personal, dialogic narrative which brings together writer and reader, 'I' and 'you', narrative and experience.⁸ Wallace establishes this frame-narrative at the outset – the families on Couldbeyours St. are 'like you and me' – so that when 'you' reappears ('you can see how life goes on Couldbeyours St.') it is a familiar presence to us, our familiar 'other' who stands in for us in the fictional world of Anywhere. This narrative device has the effect of moving the narrative in a way which works to undo the hierarchical dichotomy of subject and object, teller and tale, speaker and listener. On another level, this movement is further supported by the narrative's temporal organization. Challenging narrative's presumption of transcendence (the ironic 'Once upon a time'), Wallace's time scheme uproots us from our comfortable position as observers of the past, to re-settle us in that unsettling region which is the antecedent of the present ('last night'), to finally leave us facing the inescapable urgency of the moment: 'you are afraid.' As an instance of intersubjective communication, the narrative moves from the enunciating 'I' to the observed 'they' to the addressed 'you' to a collectively assumed 'we', thus culminating in a gesture which bespeaks faith in both the individual's power to resist and the collective's power to bring about change: 'We have to stop keeping secrets. ...we have to change.'

Like Wallace's 'moral tale,' many of the poems in *Common Magic* and *The Stubborn Particulars of Grace* trace and re-trace this itinerary from 'I' through 'he / she

/ they' to 'you' to 'we'. The French writer and lesbian theorist Monique Wittig has said of her first book, *The Opoponax*, that she often thinks of it as 'a reverie about the beautiful analysis of the pronouns *je* and *tu* by the linguist Emile Benveniste' (10). For me (or would it be more appropriate to say: 'in the intertextual space that this paper inhabits?'), Wallace's poetry bears a similar relation to Benveniste's discussion of subjectivity in language, and it is to this discussion and to Wittig's feminist appropriation of it that I would like to turn briefly before returning to the poetry. In 'Subjectivity in Language' Benveniste identifies 'subjectivity' as a possibility materialized through the linguistic category of the 'person': 'It is in and through language that man [sic] constitutes himself as a subject' (224). Benveniste understands this subjectivity to be not a static, immanent attribute of being, but rather a relational, dynamic process through which one can provisionally accede to the status of a 'subject' *by recognizing another*: 'Consciousness of self is only possible if it is experienced by contrast. I use *I* only when I am speaking to someone who will be a *you* in my address. It is this condition of dialogue that is constitutive of *person*, for it implies that reciprocally *I* become *you* in the address of the one who in his turn designates himself as *I*' (224). Benveniste does not see this polarity as being characterized by either equality or symmetry. The terms 'I' and 'you' are not only complementary – neither can be conceived of without the other – but also reversible. *Recognizing the other as subject thus becomes the sine qua non condition of subjecthood itself*. This understanding of subjectivity results in the dissolution of the binary paradigm 'the individual (I) / society (the other)', and a rejection of a view of subjectivity as established either 'in the individual's own consciousness' or through the agency of 'society, which as a totality would preexist the individual' (225). Instead, Benveniste proposes to view subjectivity as a 'dialectic reality that incorporates the two terms and defines them by mutual relationship' (225).

Generalizing from Benveniste's more particularly linguistic observations, Wittig reaffirms a constructionist view of language; for her, language 'casts sheaves of reality upon the social body, stamping it and violently shaping it' (4). Interrogating one form this violence takes – the gendering of subjectivity in language – Wittig sees gender as the enforcement of sex in language, and contends that it is more specifically personal pronouns that 'engineer gender through language' (7). In her own writing practice, Wittig has experimented with personal pronouns to unsettle gender in language and modify its use. Her writing has been often concerned with defamiliarizing the dominant gendering of subjectivity by universalizing the point of view of groups – like women, children, non-heterosexuals – who are 'condemned to being particular, relegated in language to a metaandric category' (7). This 'work on the subject,' as she calls it (7), has resulted in her use of unorthodox narrative focalizers:⁹ the indefinite French pronoun '*on*' (one) in *The Opoponax*, the collective plural '*elles*' in *Les Guérillères*, and the split '*j / e*' in *The Lesbian Body*.

