

# Reviews

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*Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*  
edited by David Hering

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At the moment it is difficult to predict what David Foster Wallace's legacy might be among literary critics, but since his suicide in September of 2008 his writing has received considerable attention. This is not to suggest that he was unappreciated during his lifetime – the reception of *Infinite Jest* (1996) had a rock-star-like quality – but, as so often happens with the untimely passing of a notable cultural figure, the importance of reading Wallace has become paramount for many since his death. There are clear reasons for this, but perhaps the simplest one is that Wallace has been understood, for nearly two decades now, as the next 'big thing' in American literature. Even before Marshall Boswell's influential study *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (2003), he was viewed as the successor to Thomas Pynchon, William Gaddis, Robert Coover, John Barth, and others. For his critics and fans, Wallace was both the heir apparent to the giants of literary postmodernism and the next aesthetic step forward in US fiction. The passing of such a figure has consequently caused a significant amount of new attention to be paid to his work.

Until now, the majority of Wallace criticism has addressed his use of irony – or rather, his meta-ironic reversals of postmodern metafictional staples mobilised in an effort to achieve a form of new 'post-ironic' sincerity. This sincerity has been characterised as striving, albeit unsuccessfully, to break through the insurmountable and solipsistic communication gap between self and other. Though there are a few exceptions to this generalisation, notably in early articles by Tom LeClair (1996) and N. Katherine Hayles (1999), Wallace criticism has focused at times almost exclusively on comments regarding irony and sincerity that he made in a special edition of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* in 1993. In that issue, Wallace published what was to become one of the most important literary manifestos of the 1990s, 'E Unibus Pluram', and also gave a lengthy interview to Larry McCaffery. Wallace emphasised the wholesale appropriation by the culture industry of

what he called 'postmodern irony', specifically in the minimalist novels of the mid 1980s and in televisual culture more generally. In response to this, he predicted that a new generation of *sincere* writers would emerge out of the hip, cynical, postmodern malaise of the 1990s. Indeed, *'E Unibus Pluram'* is as incontestably important for reading Wallace as T. S. Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', Henry James's 'The Art of Fiction', or John Barth's 'The Literature of Exhaustion' are for those writers, but on the whole, Wallace critics have limited their attention to such a prodigious, encyclopaedic, and theoretically rigorous writer only to what he has said about literature. Combating this critical oversimplification of Wallace's work, *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays* proposes firmly establishing the field of Wallace studies by forging new and unexplored paths away from the now stock-in-trade discussions of Wallace's irony and sincerity.

Occasioned by the first international conference devoted to Wallace, which was held in Liverpool, England, in 2009, *Consider David Foster Wallace*, the first volume of critical essays addressing his work, is making a timely appearance. In the two years since Wallace's death, at least three journals have devoted considerable space to memorialising him; a subsequent Wallace conference was held in November 2009 at CUNY (City University of New York); an important retrospective piece in the *New Yorker* appeared by D. T. Max; and an interview with David Lipsky was recently published by Broadway Books. Three posthumous works by Wallace are also expected: his undergraduate thesis, *Fate, Time, and Language*, his unfinished final novel, *The Pale King*, and a volume of his uncollected short stories and nonfiction. And in September 2010 the University of Texas opened the David Foster Wallace Archive at the Harry Ransom Center for Research in the Arts and Humanities. With all the recent attention Wallace has received, editor David Hering's opening sentence of *Consider* seems incontestable: 'And but [*sic*] so we come to the commencement of what I suppose we should call Wallace Studies' (p. 9).

Greg Carlisle, author of *Elegant Complexity* (2007), a study of *Infinite Jest*, introduces *Consider* by making an impassioned case for the need to establish such a field of study. Not only do scholars have to 'figure out how to get Wallace taught in more classrooms' (p. 20), he writes, but also 'we need to start generating more print resources as well. [. . .] We should collect Wallace's interviews, too. We should collect the best of what is online and in print format, too. Finally, we should have a *Wallace Quarterly*. It is not too soon to have this' (p. 22). Though it is difficult to disagree with him, Carlisle's case is diminished by a certain lack of critical rigour. His main arguments regarding Wallace's relevance and the need to establish a field of Wallace studies are: 'This

is his value: he creates work for the reader that is fun and challenging, and he makes you want to research and explore' (p. 15); and he is 'the most important author of the late [twentieth] and early [twenty-first] centuries. I think a world in which Wallace is a household name would be a more mindful, passionate, and compassionate world' (p. 20). The conversational tone of the introduction may result from the fact that it was delivered as a keynote address, but for what amounts to the inaugural publication of Wallace studies, Carlisle's introduction insufficiently makes the case for the need to establish such a field.

Most of the rest of the essays in *Consider*, however, commendably do make this case. Of especial note is Adam Kelly's 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction'. Significantly, this is the only chapter in *Consider* devoted to the topic of sincerity. In it, Kelly effectively intervenes in the commonplace critical approach to Wallace by establishing a solid and theoretically complex ground for a discussion of sincerity by utilising Lionel Trilling's *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972) and the work of Jacques Derrida to 'suggest . . . that Wallace's project ended up even more far-reaching than he claimed it would be in that key early essay, and that from *Infinite Jest* onward it became primarily about returning to literary narrative a concern with sincerity not seen since modernism shifted the ground so fundamentally almost a century before' (p. 133). Kelly's essay stands out because it extends and complicates how Wallace's sincerity can be read, and does so through an awareness of the intellectual milieu that both influenced Wallace and weighed heavily on him throughout his life: 'sincerity has the same structure as the gift: it can always be taken for manipulation, and this risk is fundamental – it cannot be reduced by appeal to intention, or morality, or context – because true sincerity, if there is ever such a thing, must take place in the aporia between the conditional and unconditional' (p. 140).

