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1

Well before his death, in 2008, the importance of David Foster Wallace in the world of contemporary American letters had overcome the boundaries of his reputation as both a virtuoso of postmodern encyclopedic fiction and the author of a diverse and impressive corpus of essays. The admiration for his technical and intellectual eclecticism had given way to a shared feeling that his work constituted a brave and authentic reaction to the problems of postmodernity. Here was an author that did not offer easy critiques (or solutions) but still did, in fact, *look for* tentative ways out of the miasma of hyper-mediation and the loneliness of the contemporary. This was perceived as a sign of the change that was coming. Thus, if it is yet to determine whether Wallace was successful or not in his ethical and aesthetic lifetime endeavor, it is easy to see why he has become the focus of so much attention on the part of literary critics and fiction readers alike. Two recent collections in particular offer an articulate spectrum of a community of (professional) readers that defines itself: *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies* (2013), as its title suggests, is meant to offer a panoramic introduction to the range of individual works and theoretical perspectives that have come to shape the field; while *David Foster Wallace and “The Long Thing”* (2014) chooses to focus on a single strand of the author’s production –his novels–

and yet manages to produce analyses of Wallace's poetics that could be productively applied (by analogy or contrast) to the rest of his oeuvre. These books, as we shall see, are representative of both the merits and the limits of the most recent scholarship on Wallace.

2

It is important to remember, while reading the essays these collections include, that they are not first or preliminary explorations of the work of a writer and his influences, but texts in dialogue with many others. For one thing, each book is edited by either one or both of the two critics whose own works have pioneered the critical assessment of Wallace's oeuvre more than a decade ago: Marshall Boswell is the author of *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (2003), which is still one of the most enlightening pieces of writing on the subject, and Stephen J. Burn has written the only monograph to-date to focus on *Infinite Jest* alone. Furthermore, these two collections are contributions to an academic subfield that is recent and yet rapidly acquiring prominence, as it is clear by the constant output of publications: in the few months since the appearance of *The Long Thing*, publishing houses on both sides of the Atlantic have already contributed two new collections and a monograph on Wallace.<sup>1</sup>

3

Interestingly enough, these three books are not easily classifiable as works of literary criticism: they all interpret Wallace's writing in relation to its philosophical underpinnings and implications. They are sometimes technical and always specific: they can take for granted the importance of the author, and proceed to dissect the work. Thus what is the peculiar point of view that collections such as the *Companion* and *The Long Thing* offer their own reader? None in particular, and *there* lies their strength. They both constitute an attempt to clarify and articulate the reasons why reading Wallace is considered by many a way to feel and comprehend some of the most important developments of our time and culture. The two collections are non-specific at heart: they serve the most important task of bringing to light the meaning itself –the ultimate *value*– of an activity as demanding as the appreciation of works of fiction that are always complex, often deliberately overwhelming. What is remarkable, then, is that they reflect different strategies to achieve the same target.

4

The *Companion* is centrifugal and diverse, with essays ranging in scope from the "Mathematics of Infinity," a piece authored by Roberto Natalini, a professional mathematician, to the intersections of Wallace's fiction and disciplines such as gender studies, neurosciences and the tradition of American Pragmatism. But the *Companion* also includes essays that are historicist in their approach, and help contextualize both Wallace's influence on younger writers and his predecessors' influences on him. The latter is the case with Kasia Boddy's excellent piece on *Girl with Curious Hair*, in which she succeeds in describing Wallace's early short stories as a series of attempts to define his own style against that of

a number of writers he imitates, parodies and borrows from. At the end of the volume Andrew Hoberek, in "The Novel After David Foster Wallace," closes the circle by considering the evolution of Wallace's poetics throughout his career, and the impact it had on writers such as Jennifer Egan, Junot Diaz and Zadie Smith, as well as on his longtime friend and rival, Jonathan Franzen. Boddy's and Hoberek's essays thus manage to account for the importance of Wallace's artistic achievement by describing it as "A Fiction of Response" (Boddy's title) on two distinct levels: response to problems in contemporary ethics, politics and aesthetics, and response to the solutions offered by other writers and philosophers. The portrait that emerges from these pages is that of an artist whose outlook on his own times transcended rigid partitions between different fields of knowledge (literature, philosophy and culture at large) to become a nodal point in a network or community of readers and writers alike. Surely, part of the reason why the field of Wallace studies is evolving so rapidly lies here, in the fact that the critical reading of his fiction gives us access to a set of questions and attempts which do not only characterize his generation, but rather define a contemporary phase of nothing less than the history of the novel in its entirety. In this sense Wallace's work (and its academic reception) is a great introduction to themes that are rapidly becoming ubiquitous: a return to sincerity and genuine human connection, and yet a return that is neither oblivious to nor incompatible with the lessons of Theory and postmodernity. As it is always the case with the authors of works that might be defined as "encyclopedic," Wallace's fiction naturally points to its many different contexts.

