Clare Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, and Resistance* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 232 pp.

Clare Hayes-Brady's provocative title disguises a very measured review of David Foster Wallace's oeuvre. Hayes-Brady defines "failure" as "incompletion," and uses the term in a broadly conceptual sense to connote the deep resistance to closure apparent in Wallace's work. Her intention is, as she explains, to "offer a framework within which his work can be read" (19). In doing so, she moves away from the dominant discourse of the critical field that too often falls back on considering Wallace as a writer primarily concerned with narcissism, solipsism and most prominently sincerity. Stephen Burn has argued that this conception of Wallace "may not be the only way to theorize *Infinite Jest.*"[1] Hayes-Brady takes up the challenge to do this, offering a completely new approach, which sets the book apart from the existing scholarship. By using the idea of failure as a prism, Hayes-Brady addresses the thematic and structural ambiguities that have long been perplexing for scholars and uses them to rethink our perception of Wallace.

The book is divided into eight sections. In the introductory chapter, Hayes-Brady distinguishes between three modes of failure in Wallace—abject, structural and generative failure. The third category is her main focus and the second chapter develops this further, making reference to general examples of failure across Wallace's work and also emphasizing the formative influence of philosophy on him. Crucially, Hayes-Brady attempts to situate Wallace in a broader context and the third chapter examines the literary and cultural influences that shaped Wallace's artistic development. For Hayes-Brady, Wallace is intrinsically a product of his time, "a writer deeply embedded in literary and cultural history" (9). Extending this, chapter four returns to philosophy and offers a more specific account of Wallace's engagement with the discipline. Ludwig Wittgenstein, Richard Rorty and Paul Ricoeur provide specific points of discussion throughout the text, as all were significant to Wallace's intellectual development. This section also refocuses attention on the sometimes overlooked first novel

*Broom of the System*. Chapter five evaluates communication in Wallace's work, with Hayes-Brady mainly illustrating its failures and shortcomings. The sixth chapter reapproaches the prominent topics of narcissism and solipsism with a particular focus on language, while chapter seven goes further by examining the "unique vocal structures" (17) Wallace uses in both fiction and non-fiction. This addresses some of the stylistic conventions of his writing, such as his continual and oftentimes disingenuous repudiation of any sort of expertise. In the eighth chapter, Hayes-Brady questions Wallace's depictions of race, gender and the body, which have been considered amongst Wallace's most pronounced literal failures. Although failure provides a clear anchor for these chapters, it also serves as broad enough umbrella for Hayes-Brady to discuss a wide range of important issues.

The monograph diverges from the critical field in several other notable ways. Aside from the novelty of the central argument itself, Hayes-Brady includes at least partial discussion of all of Wallace's texts—unusual in monographs on Wallace. She states that part of her agenda is to refocus some critical attention on the earlier texts which are often overlooked and undervalued in the face of more prominent works like *Infinite Jest*. She discusses *Broom of the System* and *Girl with Curious Hair* at some length, but even considers works like *Signifying Rappers* and the mathematical text *Everything and More*, which are even more frequently neglected. Wallace himself was sceptical of his early work and this has perhaps influenced the direction of the scholarship, but Hayes-Brady emphasizes the value of these texts as she has done before.[2] She demonstrates that paying attention to them facilitates a deeper understanding of Wallace's artistic progression and this also allows her to trace failure broadly across all periods and genres of his work.

One of the most interesting parts of the monograph is the discussion of gender and sexuality, topics that have remained neglected in Wallace. The eighth chapter also builds on the work of her previous work, developing the

[1] Stephen J. Burn, *Infinite Jest: A Reader's Guide*. 2nd ed. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), 12.

[2] Clare Hayes-Brady, "The Book, the Broom and the Ladder: Philosophical Groundings in the Work of David Foster Wallace," *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays,* ed. David Hering (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), 24-36.

argument she outlined in her excellent chapter in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies* in 2013.[3] Key ideas such as the primacy of language in Wallace are discussed in each. However, whereas the earlier chapter limited its discussion to the link between gender, language and power, the monograph extrapolates these ideas to race and personhood. Rather than dismissing Wallace's representations of otherness out of hand, Hayes-Brady suggests that these provide a necessary point of alterity. Within this chapter, she claims that her framework of failure provides a more useful way to conceptualize these issues. She does not dismiss the problems associated with gender, race and the concept of the other outright; instead she gives a nuanced account that does not deny the problematic aspects of otherness, but attributes a place to them.

Once again, Hayes-Brady has made a highly original contribution to Wallace studies, which nudges the critical field in a new direction. Her capacity to perceive and account for gaps in the scholarship is strongly reflected in the text. Through formulating her argument in terms of failure, she moves away from the hagiographic tendency to blindly venerate Wallace and instead presents a more holistic and functional account of the author. She convincingly argues that Wallace's work can be conceptualized in terms of failure, but by broadening the meaning of the word shows how this does not detract from his legacy. In fact, it has the effect of simply emphasizing the complexity of his writing and, rather than simply brushing over the problems identified by previous scholars, this goes a long way to providing some answers. Hers is a persuasive framework and is certain to initiate a new way of considering Wallace.

Aisling Smith (Melbourne, Australia)

---

[3] Clare Hayes-Brady "'…' Language, Gender, and Modes of Power in David Foster Wallace," *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, ed. Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 131-51.