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DAVID FOSTER WALLACE SPECIAL ISSUE

David Foster Wallace: Insights and Readings

Critical Insights: David Foster Wallace, Edited by Coleman, P, Ipswich, MA: Salem Press/Grey House Publishing, 2015

The David Foster Wallace Reader, Edited by Nadell, B, Green, K and Pietsch, M, London: Hamish Hamilton, 2014

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Review of *Critical Insights: David Foster Wallace*.

Critical Insights and *The David Foster Wallace Reader* offer distinct and compelling overviews of perhaps the most influential US writer of his generation. The former is a collection of strictly academic essays, exploring a number of varied themes worthy of close consideration. By contrast, the latter is an introductory volume principally for the benefit of newcomers to David Foster Wallace, with excerpts from his fiction and non-fiction. Accordingly, each book has a very different relation to Wallace's corpus, and indeed targets largely different audiences.

In a 2004 interview with David Kipen, Wallace confessed that besides an early, apparently 'awful' attempt at poetry – winning $15 in 7th Grade for a four page A-B-A-B poem about a polluted local creek – his interest in poetry was only as a reader (Sdeslimbes, 2009). It may seem strange then that Philip Coleman occupies the role of editor for *Critical Insights*. After all, Coleman's CV (printed on the collection's back-cover), while impressive, revolves around the work of poet John Berryman. Nevertheless, his contribution "On David Foster Wallace" proves Coleman to be well-positioned as editor and also raises the fascinating question: can Wallace be thought of as a poet? This is *Critical Insights* at its strongest, exploring areas of Wallace's work which remain generally unconsidered. Coleman examines DT Max's claim – that '"[Wallace] wasn't a poet"' (3) – and concludes that this 'only makes sense if one has a fairly rigid understanding of the different between "poetry" and "prose"' (3). For Coleman, Wallace attempts to dissolve these differences, going beyond the 'formal generic boundaries' and 'stylistic standard[s]' (3) traditionally separating poetry from prose.

Charles Nixon furthers this reading in his examination of the formal structure of *Oblivion*, where Wallace presents a range of 'prose types – a prose poem, a novella, a fable, a purported soliloquy – to expand the limits of what such forms can include and the details that they can represent' (177). Coleman and Nixon's mutual interest in Wallace's breaking open and expansion of formal boundaries suggests that *Critical Insights* is at its most effective when contributors engage in dialogue over a particular theme or idea. David Hering and Adam Kelly, for example, both focus on how Wallace presents structurally what he portrays thematically. In "Form as Strategy" Hering provides a convincing account of *Infinite Jest*'s architecture, observing 'how the

novel's structural shape is indicative of its thematic concerns' (128) and drawing a link between 'the rehabilitative processes of the recovering substance addicts [. . .] and the a-temporal fractal narrative structure of the novel itself' (136). Similarly, Kelly's essay on the critical reception surrounding Wallace's work uses Timothy Aubry's example of addict-recovery in *IJ* to show that '"the temporal experience of reading"' Wallace's sentences '"mimics the arduous experience of recovering in AA"' (58).

Hering and Kelly's shared focus on the connection between form and the experience of reading reaffirms the importance placed on story-structure in understanding Wallace's overall aesthetic. The physical lay-out of Wallace's prose is a strategy deployed to convey his thematic concerns. It is noteworthy then, given the status Wallace afforded to the formal organisation of his narratives, that *The David Foster Wallace Reader* should not make an imperative of preserving the original structures of the texts which it includes. The Introduction, co-authored by Bonnie Nadell, Karen Green and Michael Pietsch, describes the volume as a selection of Wallace's most celebrated works, 'a Greatest Hits collection of novel excerpts, short fiction, and essays' (ix). Like many greatest hits albums, however, the order and choice of pieces is questionable. While the short-stories and essays give a very good impression of Wallace's range – its choice of singles, if the 'Greatest Hits' analogy is pursued – *The Reader* is not so successful in how it renders excerpts from Wallace's longer work. In the case of *IJ*, pages 692–698 are followed by pages 736–747, and these followed by 755–774, and so on. This has the effect of breaking up what is already intentionally fractured. To borrow an image from the epigraph to Hering's "Form as Strategy": if *IJ*'s structure is that of 'a piece of glass dropped from a great height' (128), then the disjointed parts in *The Reader* are the result of an attempt to repair that piece of glass, only to drop it again.

