

DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S *INFINITE JEST*: A READER'S GUIDE

Stephen Burn

London/New York: Continuum, 2012.

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147

If there is a contemporary American novel that warrants a ‘reader’s guide’, David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* is an obvious contender. Its 1104 pages of fragmented narrative, chronological jumps, stylistic experimentation and copious endnotes might seem manageable to those who have already braved other guidebook-spawning heavyweights like *In Search of Lost Time*, *Ulysses*, or *Gravity’s Rainbow*, but less seasoned readers are sure to welcome some orientation in Wallace’s linguistic labyrinth. Stephen Burn’s attempt to provide such guidance is a spirited one, not least because he refuses to match the voluminosity of his source material. Weighing in at 121 pages, the present volume is slim in size, but dense in information. Its concentrated character is due in large part to the considerable amount of preparatory work that it is built on: in a welcome deviation from common editorial practice, Burn seized the opportunity to dramatically modify the structure and content of the *Guide* for its second edition. In fact, calling the current version a “second edition” does not do justice to the author’s efforts. Rather than merely updating and expanding his study, he has utterly transformed it to reflect not only the evolution of his own research, but also the developments in Wallace scholarship that have taken place since the first publication of his guidebook in 2003. These changes are so radical and compelling that even readers of the first edition can invest in the second one without fear of excessive repetition or disappointment.

The first visible change are the cuts: an introduction to Wallace's biography and a summary of *Infinite Jest's* initial reception have been replaced by a shorter, tabular chronology of Wallace's life and work and a more comprehensive assessment of his influence on contemporary American literature. This is both a welcome and a necessary modification, reflecting the increase in autobiographical information made available about Wallace as well as changes in the United States' literary landscape in the wake of the author's suicide in 2008. Furthermore, an epilogue has been added, containing brief discussions of the books by Wallace that have been published since *Infinite Jest*. This change is less compelling since the section seems somewhat out of place in a book that advertises itself as a guide to Wallace's *magnum opus* and not as a survey of his oeuvre as a whole. Given what he achieves in the rest of the book, one might wish that Burn had reserved these pages for additional insights into the novel itself, but since he has set himself the task of placing the novel in "a larger literary and cultural matrix", this attempt to connect *Infinite Jest* with the later work is understandable (Burn 2012: x). However, such connections are really only established in the section on *The Pale King*; the remaining overviews of Wallace's 'millennial fictions' are too restrictively focused on their individual subjects to qualify as integral parts of a guide to *Infinite Jest*.

148

Setting aside this minor problem, one has to appreciate the central achievement of Burn's book, namely its illumination of *Infinite Jest's* key themes, such as freedom, technology, language, the persistence of the past into the present, and the contingency of the self on the other. Burn's achievement here is to connect these themes to cogent analyses of Wallace's texts and the structures that inform them. In order to demonstrate how form and content are inseparable in the author's work, Burn provides a compelling interpretation of Wallace's short story "A Radically Condensed History of Postindustrial Life" —a veritable miniature composed of only of two paragraphs amounting to no more than 79 words. Despite its brevity, Burn manages to develop not only the spatial and aural dimensions of Wallace's work but also its relationship to mathematics, metafiction, and the deep structures that "enable or limit thought" itself (Burn 2012: 19).

Burn's reading of this 'microfiction' is indicative of his general approach, which seeks to explain the gargantuan whole through reduction to its constituent parts. Reader-friendliness, here, is the result of sustained interpretative effort. That a wealth of insight can be drawn even from a text as short as the "Radically Condensed History" points not only to Burn's considerable powers of interpretive synthesis but also to one of his central contentions about Wallace's work. The latter, Burn argues, is predicated on a "layered aesthetic" —a term he uses to emphasize the openness of Wallace's texts to multiple, but not necessarily conflicting, interpretations (Burn 2012: 21). This attentiveness to the

