

**David Hering, *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form*.  
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202pp.**

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This timely monograph from David Hering is one of several Wallace-orientated books to have been published by Bloomsbury in 2016, following on from Clare Hayes-Brady's *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*, and preceding the arrival of their "David Foster Wallace Studies" series, inaugurated by the publication of Lucas Thompson's *Global Wallace*. Like these other titles, Hering's offering covers new ground in the field of Wallace Studies, underscoring "a history of key formal and structural motifs that are of sustained importance to Wallace's fiction" (4). The book is organised around four headings: vocality, spatiality, visuality, and finality. The first three chapters each provide career-length analysis of a formal theme in Wallace's fiction, whilst the concluding chapter delivers much-needed scholarly insight into *The Pale King's* fraught compositional history, aided by Hering's meticulous archival research at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin. The latter is worth the price of admission alone here, charting the development of Wallace's last, unfinished novel from its initial conception as an exploration of virtual reality pornography entitled *Sir John Feelgood*, to Wallace's abandonment of the project in the final years of his life.

Chapter one—"vocality"—examines Wallace's anxiety over authorial presence after Barthes' "Death of the Author", and traces his career-long concern with "the author's dialogic relationship with the reader" (17). Although reading Wallace as a proponent of dialogism is not a particularly original approach within Wallace Studies, Hering's analysis stands out for the way it plots how Wallace's formal technique develops throughout his career. Hering argues that Wallace's early fiction is haunted by the spectre of a Bloomian "absent possessor"; very literally in the case of Gramma's (and by extension, Wittgenstein's) influence over protagonist Lenore in *The Broom of the System*, and at an authorial level in the narrative registers of the stories in *Girl with Curious Hair*. *Infinite Jest*, Hering suggests, sees Wallace toying with the idea of a "companion ghost" as a way to avoid the solipsistic, metafictional recursion of the early

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fiction, going on to frame Don Gately's conversation with the wraith of James Incandenza as a dialogic critique of Wallace's own "monologic artistic tendency", albeit a critique that recognises Wallace's failure to relinquish "extradiegetic control" (36). Hering then detects Wallace's use of a "revenant author" figure in later works such as "Good Old Neon" as a means of "repositioning ... Wallace's implied presence from monologic remote orchestrator to dialogic companion" (39). By illustrating the stadial progression of Wallace's method, Hering's critical intervention here is perhaps the most convincing argument to date regarding the possibility of a dialogic relationship between Wallace and his readers, relying as it does on close textual analysis rather than an extradiegetic blind leap of faith on the part of the reader.

The second chapter traces Wallace's "spatial anxiety": "the relationship between the idea of the region and institutional/extra-institutional space" (44). Hering delineates how "institutions in Wallace's fiction progressively *impede* egress", linking this with a "steady process of elision" of the real Midwest as the "cultural simulacra of the Midwest" becomes "mapped" on to the region itself (77, 75). Although Hering's reading of institutionalisation is assured, this is perhaps the weakest section of the book; his assumption of a homogeneous "authentic, non-mediated Midwest" is perhaps open to charges of essentialism (75). However, this is more a flaw in his imagining of the region itself, rather than a criticism of his argument as it pertains to Wallace. The third section looks at visuality in Wallace's work, tracing his preoccupation with screens and mirrors as a formal device. Hering again succeeds in framing this as a career-length progression in Wallace's oeuvre, moving from the mirror in Vlad the Impaler's cage in *Broom* to an "ethically inflected model of refraction" in "The Suffering Channel", which "dismantles the privacy of the viewer, requiring them to *look through* the 'prism' of mediation to the means by which the mediator retrieves the images of the suffering subject" (120). In doing so, Hering manages to reinforce the idea that Wallace was arguably close to achieving a dialogic relationship with his reader, even whilst acknowledging his own presence.

Although Hering can at times be guilty of the "academese" with which Wallace himself had a vexed relationship—for example: "a monograph allows ... a degree of granularity in analysis that is of serious value to an evaluation of Wallace's extensively detailed, often encyclopaedic narratives" (3)—this is a well-researched, provocative volume which is of considerable value to the field of Wallace Studies. His exemplary analysis of Wallace's early work in particular prompts a re-thinking of the narrative that has emerged in relation to the Wallace canon, recasting *Broom* and *Girl* as important, tentative first steps in a career-long path rather than 'failed' self-referential juvenilia, whilst his reframing of *The Pale King* as a narrative about the difficulty of its own

composition injects a new lease of life into this problematic text, and challenges earlier critical assumptions that have been threatening to become axiomatic.