

David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing," ed. Marshall Boswell (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 252 pp.

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Why might David Foster Wallace be best characterized and indeed understood as primarily a novelist and not, as may appear entirely reasonable, as a "short story writer, and perhaps a journalist and story writer who also wrote novels?" (vi). So asks Marshall Boswell in the Introduction to this collection of critical essays that together forward an important answer to this question. The answer, Boswell argues, is twofold. First and quite simply, Wallace wanted to be a novelist, and most of his other work was produced, as Boswell shows, to serve his overarching desire to do something new, something important with the US novel. Secondly, Wallace managed to do precisely this. Wallace, this collection of 11 critical essays shows, "was a specific kind of novelist" (vii), one who did specific things with the novel, things that the essays that make up this collection aim to understand better. But since Wallace was acutely aware of the recent history of the novel form and at every step aimed to articulate the specific things he did with the novel in relation to that history, the essays that together make up this collection forward a contribution to literary criticism that is about more than a matter of helping us understand the novelist a bit better. That is, by focusing on Wallace's commitment to the novel, the collection makes legible his immense contribution to the contemporary US novel and, indeed, it shows that by understanding Wallace's novels better we gain important insights into its development after postmodernism.

To that end, the various authors take the reader time and again from the particular to the universal, from Wallace's education and formation as a budding novelist during his undergraduate years to his later literary and literary critical output, thus tracing a multifaceted trajectory that leads from his early novels to *Infinite Jest* and to the posthumously published *The Pale King* (to which Wallace referred in correspondence as "The Long Thing"). As Boswell and David Letzler show, Wallace was interested throughout his career in adapting a particular kind of novel form, the encyclopedic novel, to the demands of his own historical context, which always included a reflection on the history of this novel form in US literature. Wallace's engagement with the genre rests on a deep knowledge of the form's own history and significance for the postmodern novel (as in Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* or Don DeLillo's *Underworld*). Furthermore, Wallace's own manipulation of the form is aimed at moving past these previous instantiations in part because of his conviction that he was writing novels after the end of postmodernism. Consequently, an examination of this formal aspect of Wallace's work yields profound insights into the history of the US novel.

Accordingly, the essays show the value of returning to well-known critical writings and journalism (such as Wallace's 1993 essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction" or his famous interview with Larry McCaffery). The contributors examine them as integral parts of Wallace's development as a novelist, indices of his struggle with problems of form and literary history, as well as with literature as medium, that are dialectically bound up with the production of his novels. Bradley J. Fest, for example, takes up Wallace's 1993 essay and his early interviews to treat Wallace's engagement with metafiction as a "mediated myth" (86), a way of formally mediating, through literary narrative, a historically specific relationship to temporality, to teleology, and to totality. It was a myth about endings and a purportedly postapocalyptic sociohistorical mood that had the power to speak (or write) itself into existence. Yet since metafiction is directly bound up with literary postmodernism, and since literary postmodernism, as Fest shows, was a party to which Wallace thought himself to have arrived late, his play with metafiction's ends is at every point historically specific. The famous eschatological element of *Infinite Jest*, therefore, is literary historically specific insofar as it is a formal way of rendering concrete Wallace's own untimeliness as well as that of the US novel after postmodernism.

Wallace's attempt to grapple with the link between form and history in his own novels, the authors illustrate, is bound up with literary criticism's struggle to periodize the novel after postmodernism. This collection persuasively illustrates that Wallace's novels engage the same questions about the novel after postmodernism that literary criticism still struggles to answer: how might we write/read a novel that arrived to the party of postmodernism after it had already ended, a situation in which, Fest quips, "everyone was still standing around holding their drinks, wondering if they should go home?" (86). While Wallace was no doubt strikingly skilled at isolating in his novels those topics and themes that loomed large in his historical era, the most impressive essays here show that criticism misses an integral part of Wallace's genius if it fails to account for the centrality of form in his work. In examining Wallace's relationship to the novel of ideas, for instance, Adam Kelly shows that one true mark of Wallace's craft as novelist is his interest in themes and topics largely insofar as he can trace them in their sedimented state—as form. But Wallace's commitment to form that becomes visible when we read his novels as novels of ideas is in itself grounded on a historical awareness of the US novel of ideas that, as Kelly argues, informs Wallace's deploying of form to counteract such novels' infamous and limiting reliance on experience. Wallace's novels, then, move past the cult of experience and its emphasis on the subjective and toward a formal, historical confrontation with ideas at the very moment at which postmodernism and its focus on identities begin to wane.

Similarly, Wallace's use of the encyclopedic novel is at every moment historically specific since, as Letzler demonstrates, he formulated his own experiments with the genre both as a move beyond previous instantiations and in direct relation to the problems encountering attempts at encyclopedically ordering, managing, or synthesizing data or information in Wallace's era. Of course, any answer to the question of the very possibility of ordering knowledge or of ordering information as expressing mastery of the cultural specificities of a given epoch entails commitments to critical and interpretive positions that are, in turn, directly interwoven with critical and aesthetic choices. What, then, is the logic underlying the act of encyclopedizing upon which *Infinite Jest's* particular modulation of this tendency rests, asks Letzler? Is it a postmodern attachment to a more open approach to knowledge or information, or do we find logical investments in ordering or totality that help us make sense of Wallace's attempts to move the novel beyond postmodernism while never forgetting postmodernism's important lessons? Once again, it becomes clear that how we read *Infinite Jest* has important consequences for how we understand recent US literary history.

Not all essays collected in this book are of the same, high quality as the ones to which I allude above. At times one cannot shake the feeling that the project with which the collection tasks itself and which Boswell circumscribes so effectively could have been carried out in more detail. Too many aspects of Wallace's strikingly knowledgeable and poignant experiments with novelistic form remain underexamined, and even individual foci, such as the encyclopedic novel, would have warranted more in-depth treatment. But I take this feeling of incompleteness, of wanting more, as a good thing. After all, the point of collections such as these is to isolate important areas of critical inquiry and offer blueprints for longer, more sustained projects. Additionally, the book also collects some of the earliest scholarly essays on *The Pale King*, Wallace's posthumously published final novel whose historical significance we are only beginning to appreciate. In the end, the true source of the few moments of dissatisfaction with this book are likely less a matter of lacking quality than of lacking quantity—above all, I wanted the book to be longer, to include further essays. The book helped me better understand David Foster Wallace as well as the history of the novel in the US after postmodernism. To accomplish this and still leave the reader feeling that there is much more to be said clearly signals a profoundly important intervention.