Despite *The Reader*'s problematic distillation of Wallace's longer works (assuming that they should or can receive this treatment at all), the afterwords following the filleted excerpts are worth examining. A number of anecdotes follow the stories and essays, which will be attractive primarily to newcomers interested in seeing a partial portrait of the artist as his talent was developing. *The Broom of the System*'s

editor Gerald Howard, for instance, proclaims in his afterword that this novel 'basically fulfilled every idealistic and naïve dream I ever had of being the editor who discovered the best writer of his generation' (63). Furthermore, those familiar with the chronology of Wallace's output and the circumstances surrounding *The Pale King*'s posthumous publication will enjoy a glance over Wallace's *own* editorial choices, courtesy of Nick Maniatis's 'Fun fact': *Oblivion*'s "Incarnations of Burned Children" featured in an early draft of *TPK*. Elsewhere, however, Hari Kunzru's brief meditation on the importance of masks in "Little Expressionless Animals" could have been more extensive, and certainly the sections included from *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* would have benefitted from an afterword of some sort.

Later in the volume, an Introduction by Sally Foster Wallace to the Teaching Materials, and subsequent reprinted correspondences between herself and her son on complex grammar questions, presents a tender relationship held together by a shared love of language and a mutual 'groaning about composition' (601), as she affectionately remembers it. The rigorous Course Syllabus, Description and Schedule, designed by Wallace for the Creative Writing programme he taught at Pomona College, highlights the intellectual athleticism which he required of his students. This should give newcomers an indication of what might make a productive Creative Writing student. Moreover, as Sally Wallace correctly suggests, her son's 'pedagogical practices' found within *The Reader* 'will be useful to teachers' in the future (602). Otherwise, for scholars familiar with Wallace, the programme's Required Texts list may help trace some of his influences. For instance, *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin appears as one of the core texts for Wallace's Spring '03 course, an 'arguably good and/or important' book (609) but also in *IJ* as one of Madame Psychosis's depressing radio-show reads (1997, 191).

Perhaps *The Reader*'s finest moment is "The Planet Trillaphon as It Stands in Relation to the Bad Thing". Like a musician's previously unreleased song, or an album's 'hidden track', its inclusion compels purchase of the book to 'complete the set'. More than this, the story is a very early example of Wallace's career-long preoccupation with themes of disease, waste and non-endings. Kevin J.H. Dettmar's afterword draws together a couple of these in a brief

analysis of the 'bruised, frightened human heart at the center of "Trillaphon"' (20). He avoids too much critical engagement with the content of the story, which will benefit readers simply looking for a flavour of Wallace's writing-style, but this approach also draws attention to *The Reader*'s limits. Dettmar's afterword relies on the contributor's personal proximity to Wallace himself. The potential for a measured analysis of "Trillaphon" is affected by Dettmar's knowing Wallace 'albeit slightly' and writing his afterword 'across the hall from the office that was [Wallace's]' (20). Rhetoric of this kind may reinforce the misleading mythology of 'Saint Dave' as well as complicate the audience's impression of *The Reader*. While a quotation from GQ on *The Reader*'s back-cover suggests 'he was the closest thing we had to a recording angel', Jonathan Franzen, one of the volume's Advisers, wrote in 2011 that 'the people who knew David least well are most likely to speak of him in saintly terms' (2011).

This personally invested approach – Dettmar referring to those 'near and dear to me [who] have suffered with clinical depression' (20), or Anne Fadiman informing the reader that Wallace 'died six days before my 2008 class' (762) – contrasts with *Critical Insights*, where the discussion of suicide is more restrained. Aengus Woods looks to the work of the mathematician Georg Cantor, about whom Wallace wrote extensively, to examine the implications of Wallace's suicide for understanding him and his work: 'Just as Cantor's mental illness cannot be explained by his achievements in unlocking the mysteries of infinity, neither should Wallace's suicide and struggle with depression stand as an inevitable outcome of his literary brilliance' (269). The emphasis is placed on distinguishing an individual's personal circumstances from their artistic output. Differing from the claims shared in interview by Tom McCarthy and DT Max – that it is hard not to read *TPK* as 'a kind of snuff novel'; that Wallace 'writes himself into a position where suicide or some kind of disappearance is the only thing to do'; and that 'David's [suicide] does change the narrative' (Strand Bookstore, 2012) – Woods points out that a talent for writing convincingly about subjects like suicide or depression does not necessarily make suicide an inevitable outcome. Moreover, if Coleman's concluding remarks to his essay are examined, then Wallace's choice of subject-matter was not a contributing factor in his

suicide: 'Wallace took his own life on September 12th, 2008, at the age of 46, having stopped taking anti-depressant medication the previous year' (25).

