



Open Library of Humanities



Part of the Ubiquity
Partner Network



David Foster Wallace Special Issue

How to Cite: Reilly, E 2017 Review of Hayes-Brady, C, 2016. *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, Resistance*. London: Bloomsbury. *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 5(1): 14, pp. 1–7, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.201>

Published: 22 March 2017

Peer Review:

This article has been internally reviewed by an editor of *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, which is a journal of the Open Library of Humanities.

Copyright:

© 2017 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Open Access:

Orbit: A Journal of American Literature is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

Digital Preservation:

The Open Library of Humanities and all its journals are digitally preserved in the CLOCKSS scholarly archive service.

The Open Library of Humanities is an open access non-profit publisher of scholarly articles and monographs.



Erin Reilly, 'Review of Hayes-Brady, C, 2016. *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, Resistance*. London: Bloomsbury' (2017) 5(1): 14 *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.201>

DAVID FOSTER WALLACE SPECIAL ISSUE

Review of Hayes-Brady, C, 2016. *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, Resistance*. London: Bloomsbury

Erin Reilly

Birkbeck, GB
ekr8@columbia.edu

Review of *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, Resistance*.

'Unspeakable Failures': from this ostensibly pessimistic point of departure, Clare Hayes-Brady concocts one of the most productive readings of David Foster Wallace and his use of language that exists in the secondary literature to date. Hayes-Brady's study offers an incisive analysis of several complex and weighty Wallacean themes, handling them with deftness and intellectual rigor. It is coherently organized, tightly theorized, lucidly written, and challenging, yet enjoyable, to read.

Positing failure and resistance to closure as the primary organizing principles of Wallace's writing, Hayes-Brady looks more specifically at how breakdowns in language and communication function as a formal and aesthetic response in Wallace's texts to the neoliberal ethos and culture of late capitalism. In other words, Hayes-Brady's study reveals the ways in which the many failures that characterize Wallace's work, (e.g. inadequacies and/or frustrations in narrative, plot, communication, characterizations, etc.) amount to a deliberate act of literary-political resistance.

Hayes-Brady lays out the main themes of her study in the introductory chapter, offering a comprehensive explication of the philosophical theories with which all serious readers of Wallace must grapple as they make their way through his literary corpus. Brady's understanding of early Wittgenstein and logical positivism, the anti-idealism of Adorno's negative dialectics, and Rortian pragmatism is impressive, even more so for her ability to analyse and explain Wallace's literary engagement with these often dense philosophical concepts in a concise and productive fashion, maintaining a balance between rigor and accessibility in her discussion.

In the second chapter on 'Wallace and the Incomplete', Hayes-Brady builds upon the introduction's philosophical framework to investigate the 'unifying anti-teleology of Wallace's writing' (22), the both/and quality and commitment to plurality that takes on political substance in Wallace's literary fiction and philosophical meditations. In her astute application of Derrida and Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Cavell, Hayes-Brady demonstrates how Wallace's persistent 'resistance to ending' and 'commitment to process' represent 'a fundamentally political series of actions [that] draw readers out of the search for finality [...] towards a comfort with ambiguity' (30).

Bridging the gap between philosophy and literature, Hayes-Brady's third chapter, 'Wallace and the World', provides a thorough exploration of Wallace's engagement

with a broad literary heritage, including but not limited to his oft-mentioned post-modern forefathers. This chapter includes an examination of Wallace as a self-consciously American writer, as well as meditations on his complex use of irony, including ethical or self-questioning irony, introducing a Kierkegaardian reading to the philosophical mix. From Shakespeare, Keats, and Joyce to Beckett, Pynchon, and Barth, this chapter offers a comprehensive literary historical and intertextual reading of Wallace's fiction and cultural criticism.

Collapsing boundaries between literature and philosophy even further, Hayes-Brady's fourth chapter, 'The Book, The Broom and the Ladder', offers a brilliant close reading of *The Broom of the System* by way of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language and Rorty's pragmatist ethics, highlighting the philosophical underpinnings of Wallace's marked tendency to 'move away from closed systems'. Her analysis demonstrates how 'in *Broom*, it is Lenore's desperation for immutable truth – that is to say, for closure – that frustrates her capacity to live contentedly' (80). This backs up Hayes-Brady's thesis that for Wallace, 'the teleological imperative is a hollow goal. Lenore must instead learn to cope with the incomprehensible, and the merely bizarre' (81). Wallace scholars, take note: this is one of the most interesting and productive studies of *Broom* that exists to date, and well worth a close reading.