multidimensionality of the author's work in general and *Infinite Jest* in particular effectively liberates Burn's *Guide* from the all-too-narrow focus on irony and the postmodernist heritage that characterize early readings of the novel and continue to inform a significant part of Wallace scholarship, often at the expense of more unorthodox and autonomous perspectives. Since Wallace himself had established these issues as reference points for his work in a series of paratextual statements that Adam Kelly has since dubbed the "essay-interview nexus", such a concentration of critical attention amounts to a surrender to the author's own position (Kelly 2010). As a scholar who has consistently refused to take authorial word for gospel, Burn is well-equipped to resist the dominant strains in Wallace scholarship, and in the *Guide*, he proves adept at synthesizing the insights of earlier interpretations, even as he alerts the reader to their deficiencies.

However, Burn is not completely immune to the lure of Wallace's own assumptions, which seem to have a way of insinuating themselves into the metadiscourses that aim to explain his work. At the end of the *Guide*'s second chapter, Burn uncharacteristically succumbs to a flight of adulatory rhetoric that presents *Infinite Jest* as "an echo sounding exercise designed to measure the depth of the modern self during the twilight hours of modern identity" (Burn 2012: 32). This notion is problematic not so much because of the flamboyantly poetic register employed to convey it, but rather because it unproblematically accepts two tenets that would warrant further examination: first, that the modern self is best understood according to a depth model of the psyche, and second, that the period from *Infinite Jest*'s publication up to the current cultural moment is indeed best described as a prolonged crisis in human identity. In effect, Burn's formulation closely echoes Wallace's belief that "there are things about the contemporary U.S. that make it distinctively hard to be a real human being", suggesting that Wallace's framing of his own work haunts even those who attempt to remain unbiased (Wallace 2012: 26).

Aside from this one atypical lapse, Burn displays a wariness of interpretive pitfalls and end-all explanations that serves him well: he manages to steer clear of an undue reduction of *Infinite Jest* to any single theme or thesis. Instead, Burn understands the book as ultimately resisting both narrative and interpretive closure. 'Conclusions' are rejected both in the sense that the novel's plot is never resolved in any traditional manner and in the sense that there can never be one exclusive and exhaustive interpretation that accounts for all the text's elements.

Yet even as Burn presents *Infinite Jest* as a novel that "eludes total mapping" (Burn 2012: 34), he takes pains to provide the reader with the necessary tools to navigate a book that its author, in a telling simile, had described as "a very pretty pane of glass that had been dropped off the twentieth story of a building" (Caro 2012:

53). Piecing together the chronological shards, Burn enables even first-time readers of *Infinite Jest* to appreciate its intricate construction and track the exchanges and interactions that take place between its many characters. In particular, it is no small feat that Burn manages to clarify the trajectory of the lethal film that lends the book its title, especially when the narration itself does its utmost to confuse the details of the who, when and where of its circulation.

Providing such orientation is probably a guidebook's most important function, yet Burn's *Guide* also successfully manages to convey a sense of the philosophical concerns and intertextual allusions that pervade *Infinite Jest*. Often these two meet, as when "the search for an adequate understanding of the self", which Burn views as one of the text's dominant themes, is filtered through an engagement with the philosophy of mind as handed down through Descartes and his twentieth-century behaviorist detractor Gilbert Ryle (Burn 2012: 45). Burn's account of how materialist descriptions of the self resonate throughout *Infinite Jest* represents a highlight of his study. Clearly, a book that explores athletics and addiction as ways of behavioral and cognitive conditioning needs to be located within the contexts of neuroscience and biomedicalization, and the *Guide* does an outstanding job of tracing such cultural and philosophical underpinnings.

That a number of its other concerns, like *Infinite Jest*'s mythic patterns or temporal economy, cannot be discussed in detail here for reasons of brevity indicates the vast scope of this slender book, which can be highly recommended to anyone interested in the work of David Foster Wallace and its relations to twentieth-century literature, philosophy, and science.

150

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