

## *Quo Vadis—Introduction*

David Foster Wallace

HI. I'VE NEVER REALLY edited anything before, but I'm the one who's edited this "Quo Vadis" number of *RCF*. This job involved sending out a letter about a year and a half ago inviting a number of writers and editors under c. forty-five to write whatever they wanted on the topic of where they thought literary art\* was heading in the next century. I'll spare you a reproduction of this letter. Plus the job involved interfacing with the Dalkey Archive Press people about whom to invite to contribute, and then reinterfacing with them when some of the original people on the list said no or said yes and then bailed out and then other people who hadn't been on the list heard about the list and thought maybe they'd like to write a Quo-Vadisish essay and were added to the list. The final list is about 50 percent Dalkey and 50 percent me. Then the job involved reading the essays as they came in and copyediting them—I'm a good copy editor, and this has been the only really comfortable part of the whole process as far as I'm concerned.

So here are twelve essays. If you flip one page back you can see for yourself who they're by. I won't try to sum up any of the essays or do some discursive thing about what the overall gist of the collective seems to be—the pieces themselves are mostly pretty discursive, and I don't feel like anybody wants to hear me discoursing about discursion. In a way, the essays already summarize themselves pretty well. Some of them are really dark. More than a few are pissed off about various things. Some of the essays are funny, and a couple have really pretty prose. Some take an attitude toward contemporary culture and government that I think is self-pitying and beetle-spirited. A couple of the essays are kind of inspiring. I find about three-quarters of them interesting, finally.

I have observed in myself a kind of sine-wavelike cycle of interest and boredom and interest in riding herd on a project like this. In a way it's sort of like my cycle of feelings about religion. To me, religion is incredibly fascinating as a general abstract object of thought—it might be the most interesting thing there is. But when it gets to the point of trying to communicate specific or persuasive stuff about religion, I find I always get frustrated and bored. I think this is because the stuff that's truly interesting

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\*(literary art in general, or literary art in relation to culture, or all of these, or none)

about religion is inarticulable.\*\* Plus the truth is that there's nothing about it I really *know*, and nothing about it that anybody, I don't think, really *knows*; and so when I hear some person try to articulate or persuade me of some specific point about religious stuff I find myself looking at my watch or shifting my feet, immediately and deeply bored. But—each time—this boredom always lasts exactly as long as it takes me to realize that what this person who's trying to talk about religion is really talking about is herself. This happens each time. I'm glazed and scanning for the exit until I get the real gist: though these heartfelt utterances present themselves as assuasive or argumentative, what they really are are—truly, deeply—*expressive*—expressive of a self's heart's special tangle, of a knowing and verbal self's particular tortured relation to what is unknow- and -sayable. Then it gets interesting again.

I know that each of the contributors to this number of *RCF* has a deep-felt stake in literary art and its future. I also know that not one of them is "right" in any argumentative or predictive sense.\*\*\* Nobody knows where anything important is going, really. And the deeper the stake a writer has in something, I think, the less reliable a diagnostician or forecaster she's going to be. But I think this is OK. I myself ended up reading these essays more like diary entries than anything else—the only real object of revelation is the writers themselves. I suppose this is S.O.P. for all essays, in a way.

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\*\* (Which of course paradoxically is a big part of what makes it so interesting, so it all gets really tangled.)

\*\*\* (I think Jon Franzen's very, very close to being right, but this is because he and I are friends, and sort of rivals, and we argue about all this stuff, and from the way I read his piece here it seems to me that I've won and convinced him I'm right, so in general I'm just real pleased with Jon's essay.)