'Something to Do with Love: Writing and the Process of Communication', is the title of Hayes-Brady's eloquent fifth chapter, which investigates the paradoxical links between love and distance. By unpacking the dis/connections between love and communication, she elegantly demonstrates how for Wallace, both love and communication are predicated on the incomplete, on missing links and gaps, the sacred and mysterious space between: 'always necessarily unfinished, unachievable, longed for even in the inevitability of either failure or death, encompassing even in its giving the process of its own destruction' (99–100).

Continuing with the theme of communication in the sixth chapter, entitled 'Narcissism, Alienation, and Commun(al)ity', Hayes-Brady investigates Wallace's communicative failures with respect to solipsism, subjectivity, and the complex boundary between 'alterity and the narrative self' (120), including Paul Ricoeur's theories on narrative identity and oneself as the other. In this section Hayes-Brady provides

an extensive demonstration of how Wallace deploys these key aesthetic and ethical motifs to 'dramatiz[e] the choice between alienation and connectedness, depicting the necessity of choosing the latter over the former' (136).

This meditation leads nicely into the penultimate chapter, 'Vocal Instability and Narrative Structure', in which Hayes-Brady conducts a fascinating study of a pronounced instability between primary or explicit and secondary or implied narrative voices in Wallace's fiction. Hayes-Brady names this tendency the 'skeletal narrative', and explains it as 'a strategy by which Wallace embeds the seeds of textual and interpretive unraveling within the narrative voice of a story', in which the primary narrator 'begins to tell a story, but through asides or tonal slippage reveals another layer of narrative under the surface, ultimately losing control of the primary narrative vocabulary and confessing or revealing what was hidden' (138–139). This clever and original analysis will undoubtedly prove a productive point of departure for scholars interested in Wallace's engagement with theory of mind and different levels of consciousness, including the role of cognitive vs pre-cognitive awareness and decision-making in his narratives.

The eighth and final chapter offers an important reading on 'Gender, Difference, and the Body', themes that many of Wallace's readers, notably Amy Hungerford and Mary K. Holland, are beginning to approach from a decidedly more critical standpoint. In exposing Wallace's many failures in representing the other, especially in writing from the perspective of female characters, Hayes-Brady's final chapter opens the door for a great variety of future studies on this topic.

The literary and philosophical themes set forth in Hayes-Brady's book flow smoothly from chapter to chapter, with each essay building upon the salient points from the previous section's discussion; however, each chapter is robust enough to stand alone as a well-developed study in its own right. Wallace fans and students of literature, philosophy, and theory alike will definitely want this collection in their library, and will no doubt refer to it time and again as a foundational text and inspiration for further research.

Clare Hayes-Brady's study is both timely and relevant for the way in which it draws parallels between failures in communication and the challenges of/possibility for political resistance. The substantial work required to make sense of Wallace's

writing is never met with easy gratification or satisfying conclusions, but more often with abrupt and incomplete endings, full-stop textual breaks, further questions – often left unanswered – and ineradicable confusion, especially moral confusion. This anti-telos takes on political substance by spotlighting the ruthless and often mindless American ethos of “winning” that values the showy performance of glib triumph over consideration of complex moral problems – indifference to divisive inequality, pervasive alienation, and unchecked greed.

There’s certainly something post-aspirational going on in Wallace’s literature. And indeed, a quintessentially American response to anything post-aspirational might be: Well, but what is wrong with aspiration, with goal-oriented-ness and playing to win? Hayes-Brady cleverly answers by reframing Wallace’s dialogic failures in narrative and communication as privileging love over winning, privileging the messy process of creation over the finality of any successfully completed or consumptive act. In her reading of Wallace, love is the true ground for communication precisely because it is imperfect, open-ended and ever-changing, always threatened by (and ultimately culminating in) death, and yet that which most fully ‘illuminate[s] the possibilities for being alive and human’ (McCaffery, 1993: 26).

