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This essay examines David Foster Wallace as a “program” writer in various senses, including as a graduate of a creative writing program and participant in twelve-step recovery programs. It argues that what makes Wallace most distinctive in literary historical terms is his rejection of the paranoid relation to institutions characteristic of an earlier generation of postmodern writers and his inhabitation, instead, of various forms of institutional being. In this context, the political and other limits of Wallace’s project are revealed in the awkwardness of its engagements with the question of race, and in its idealization of community as a form of mutual indebtedness.

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