

Clare Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, and Resistance*. London: Bloomsbury, 2016. ix. 222 pp.

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Clare Hayes-Brady's *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, and Resistance* is a bold contribution to the burgeoning field of Wallace studies. Indeed, the book appears at what feels like a pivotal time for the field. In the knowledge that Wallace "criticism has turned up a range of ideas that have become doctrinal" (ix), and yet also anticipating "the development of a new critical perspective, a second wave of scholarship" (193), *The Unspeakable* offers a fascinating snapshot of how far Wallace studies has come, where it now stands, and where it may go.

The organizing principle of Hayes-Brady's study is failure; a perhaps surprising approach to a writer whose work continues to inspire a voluminous amount of scholarly and popular praise. For Hayes-Brady, failure in Wallace's texts is not a sign of deficiency, but opportunity: it is the "generative trigger" (195) of his "concern with human connection and the establishment of the self among selves" (93). "Generative failure" (5) is in fact the term Hayes-Brady gives to one of the three modes of failure she identifies in his work. This refers to how "our inevitable failure to communicate successfully, due to the fundamental absence inherent in textuality" (5) generates an awareness of the other's alterity, the existence of which forestalls the solipsistic delusion "that one's own consciousness is responsible for the whole universe" (5). The second mode Hayes-Brady identifies is structural failure, in which the capacity for communication is missing, whilst the third, abject failure, entails "the total failure of an attempt to communicate" (4). These latter two do not figure as heavily in the book's analyses. Indeed, Hayes-Brady's preference for generative failure signals her largely upbeat estimation, throughout this study, of Wallace's "redemptive ambition for literature" (22).

The Unspeakable's seven chapters trace the articulation of this ambition across a broad range of Wallace's fiction and non-fiction. Beginning with a reading of incompleteness in his texts, Hayes-Brady proceeds to considerations of Wallace's

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embeddedness in particular literary and cultural contexts, his engagement with philosophers (especially Ludwig Wittgenstein, Richard Rorty and Paul Ricoeur), the role of community and vocality in his writing, and finally of his troubling engagements with gender. Though her approach is sometimes quite choppy, Hayes-Brady maintains focus with her conviction that Wallace follows an “overall artistic project of working against solipsism” (93). Nonetheless, she is attentive to the development of this project through different registers; for her the tenor of Wallace’s “writing appears to shift from language to culture and finally to politics” (16). This may still sound too neat to some, but Hayes-Brady is convincing in her argument that “central concerns and strategies are identifiable in different guises from the beginning his career” (10).

Despite the insightfulness of such broad estimations, this study is perhaps at its best when it zooms in on the formal mechanics of Wallace’s texts. In this regard a highlight is Chapter 7, “Vocal Instability and Narrative Structure”. Focusing on what she calls “skeletal narrative structure” (138) in Wallace’s writing, Hayes-Brady offers an astute analysis of how “Wallace embeds the seeds of textual and interpretive unravelling within the narrative voice of a story” (138). That said, what is arguably the book’s most significant section is far broader in its approach – Chapter 8’s consideration of gender, difference, and the body. Noting “the heavy bias toward the Y chromosome that characterizes his readership”, Hayes-Brady acknowledges how Wallace’s “writing of both female characters and romantic relationships is patchy at best and enormously problematic at worst” (167). A consideration of the sexism in Wallace’s texts has been needed for a while, and *The Unspeakable* seeks to provide such.

However, Hayes-Brady could have pursued this line of enquiry more forcefully. Rather than elucidate the sexual politics of his work, she suggests that images of women—“one of the major weaknesses of his writing” (168)—offered Wallace “a shorthand for the explication of concepts of alterity that occupied much of his writing” (191). In this way she turns a political objection into another form of aesthetic appreciation; Wallace may be poor at writing women, in other words, but that too is generative. This unwillingness to carry out a more exacting critique may be attributable to Hayes-Brady’s tendency to read the man rather than the texts. On the same page on which we are warned against “attention to Wallace’s own possible prejudices”, for example, she postulates that his depictions of “relationships may be read as a literalization of *Wallace’s own ideas* about the challenges of connection” (168; italics added).

The intentional fallacy is still worryingly common in Wallace studies, and Hayes-Brady’s susceptibility to it is by no means the most flagrant example. *The Unspeakable*’s weaknesses indeed lie mainly in its indebtedness to the field as it currently stands. In its

intimations of what is to come though, Hayes-Brady's study is at the pinnacle of a second wave of scholarship it both explicitly augurs and endeavours to spark.