In looking at Wallace's later poetry I would like to foreground two aspects of her voice and vision which could be seen as her particular contribution to the conversation on subjectivity in language sketched above. For Wallace, subjectivity is indeed a primary constitutive category of experience, a dynamic process itself constituted in and through language – through the making and transmission of what she calls 'life-stories' (*KWS* 23 January 1989). This process is, moreover, an intersubjective and ultimately communal one: the lived words and stories that shape a life and continue to define it, also redefine other lives in the telling. Wallace's 'reverie', then, is about the inextricability of word and flesh, story and life, experience and narrative, love and conversation, self and other: 'whether we listen or not / won't stop them from telling / our story in their own' ('Testimonies' *TSPG*).

For Wallace, words are both the shapers and shaped substance of life, and their power comes from the vitality of narrative and conversational exchange. The old woman in 'Testimonies' (*TSPG*), telling her stories in a language that is almost extinct, recognizes this power: "My stories are my wealth, / ... all I have to give / my children." Idiosyncratic ciphers in a common language, stories are privately encoded and communally decoded, just as any listener

becomes part of the story too,
just as I am added when I tell it,
as anyone will be, each version
a journey that carries us all along.
(*'Testimonies'*)

Engaging in conversation, we become like Berger's storytellers: telling our lives we construct a context within and against which others will continue to describe and redefine theirs. It is the word of another that interpellates the 'I' as subject and speaker:

A story of yours got this one going,
so I'm sending it back now, changed of course,
just as each person I love
is a relocation, where I take up
a different place in the world.
(*'Bones'* *TSPG*)

The mutual embeddedness of life-stories constitutes one of the most compelling elements of Wallace's vision for me. It provides her with an idiom with which to speak of our terrible frailty and the promise of grace. We are like the man who 'loves how his friends build their lives / into stories like that,' which love and which stories are the only antidote he knows to the paralyzing strangeness of an ordinary existence:

how can he help letting them rummage through his story,
 the new owners of a place he can't keep up anymore.
 ('The Man with the Single Miracle' *TSPG*)

Listening 'in that way that listening / can be active, when the listener re-enters / the country of her own damage / from a new direction,' we enter another's life-story, there to re-discover our own ('Bones' *TSPG*). For Wallace, we always move in our 'own seasons / through the seasons of others' ('Common Magic' *CM*), our lives forever 'unfolding into another's' ('Ordinary moving' *TSPG*).

The mutual embeddedness of life and story and of life-stories, and the dialogic quality of the conversational mode – the elements of Wallace's vision which I have been foregrounding – find their formal expression in the particular use Wallace makes of shifts in focalization through shifts in personal pronouns. *Common Magic* already provides many such examples of shifting focalization, with 'you' often used as a flexibly inclusive and mobile pronoun capable of breaking down the polarity 'person (I) / non-person (they)' and the opposition 'singular / plural'. The volume opens with a poem which launches us into an exploration of subject positions and their pronominal signs. The narrator and focalizer of 'The Town Where I Grew Up' is the 'I' of the first line, and the first part of the poem, which juxtaposes the clean and respectable town with the grotesque, almost monstrous life in the shacks north of it, closes with a pronouncement that fixes that opposition by translating it into the idiom of subjectivities assumed and denied. The shacks are to the town as 'another country' is to one's native land, as the non-person is to the person: 'Them and us.' As the narrator emerges from the pastness of childhood into the present of enunciation – 'Now' – a concomitant shift takes place in the positionality of the focalizer. For a few lines in one of the poem's concluding verse paragraphs, 'I' and 'we' give way to 'you'; the *Globe & Mail* and the *National Enquirer* are

both the same, really;
 they both line words
 like bars across the pages,
 making you want to squeeze
 between them into the white
 where you think the truth is.

The truth is in the interval between 'I' and 'they', in that space where 'I' and 'they' meet to call each other 'you' and to each assume, in turn, the self designation 'I'. 'You' is where truth is, not the fixed truth of transcendental knowledge, but the contingent, ever-shifting, particular truth of 'living things.'

