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David Foster Wallace Special Issue

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DAVID FOSTER WALLACE SPECIAL ISSUE

Introduction – Supposedly Fun Things: A David Foster Wallace Special Issue

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David Foster Wallace's works continue to attract scholarly interest at a startling rate, and from a variety of perspectives. This special issue reflects some of the continuities and transformations taking place in appraisals of this most influential of American writers.

In his account of David Foster Wallace's compositional struggles writing his final novel, *The Pale King*, David Hering relates how Wallace described 'the "tornadic" nature of the process to his editor Michael Pietsch as "like wrestling sheets of balsa wood in a high wind"' (2016). The same can now be said for keeping track of Wallace's texts in light of their critical reception. The speed with which new studies of Wallace's work have appeared over the past few years is startling, and only looks set to increase.¹ In place of Wallace's implied despair in the above image, however, we should perhaps, as readers, feel exhilaration instead. This special issue of *Orbit* reflects some of the scholarly eddies currently animating Wallace Studies.

Wallace's premature death reconfigured the teleology of his entire *oeuvre*, throwing scholarly labels such as 'mid-career' or 'late works' into disarray. Precipitously, his body of work became an indivisible unity, both finished and not, whilst so many of his literary forefathers – William H. Gass, Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon – continue reworking and modifying the ultimate shape of their artistic projects, in a way warping chronology by attesting to a contemporariness to which Wallace may no longer lay claim. His death allowed us to observe the final shape of his corpus, yet it is a vista that is haunted by the unfulfilled promise of his imagined future works. Critical analysis is a bitter substitute for what could have been, but the enthusiasm with which scholars now approach Wallace only confirms Adam Kelly's prescient announcement, in 2010, of 'the Death of the Author and the Birth of a Discipline'. Touching on themes familiar and new, and from a variety of well-established and upcoming voices, the articles collected here are a testament to how fertile the field now is.

A sense of fevered activity was indeed apparent at the event from which this special issue arose – Birkbeck, University of London's 'Supposedly Fun Things: A Colloquium on the Writing of David Foster Wallace' (2015). At this day-long

¹ Recent monographs on Wallace's work include Clare Hayes-Brady's *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, and Resistance*, David Hering's *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form*, and Jeffrey Severs' *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books: Fictions of Value*. Bloomsbury has also published Lucas Thompson's *Global Wallace: David Foster Wallace and World Literature* – the first title in its new line of 'David Foster Wallace Studies'.

conference a dozen scholars spoke on topics ranging from Wallace's popular reception (Tony Venezia, Emma Southon), the connections between 'Consider the Lobster' and Herman Melville's 'Bartleby, the Scrivener' (Martin Paul Eve), and the semiotics of Coca-Cola in *Infinite Jest* (Xavier Marcó del Pont). Graciously concluded by Professor Geoff Ward, whose closing response included anecdotes about how he put together the BBC documentary *Endnotes: David Foster Wallace* (2011), 'Supposedly Fun Things' planted the seeds for this current special issue.

In retrospect, one of the colloquium's most notable themes was a readiness to interrogate Wallace's politics. This was especially apparent in the day's final panel. Joel Roberts assessed *Signifying Rappers* for its disassembled whiteness, Daniel Mattingly pondered the role of femininity in Wallace's broadly masculinist writings, and Iain Williams scrutinised Wallace's dialectical reasoning as a form of Third Way neoliberalism. In his subsequent review of the colloquium, Williams wondered if the day would help instigate 'a split in Wallace Studies, with those who buy into Wallace's self-professed attempts to write ethically and morally on one hand, and scholars who challenge Wallace's politics of representation and his representation of politics, on the other' (2015). The significance or otherwise of a single colloquium aside, Wallace's engagements with race and gender in particular have started to gain much more critical attention,² and several of our articles reflect this trend.