While Pankaj Mishra has characterised Wallace as an ‘old-fashioned moralist in postmodern disguise’ (2006), Hayes-Brady’s book prompts an interesting consideration of Wallace’s failures as a moralist, exploring the ways in which these failures constitute an ethical stance. As Emmanuel Levinas and Judith Butler have shown, ethics must necessarily come before ontology; the other is always already there, and subjectivity is grounded upon our engagement with profound and radical alterity; the telos and closed systems of ontology will always be secondary and derivative to these primary mysteries. Ethics, by contrast, is open-ended and constituted by confusion and indeterminacy, by gaps and imperfections. We are ethical agents because we understand that we can never have conclusive answers and final solutions, because we suffer great anxiety over our choices and because our freedom to choose is often painful, because we aim for the moral high ground, but will never finally and permanently occupy it. We will succeed to fail another day, and yet the willingness to try in the knowledge of this inevitable failure is what furnishes our agency as humans.

In taking failures as her framework of analysis for Wallace's oeuvre, Clare Hayes-Brady's book augments a secondary wave of Wallace studies, which moves beyond hagiography and *sui generis* criticism and provides a more nuanced and complex reading of this widely acclaimed writer, now approaching 10 years since his death. Hayes-Brady's work is a boon for Wallace scholars, as well as for anyone interested in the intersection of philosophy and literature, post-modern literary and cultural theory, and scholars engaged with applied linguistics and philosophy of language.

Overall, her study is so expertly crafted that there is not much room for criticism. There were certain points at which additional discussion around a central premise would have added more clarity; for example, some more unpacking of the term neoliberal. Though Hayes-Brady applies the term as a descriptor/modifier for American culture and society throughout her book, there is an assumption that all readers agree on what this means, resulting in a conflation of neoliberal America with corporate capitalism or narcissistic individualism. A slightly more focused discussion around the discourse of neoliberalism, around its history and systems and the particularities of the American version that Wallace so thoroughly engages with, would have been helpful. A wider discussion of Hayes-Brady's thoughts and ideas on this topic would prove a fascinating read.

In addition, since the book takes as its premise failures of language and communication, it would have been interesting to see more mention of neuropsychological conditions that contribute to such breakdowns, with more discussion around how these conditions function as metaphors within Wallace's formal structure. For example, how do autism, aphasia, anxiety and personality disorders, as well as disorders in attention, emotional regulation, or even learning delimit one's subjectivity, and how do these conditions function as embodied realities that render inevitable certain narrative and linguistic failures? What are the neurochemical family resemblances amongst addiction, boredom and depression, and how does Wallace expose (or struggle and fail to expose) these with respect to a narrative framework grounded in moralizing Western Christian/neoliberal notions of free will and individual choice? To be fair, an in-depth discussion of Wallace's engagement with failures of language from this perspective would constitute an entirely different study, perhaps grounded

in medical humanities, which Clare Hayes-Brady's work never purported to do. It is a testament to the profundity of her thinking that her reader is eager to apply her theories to wider conceptual landscapes, to continue the conversation, instead of concluding it.

By way of final remarks, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace* is an excellent work of scholarship, in which Clare Hayes-Brady has shown a masterful command of both primary and secondary Wallace literature as well as the varied and often difficult philosophical waters in which he swims. With this offering Hayes-Brady skillfully and creatively reinforces her already substantial contributions to Wallace studies – in its well-informed and penetrating deconstruction of Wallace's failures, this book amounts to a splendid success.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

References

- McCaffery, L** 1993 An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace. In: Burn, S, ed. 2003. *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, pp. 21–52.
- Mishra, P** 2006 The Postmodern Moralists. *The New York Times*, [online] 12 March. Available at <<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/12/books/review/the-post-modern-moralist.html>> [Accessed 11 February 2017].

How to cite this article: Reilly, E 2017 Review of Hayes-Brady, C, 2016. *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, Resistance*. London: Bloomsbury. *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 5(1): 14, pp. 1–7, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.2017.5.1.14>

Published: 22 March 2017

Copyright: © 2017 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



Orbit: A Journal of American Literature is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Open Library of Humanities.

OPEN ACCESS The Open Access logo, which is a stylized 'O' with a person icon inside.