5

The stylistic dichotomies which Hoberek identifies in Wallace's fiction are those typical of postmodernist fiction: they include those between maximalist and minimalist prose, realism and its deconstruction, a complex characterization and the flatness of many characters of contemporary literature. Hoberek is careful in contextualizing these tensions both synchronically and diachronically: thus the immense cast of characters that unites Wallace and Zadie Smith is also linked to the technique of a past master such as Dickens. Yet this sort of contextualization does not proceed from the assumption that Wallace was in fact successful in his aesthetic endeavor, or necessarily innovative in his formal experimentations. On the contrary, Hoberek argues, "the most important thing about Wallace's fiction may well be that it refuses the imperative to absolute originality that drove novelistic innovation throughout the twentieth century" (224). His books encourage us to consider literary history "not as a series of outmoded styles waiting to be superseded, but rather as a storehouse of formal options [...] awaiting renewal." It is delightful to read these lines at the end of the *Companion* and realize that its own organizing principle mirrors Hoberek's assessment of Wallace: each essay focuses on a particular novel or short story collection, following the chronological order of publication, and yet the impression they give, collectively, is not that of a constant and

harmonic development, but of a series of more or less tentative attempts on the part of a writer to come to terms with the impasses and shortcomings of his own previous work.

6

It is admirable that many of the contributors to the *Companion* manage to convey so convincingly an author's urgency to find the best way to connect and communicate with the people around him, and with his own audience in particular. Thus the existential struggle of Wallace's private life is described as the very fuel of his work as a writer—and the latter cannot be properly understood without a broader look at his philosophical influences. David H. Evans's piece in the *Companion*, "Free Will and Faith in William James and David Foster Wallace," is a brilliant contribution in this sense: by means of a comparison with the pragmatic philosopher, Evans is able to fully articulate the existential stakes of Wallace's quest out of the more depressing implications of Theory. The same sense of impelling necessity to cope with life's trouble through the written page emerges in Marshall Boswell's chapter on "Oblivion and the Nightmare of Consciousness." Moreover, for readers of Boswell's excellent monograph on Wallace, both the *Companion* and *The Long Thing* represent an occasion to read two articles (one in each collection) that might well be considered as the two final instalments of his longer work. In 2003, in fact, Boswell had access to just a few of the stories that would be then included in *Oblivion*, and *The Pale King* was still in the workings. Another important name in Wallace studies to cover new territory is that of Mary K. Holland. Her piece on *Brief Interviews with Hideous Man* reflects an intent that is evident in both collections: to let the critical assessment of Wallace extend beyond the strict boundaries of *Infinite Jest*, his *magnus opus*.

7

Accordingly, *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing"* fills a gap in criticism that was due to the only recent publication of *The Pale King*, Wallace's posthumous novel (2011). The book, in fact, is divided in two sections: the former, "Wallace as Novelist," focuses on aspects of his poetics that are constant throughout his career, while it is only in the latter, "The Novels," that the individual essays are organised around a single work of fiction. This group includes one chapter on *The Broom of the System*, two on *Infinite Jest* and four on *The Pale King*. These numbers alone show the "corrective" intent of the collection. And yet I would argue that the ultimate value of *The Long Thing* lies in its first section, because it is when critics adopt that kind of aerial, career-sweeping perspective that we grasp the best insight into what they think is really at stake in the artistic endeavour of an author. One only needs a glance at the "Contents" page to realise that the key themes of these initial four essays are those that have been recurrent in Wallace studies since its inception, and that is because they are all more or less directly related to the ethical dimension of fiction. Thus, these chapters are four new forays into familiar territory. They are not mere repetitions of