Wallace has many uses for 'you', employing it in a manner similar to Wittig's use of the French indefinite *on*. 'You', like *on*, can be used to 'represent a certain

number of people successively or all at once – everybody, we, they, I, you, people, a small or large number of persons – and *still stay singular*' (Wittig 8; emphasis added). Lending itself to all kinds of substitutions of persons, 'you' not only retains the immediacy of address (interpellating us directly), but always also contains within it both the common and the particular, both the plural and the singular. It is this elasticity of the second person – its ability to articulate an intensely personal gesture (to stand in for an 'I'; in its function as a mode of address) but also to constitute an individual as a member of a group (the plural 'you') – which makes it a particularly suggestive vehicle / figure for an evolving feminist subject. In poems like 'Lonely for the Country' (CM) or 'Mexican Sunsets' (CM), for example, the 'you' is an expansive projected 'I' that easily turns into the inclusive and collective 'we':

you're beginning to suspect
that deep within *you*,
like a latent gene, is this belief
that *we* belong somewhere.
(*'Lonely for the Country'*; emphasis added)

In other poems, like 'Place of Origin,' where the singularity of the narrative 'I' is consistently maintained, 'you' functions to interpellate a reader – 'I could tell you' – but also as an evocation of a group subject. Town gossip is important because 'You can't have your daughters marrying men / who beat their wives'; the grandfather's face is a cipher that not only the narrator but a whole community knows how to interpret:

my grandfather's face,
letting you know that Toronto and Montreal
were nothing to him, he belonged right here.
Bluffing you
into believing it

This collective 'you' remind us that no subject stands alone; that knowledge, like experience, is always situated at the juncture of the private and the public, the singular and the common. Some poems in *Common Magic*, like 'Into the Midst of It' and 'Common Magic,' capture this sense by using a general, we might say, generically collective, focalized 'you'. Others, like 'Coming Through,' introduce an intensely personal and vividly particular 'you' – 'you can almost smell the coffee you'd make for her then' – that can nonetheless also accommodate a more collective modulation, becoming the voice of a shared knowledge: 'Some people are a country / and their deaths displace you.'

Wallace's writing in *Common Magic* and *The Stubborn Particulars of Grace* is intensely personal in a manner characteristic of what Rita Felski has called feminist confessional writing. Wallace's particular use of personal pronouns, and more

specifically her quite unique use of the second person, can be seen as her contribution to an ongoing feminist-expressive project to explore the voices with which such a feminist subject could speak. Felski argues that the centrality of the category of the subject to the feminist project should not be understood in terms of an appeal to an essential female self, but rather as arising out of the recognition 'that women's positioning within existing social, familial, and ideological structures differs fundamentally from that of men in distinct although often varied ways, and that the emancipation of women requires an examination of the nature and implications of such differences' (Felski 73). Feminist confessional writing undertakes an exploration of women's positioning and actively engages in the process of constituting alternative subject positions. In adding to the articulation of subjective experience an awareness of the specific problems and experiences which bind women together, 'feminist confession exemplifies the intersection between the autobiographical imperative to communicate the truth of unique individuality, and the feminist concern with the representative and intersubjective elements of women's experience' (Felski 93). The poems in *Common Magic* establish the second person as the voice of a feminist subject who speaks with the particularity of a projected 'I' and the urgency of a collective 'we'. A poem like 'Woman at the Next' (CM) is exemplary in this respect, as the focalized 'you' is both a collective witness to the (particular and representative) anger of 'the woman at the next table' who is 'talking about men,' and an individual consciousness who recognizes in that 'other' anger the merciless reminders of her own pain:

What gets you, of course,
is that you recognize the tendency
though you hate to admit it.
Hate to think of all the nights
you've spent like that,
all the mornings
waking from this dream
of your own voice
to the fumbling memory,
dead weight on the day.

The poems in Wallace's last collection refine this use of the second person by being bolder and more particularizing in the articulation of the person/s which the 'you' contains. In poems like 'Joseph MacLeod Daffodils,' 'Testimonies,' 'Food,' 'Anniversary,' 'Bones,' 'Seeing is Believing,' the reader is drawn into the center of an intense relationship between the narrating 'I' and the particular 'you' invoked. Through the use of the second person, neither the object of the narrator / focalizer's gaze (Isabel in 'Joseph MacLeod Daffodils,' Marty in 'Food,' etc.) nor the narrator's implicit addressee (the reader) is reduced to the status of non-person. As the referents of 'you' change from an explicitly named narratee ('It's what I love in

you, Isabel') to a plural / collective entity which includes us as readers ('those articles you read / ... / the ones that talk as if the future's / something you decide about'), we find ourselves interpellated as participant observers in a conversation that does not fail to acknowledge our presence. A number of poems – 'Change of Heart,' 'Burn-Out,' 'Ordinary Moving' – explicitly recreate that scene of conversation between narrator and reader: 'I'm trying to write about a change of heart, / as if some homely metaphor / about it growing sweeter, / like a piece of fruit, / is going to make it easier / to tell you / it belongs to the man in the last poem' ('Change of Heart').