Woods' persuasive argument about suicide, as with Coleman's examination of Wallace and poetry, proves that *Critical Insights* delivers on its title's promise of critical engagement with interesting and provocative aspects of Wallace's texts. One such vital exploration is Clare Hayes-Brady's essay on gender. In "Personally, I'm Neutral on the Menstruation Point", she suggests that the fact of Wallace's predominantly male readership does not necessarily mean 'he is hostile towards female readers' (63). Hayes-Brady goes on to claim that given the overwhelmingly male focus in his work 'it is possible to accuse Wallace of misogyny' (64). Misogyny is hatred or contempt for women, which surely trespasses on the definition of hostility, and Hayes-Brady's formulation is appropriately nuanced: Wallace's attitude 'to gender and gender relations is not as simple as mere hostility, but is inflected with ideas of power and narcissism' (64). While it would be a stretch to claim that Wallace favours patriarchal structures of power and narcissism, his neglect of women-centred issues certainly leaves him open to the charge of 'gender blindness'. Indeed, Hayes-Brady's essay's title infers more of a neutrality towards issues of gender, rather than an active hatred towards women.

To be 'gender blind' means failing to recognise gender equality for the urgent issue it is. Writing about *BOTS*, Hayes-Brady argues compellingly that 'Wallace's appropriation of female subjectivity in *Broom* can be read as a means of embodying the Ricoeurian paradigm of narrative identity, in much the same way that he figuratively embodied the concept of solipsism in Norman Bombardini, or the acquisition of language without understanding in Vlad the Impaler' (66). This illuminating passage demonstrates that Wallace uses the issue of gender in much the same way as the issue of solipsism or linguistics. In other words, Wallace can be accused of misogyny, or rather gender blindness, insofar as he neglects to privilege the issue of gender above other discourses. He appropriates gender as a means of exploring some greater theme. The problem with this somewhat utilitarian approach is that it fails to recognise the importance of gender equality as a much more divisive issue than solipsism or linguistics. To treat them as if they are all similarly useful for artistic ends

is to misunderstand the significance of pushing for equal rights for women. Solipsists and linguists have not been subjugated as women have been. The issue of gender comes with a whole weight of cultural and historical significance that is not present for issues of either solipsism or linguistics.

Elsewhere in *Critical Insights*, having examined the issue of race in *TPK* Jorge Araya concludes that the novel's 'overwhelming whiteness [. . .] appears to be very much a deliberate move on Wallace's part, rather than a spell of absent-mindedness' (244). Here a distinction can be made between Wallace's conscious and engaged approach to the issue of race in *TPK*, removing minorities from the narrative to create a pallid dystopia, and his gender blindness in *BOTS*. While the treatment of race indicates a 'deliberate move' on Wallace's part, his treatment of gender does suggest 'absent-mindedness', or a failure to recognise the importance of the culturally pervasive issues around women – issues about which no one should be 'Neutral'.

It is to the credit of both *Critical Insights* and *The David Foster Wallace Reader* that neither book allows for neutrality, from contributors, in the included passages from Wallace, or from their audiences. While the latter volume carries with it a personal investment which may stifle critical engagement, and while the former may be unappealingly restrained for those wanting the visceral experience of reading Wallace, both are sufficiently compelling and provocative. More than anything else, any book written about this unique writer should provoke a discussion, and prompt us to return to the original source, to Wallace's own writing.

Competing Interests

David Hering was my tutor at Liverpool University for my undergraduate degree. He introduced me to DFW's writing.

Other than Hering, I've met Clare Hayes-Brady a number of times at colloquiums on DFW.

I've met Tom McCarthy at a number of events. He's also hopefully going to speak at an upcoming David Foster Wallace event organised by me and the Infinite Reading Group, of which I am the co-chair. This probably doesn't constitute a bias either way, but his novels are very good.

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