The rest of the essays in *Consider* depart considerably from previous Wallace criticism, and the novelty of the collection is established in its first essay, where Clare Hayes-Brady draws attention to the previously unnoticed importance of the thinking of Paul Ricoeur and Richard Rorty in philosophically grounding Wallace's project. In 'The Book, the Broom and the Ladder' she argues that through this philosophical grounding, Wallace's first novel, *The Broom of the System*, 'deserves to be considered not as the juvenilia of a potentially talented author, but as the self-assured declaration of an artistic and philosophical project that would give rise not just to an impressive career, but also to a rebirth of American fiction' (p. 36).

Several other essays stand out in *Consider*. Graham Foster's 'A Blasted Region: David Foster Wallace's Man-made Landscapes'

rectifies the conspicuously absent discussion so far of landscape in Wallace's work by emphasising its relationship to Leo Marx's seminal study *The Machine in the Garden* (1964). Connie Luther and Philip Coleman offer new ways into *Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way* that go beyond simply stressing the novella's relationship to Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*. In particular, Luther begins the very necessary conversation of how to understand Wallace's work with regard to late capitalism by noting its affinities with Fredric Jameson's account of postmodernism. "'Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders': Chaos and Realism in *Infinite Jest*" by Kiki Benzon also admirably takes up the subject of his engagement with cultural formations specific to the 'contours of the late-capitalist environment' (p. 101). Drawing upon his own conception of 'radical realism' from *Infinite Jest*, she argues that '*Infinite Jest* affirms that the perpetual, fundamental tension between order and disorder is precisely where "the real" resides' (p. 112). David Hering's '*Infinite Jest*: Triangles, Cycles, Choices and Chases' discerns how *Infinite Jest*'s structure – in terms of both its narrative and its presentation of topological space – is based on the fractal known as the Sierpinski Gasket. In terms of unexplored terrain in Wallace's work, Hering's intervention is potentially the most interesting in the collection, for it points to the fact that literary critics must take quite seriously Wallace's early training in formal logic as well as his interest in transfinite mathematics.

Though perhaps less important for more general discussions of Wallace, the other essays in *Consider* highlight the sheer multitude of arenas he explored in his substantial body of work, and consequently how diverse any field of Wallace studies will necessarily have to be to engage the many facets of his writing. For instance, Gregory Phipps engages with the role athletics play in Wallace's work, Christopher Thomas addresses the obvious influence of Laurence Stern's *Tristram Shandy* on *Infinite Jest*, Iannis Goerlandt begins what promises to be a fruitful study of how annotation and footnotes function in his shorter fiction and nonfiction, while Paul Jenner takes up his encounter with John McCain's 2000 presidential campaign. In addition, Christoforos Diakoulakis, Thomas Tracey, Christoph Ribbat, Daniel Turnbull, and Matt Tresco turn in diverse readings of Wallace around such topics as, respectively, love and scotopia, representations of trauma in *Oblivion*, his relationship to New Journalism, ethics, and autism.

For a collection purporting to establish a field of Wallace studies, and one that is admirably attempting to do so through a wide range of new approaches, however, *Consider David Foster Wallace* remains unsatisfactory. Part of this is the sheer brevity of the essays (none is longer than fifteen pages), as well as the ratio of graduate work to the

work of more established critics (ten to six), but *Consider* ultimately highlights how much more work still needs to be done on Wallace. Though probably an inescapable problem for any first collection attempting to define a field – especially for a writer whose output was so voluminous and diverse – there is a pervading sense that *Consider* is a rushed initial foray into what should prove to be an important new field of literary studies. That said, *Consider* should be welcomed for the simple fact that it makes quite clear a serious conversation about Wallace is already under way and will continue productively into the foreseeable future.

### Further Reading

- Boswell, Marshall, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2003).
- Carlisle, Greg, *Elegant Complexity: A Study of David Foster Wallace's 'Infinite Jest'* (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2007).
- Freudenthal, Elizabeth, 'Anti-Interiority: Compulsiveness, Objectification, and Identity in *Infinite Jest*', *New Literary History*, 41:1 (Winter 2010), 192–211.
- Giles, Paul, 'Sentimental Posthumanism: David Foster Wallace', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 53:3 (Fall 2007), 327–44.
- Hayles, N. Katherine, 'The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity: Virtual Ecologies, Entertainment, and *Infinite Jest*', *New Literary History*, 30:3 Ecocriticism (Summer 1999), 675–97.
- LeClair, Tom, 'The Prodigious Fiction of Richard Powers, William Vollmann, and David Foster Wallace', *Critique*, 38:1 (Fall 1996), 12–37.
- Lipsky, David, *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace* (New York: Broadway Books, 2010).
- Max, D. T., 'The Unfinished', *New Yorker* (9 March 2009). ([http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/03/09/090309fa\\_fact\\_max](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/03/09/090309fa_fact_max))