For example, in 'White Guys: Questioning *Infinite Jest's* New Sincerity', Edward Jackson and Joel Roberts offer a sustained critique of this novel's supposed sincerity, particularly as explicated by Adam Kelly (2010; 2014; 2016). Arguing that Kelly works with questionable understandings of Derrida's theories of iterability and undecidability, Jackson and Roberts show how *Infinite Jest's* New Sincerity surreptitiously aggrandizes white masculinity at the expense of its black and female characters. Revisiting in particular the novel's Alcoholics Anonymous scenes, they examine how a reactionary antipathy towards non-white and non-male subjects motivates its pretensions to

² Clare Hayes-Brady has in recent years pioneered readings of gender in Wallace's texts (2015; 2016), to which Mary K. Holland (2017) and Amy Hungerford (2016) have since added. For considerations of Wallace and race, see Jorge Araya (2015), Samuel Cohen (2015), and Thompson (2017).

therapeutic intervention. Similarly, John Roache's "The realer, more enduring and sentimental part of him": David Foster Wallace's Personal Library and Marginalia' looks warily at the tendency to read 'Wallace as the white male "genius" of the educated middle classes' (2017). He does so within a broader consideration of the politics of the archive – namely, of Wallace's papers collected at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas. Roache starts with the controversy surrounding Maria Bustillo's 2011 article 'Inside David Foster Wallace's Private Self-Help Library'. Revelations regarding Wallace's personal life in this article led to the withdrawal of several of his self-help books from public access, a move that, as Roache explains, helped perpetuate ideas of the archive as a fount of authorial truth. For Roache, a more dynamic approach to Wallace's papers is needed, one that complicates their often hagiographic valuation.

Vincent Haddad offers a compelling example of what such scholarship might look like in 'Conjuring David Foster Wallace's Ghost: Prosopopeia, Whitmanian Intimacy and the Queer Potential of *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*'. Supporting his analysis with information gleaned from the archive, Haddad brings insights from queer theory (an optic still largely neglected in Wallace Studies) to bear on how Wallace's texts create homosocial intimacies between the author and white male readers. Drawing parallels with Walt Whitman's poem 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry', Haddad shows how a persistent homoeroticism, grounded in the conceptual metaphor of the ghost, informs Wallace's main concerns. In this respect, Haddad is in dialogue with this issue's opening piece, David Hering's 'Reading the Ghost in David Foster Wallace's Fiction'. Hering traces a career-long preoccupation with ghost figures as being indicative of Wallace's interest in authorial presence in the wake of post-structuralism. Framing his analysis through the Bakhtinian concepts of polyphony and monologism, Hering suggests that Wallace's spectres develop from 'absent possessors' to 'companion ghosts' (2017) in the pursuit of dialogic communion with readers. Haddad and Hering, thus, offer incisive yet disparate takes on a key Wallacean trope, laying the ground for future considerations of his signature hauntings.

Of the varied critical contexts that continue to possess Wallace scholarship, perhaps the two most enduring are American pragmatist philosophy and the language

theories of Ludwig Wittgenstein. In ‘The Importance of Habits in Meredith Rand and Shane Drinion’s “tête-à-tête” in *The Pale King*’, Alexander Moran offers a fresh iteration of the former in regards to John Dewey’s concept of habit. Moran focuses on a section of *The Pale King* to extrapolate the defining motifs of Wallace’s characterisation. Reflecting on the state of pragmatist readings of Wallace, and on how they might develop, his analysis reasserts the continued relevance of these philosophies to Wallace’s texts. Elsewhere, in “‘I kept saying her name’: naming, labels and power in the early writing of David Foster Wallace’, Clare Hayes-Brady shows in part how Wittgenstein remains crucial to understanding Wallace’s craft. Focusing on *The Broom of the System*, she illuminates how Wallace’s naming practices are entwined with Wittgenstein’s ideas concerning meaning and use. As she also argues, onomastics are a key thread through many of Wallace’s heterogeneous interests, whether those be generational influence, gender relations, or comic play. Moran and Hayes-Brady revisit critical touchstones in Wallace studies to point them in new directions, exemplifying the continued scope for attentive explorations of Wallace’s form. Our final piece indeed considers one of the most visceral of Wallace’s formal techniques – his propensity for long, breathless sentences. In “‘They All Sound Like David Foster Wallace’: Syntax and Narrative in *Infinite Jest*, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, *Oblivion* and *The Pale King*’, Simon de Bourcier traces how Wallace’s syntactic gymnastics develop, chiefly along the lines of both a mimetic rendering of speech and ontological disruption. With such a microscopic analysis of sentence building, de Bourcier brings fresh insights into Wallace’s meticulous construction of fictional worlds.