I see in Wallace's extensive use of the second person, mostly as subject-focalizer in *Common Magic*, more often as the addressed subject-focalized in *The Stubborn Particulars of Grace*, a successful attempt to fashion a narrative space in which a feminist subject can re-define herself, both individually and collectively, through conversation and dialogue. I also sense that Wallace's particular attraction to the second person is deeply rooted in a need (could we possibly re-claim 'human', just for this one?) to invoke presence – the presence of 'you' without which 'I' am nought – as our only means of keeping death (its devastating traces in our lives, the knowledge of its certainty) in abeyance. In the silence before I / we speak are

the conversations
I catch myself having
with a friend who's died, when I want to say
you and mean it, unable to believe
I can't anymore.
(*'Familiars' TSPG*)

VI. Epilogue

In the aftermath of the Montreal massacre, a series of incidents are reported in various parts of the country. Symptoms that confirm the initial diagnosis. 'EDMONTON (CP) – Chants of 'Shoot the bitch! Get her off the stage!' greeted a female engineering student Wednesday who had complained about sexism in the faculty... 'It's all in fun,' said Jim Dixon, 22, a chemical engineer' (*The Gazette* 12 January 1990). 'TORONTO. Police are investigating a party thrown by a sports club that featured a parody of the massacre of 14 female engineering students in Montreal' (*The Gazette* 26 April 1990). These stories too, I know, aren't ones to be told in the third person. These stories too, as Wallace so wisely reminds us, are not 'about them, about those people' (*'Intervals' TSPG*). If their re-telling could serve a purpose, it might be to help us not

forget
how little is ever really possible
for any of us, botched

failed things to whom it may only come once
 and never clearly, that moment
 when the voice that tries to sing
 through all our stories rises, briefly,
 first person singular,
 cries *yes* and *now* and *help*
help me.

If we could only admit to the need, and learn to turn to each other for help.

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Notes

1. Wallace would often sign off her 'In Other Words' pieces with this phrase.
2. I am thinking, as I depart from my practice throughout this paper to refer to the woman I never met and the poet I love by her last name, of Mary di Michele's wonderful review of Wallace's collection of short stories, and her parenthetical comment about surnames still being 'slippery for women.'
3. Wallace quotes Diane Arbus' credo – 'It's what I've never seen before that I recognize' – in her story 'The Scuba Diver in Repose,' in *People You'd Trust Your Life To*, 182.
4. My understanding of dialogism as multi-voicedness, that is, the discursive coexistence of a plurality of voices, each retaining its distinctiveness and separateness, is indebted to Bakhtin. As Angenot points out, dialogism is not dialectic, as it does not involve a resolution through synthesis, but rather a play of contesting speech-acts suspended in dialogue: '*Le dialogisme bakhtinien n'est pas "dialectique": il n'entraîne pas de dépassement ni de synthèse, mais un jeu toujours surdéterminé de contradiction en dialogue, dans une structure dynamique centrifuge*' (59).
5. Wallace, 'A black woman, speaking with experience's authority [on Angela Davis],' *KWS* 21 February 1989.
6. My basic understanding of the subject as interpellated by the discourses of ideology is indebted to Althusser: 'ideology has the function (which defines it) of "constituting" concrete individuals as subjects' (160). I agree, however, with Paul Smith's critique of Althusser, which points out that Althusser's conflation of 'subject' and 'individual' 'leaves little room for an elaboration of a theory of human agency' (Smith 17). Wallace's pluralistic vision, like Smith's, recognizes the multiplicity of discourses through which a subject may be interpellated.
7. My narratological vocabulary is drawn principally from Genette, Bal, and Rimmon-Kenan.
8. Identifying the oppositions that differentiate the persons, Benveniste remarks that 'person is inherent only in the positions "I" and "you". The third person, by virtue of its very structure, is the non-personal form of verbal inflection' (199).
9. Focalization, to cite Bal, 'is the relationship between the "vision", the agent that sees, and that which is seen.... The subject of focalization, the *focalizer*, is the point from which the elements are viewed' (104).