summaries: rather, by linking these theoretical problems to precise formal characteristics, they aim at better articulating a debate that was promising and yet merely sketched out. The first one, Adam Kelly's "David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas," makes use of the terminology Bakhtin had deployed in relation to Dostoevsky and his "dialectic imagination" and confronts it with Wallace's three novels. What emerges is the picture of a writer who did not write to express opinions that he had already fully worked out, but rather wished to engage the reader in a quest for balance between opposing values and problems that were still unresolved. Whereas *The Broom of the System* was a work of fiction that asked to be interpreted and understood in its own terms, Kelly argues, *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King* genuinely interrogate the reader by convincingly dramatizing the implications of both sides of a given issue. The most famous example of Wallace's dialectical technique is the Tucson, AZ scene in *Infinite Jest*: Steeply's and Marathe's points of view on the theme of freedom are given equal space and depth, thus making any assumption regarding the opinion of the author undecidable –and ultimately irrelevant.

8

Kelly's reading of the dialogue scenes in Wallace's work is in deep resonance with Andrew Warren's contribution, "Modeling Community and Narrative in *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*," in which Wallace's style and use of jargon are described as one among many strategies which he deploys to create a sense of intimacy with the reader. Readers of Wallace's nonfiction are familiar with his arguments concerning the necessity to "return" fiction writing to the realm of authentic and effective communication between two individuals, the writer and her reader. This is a theme that is also explicit in much of his novels and short stories, and his predilections for Wittgenstein's philosophy and its focus on language's fundamental function in the shaping of a community has been given due consideration in previous works of criticism. It is in this sense that Kelly and Warren are furthering our understanding of critical trajectories that are not only as old as the discipline itself, but actually motivated Wallace's own manifesto-like pieces, "E Unibus Pluram" and his famous interview with Larry McCaffrey. Similar echoes with these and other works of nonfiction can be found in Allard den Dulk's article on Wallace and Kierkegaard, as well as in Toon Staes's "Wallace and Empathy: A Narrative Approach." Here as in the other essays in this section the object itself of the study (dialogue, community, empathy) is drawn directly from Wallace's own articulation of the ethical value of literature. The fact that some of his claims are not particularly original (nor are they meant to be) does not prevent us from recognising his own parameters behind the critical lenses that his critics have chosen to adopt. The tendency to read Wallace the way he wanted to be read (that is, by measuring his achievement by the same standards that he had set for himself at the start of his mature phase) goes beyond *The Long Thing* and has characterized the work of more than one critic.

9

Adam Kelly himself had already voiced a similar complaint in his 2010 survey of the existing scholarship on Wallace when he claimed that “[by 2003] the essay-interview nexus had become established orthodoxy.” He then went on to identify, among the latest contributions, a new wave in the field that was not so much concerned with Wallace’s own statements of poetics and thus managed to be more effectively critical. And yet, even considering the notable exceptions (Mary K. Holland’s reading of *Infinite Jest* being a case in point<sup>ii</sup>), the community of Wallace scholars seems to be primarily concerned with taking for granted both the validity of Wallace’s artistic premises and the fact that he managed to achieve his own goals. The relevant question seems to be *how*, and never *whether*. This is not inherently problematic: the fact that an entire community of scholars is ready to accept an author’s reading of contemporary culture only testifies to the relevance of his work. Moreover, the critics in both the *Companion* and *The Long Thing* are right in wanting to give a better account of how Wallace’s oeuvre develops from its own theoretical premises. These articles are good scholarly work because they tackle issues of Wallace’s poetics with a variety of approaches – historicist, philosophical, narratological. But they also leave the reader waiting for a further development in Wallace studies: once a full appraisal of his literary achievements will be established, it will be important to consider what Wallace failed to see, understand and interpret –and why.

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## NOTES

i. I am referring to Robert K. Bolger and Scott Korb, eds. *Gesturing Toward Reality: David Foster Wallace and Philosophy*, London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013; Steven M. Cahn and Maureen Eckert, eds. *Freedom and the Self: Essays on the Philosophy of David Foster Wallace*, New York: Columbia University Press 2015; Allard den Dulk, *Existentialist Engagement in Wallace, Eggers and Foer*, London and New York: Bloomsbury 3PL, 2014.

ii. First published as a journal article, Holland’s essay later became a chapter of her *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Literature*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.

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