There are always lacunae. We had hoped, for example, to include material on the reception of Wallace’s work. This avenue represents a potentially fruitful and novel approach to Wallace, one with clear echoes in his writing. Interviewed by the BBC in 1995, Wallace argued for a privileged position for literature over popular mass media such as film and television, suggesting that literary fiction is able to do things of which popular culture is incapable (cited in *Endnotes*). In making this argument, Wallace was reworking older narratives of suspicion and pessimism regarding

mass-produced culture. *Infinite Jest* explicitly re-articulates the fear of contamination by and addiction to mass media. In this, Wallace can be contrasted with certain contemporaries, such as Michael Chabon, Junot Díaz, and Jonathan Lethem, who put popular culture and cultural practices at the centre of their writing.

Ironically Wallace's own online fandom is particularly visible. Wallace is one of the first major literary figures to live and die in the age of the internet and social media, and his legacy has been kept alive by independent scholars, bloggers, and fans at online venues such as the Wallace-I listserv and *The Howling Fantods* website. Given that fandom is often associated with emotional overinvestment, it is possible to speculate that literary fandom is associated with certain writers. Simply put, some authors have fans and some have readers. Writers like Thomas Pynchon and Wallace attract fans and fan-like behaviour; writers like DeLillo or Franzen, however, arguably do not. This is something that warrants further empirical research. In the case of Pynchon and Wallace, their online reception is closely linked. The Pynchon listserv has been long established – its archives date to 1992 when it switched to Majordomo software; but discussion of Pynchon dates back to various bulletin boards and groups in the '80s. In 1996 several members of the list began discussing *Infinite Jest*. Others suggested that they either stick to discussing Pynchon or start their own list.

The ease of publishing on the internet has allowed for detailed close readings of Wallace's texts from both academics and committed lay readers. Consequently, the distinction between online fandom and academia is increasingly difficult to discern. Online reception of Wallace and his work shows evidence of a vibrant, productive, and diverse interpretative community, one in which the boundaries between academic and non-academic responses are not clear cut. Understanding Wallace fandom allows us to capture the circulating discursive frameworks of reception. While Wallace and some of his academic interlocutors have been at best ambivalent about popular culture, Wallace and his work, through online engagements, have been transformed *into* popular culture. With this in mind, in addition to Saul Leslie, Erin Reilly, and Stuart J. Taylor's reviews of recent Wallace scholarship, this special issue includes Matthew Darling's assessment of 2015's Wallace biopic, *The End of the Tour*.

As ‘Supposedly Fun Things’, the articles here variously explore the implications of our title’s adverb and adjective. Their engagements with Wallace’s texts are, we hope, as fun to read as they were to collect and edit, particularly with the insights they offer into Wallace’s craft. At their most critical, however, these pieces also interrogate some of the supposedly self-evident aspects of Wallace’s texts – whether these relate to sincerity, gender, or author-reader dialogue. Lastly, we truncate the characteristically strung-out bounce of Wallace’s own title – *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again* (1998) – to work against its coy finitude. It is our wish, rather, that you can and do return to these articles, and in turn continue the various conversations they both develop and begin around Wallace’s work.

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Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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