

BOTH CRITIC AND NOT: A CASE STUDY OF DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S LITERARY REVIEWS AND ESSAYS

RAUL SĂRAN

West University of Timișoara

Abstract: *While often described as a significant part of David Foster Wallace's contribution to American culture, his essays highlight some of the author's principles and values when it comes to American fiction, entertainment and the general status quo of American society in the 1990s and 2000s. There are several essays where Wallace discusses literary works, from Franz Kafka and Zbigniew Herbert to John Updike and Cormac McCarthy, as well as essays based on the evolution of American fiction at the turn of the millennium. Based on a selected corpus of essays from three of his essay collections – A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again, Consider the Lobster and Both Flesh and Not – the purpose of the paper is to highlight and discuss the ways in which Wallace analyses and understands literature not just as a writer, but also as an essayist and reviewer.*

Key words: *American fiction, American literature, David Foster Wallace, entertainment, essays, literary analysis, reviews*

1. Introduction

The world of literature appears to be, for most readers, an enigmatic, complex and intricate conundrum, accessible only to the artists themselves; therefore, for centuries, people have been significantly interested in what goes beyond the work of art. Any glimpse into the writer's world or their thought process, creative approaches and spheres of influence would be treated as part of the "aura" of the writer, their ideological, political or philosophical views on the world would become indispensable for every researcher, and biographical criticism would impose itself as one of the fundamental perspectives in analysing the literary masterpieces that the prolific writers of every generation have been offering to the world for centuries. However, it should be noted that this "curiosity" goes, for most readers and researchers alike, beyond the mere process of "choosing" our literary heroes. The sheer curiosity, in this case, serves as a function that allows us to try and "decipher" how literature works, how it needs to be analysed and interpreted, while providing a potential answer that goes to the nature of a piece of writing in itself, and as to why a certain story, poem or novel looks, feels and works in a certain manner. Therefore, any great author who is willing to provide insights into how they think, see and understand literature becomes a lot more appreciated.

As a result, when it comes to David Foster Wallace's influence in the cultural paradigm of the United States at the turn of the millennium, it can be argued that the American author was not only a prolific writer of novels and short stories, but also a remarkable essayist and literary reviewer. The standard that he maintained for his intricate, yet complex writings, was an important aspect that he was looking forward to in mostly all the aspects that he was taking into consideration when writing a literary review or an essay. These non-fictional texts not only allow critics and researchers to get a better glimpse into David Foster Wallace's literary principles, but also, from a contextual standpoint, could provide a better understanding of both the New Sincerity movement, as well as the juxtaposition of postmodern themes and modern sensibilities that Wallace was known for in the American literary landscape of the 20th and 21st century. Considering the aforementioned aspects, the following paper focuses on a close reading of several literary reviews and essays that can be found in three volumes of non-fictional texts published by Wallace: *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, *Consider*

the Lobster and *Both Flesh and Not*, which provide a remarkable perspective in terms of the solid and significant literary and cultural background that David Foster Wallace adheres to in order to create his fictional words. Furthermore, it might be argued that the unique form and content of the essays entertain the possibility that Wallace was trying to experiment with the definition of literary criticism itself, arguably attempting to demonstrate that literary reviews can intrinsically become a form of literature as well.

2. David Foster Wallace, The Literary Critic

2.1. Wallace and Poststructuralism - A Review of H.L. Hix's *Morte D'Auteur: An Autopsy*

Even from a first reading of a literary review written by Wallace, it becomes quite clear that the American author is not very keen on “following the rules” of how a literary review “should” look, sound or feel like, in terms of the formal character of the language. The following aspect has been previously observed by other critics as well, David Hering (2016:17) arguing that Wallace is “perhaps disingenuously” trying to clearly establish his writing outside the academic jargon. This does not mean, however, that his arguments do not establish credibility to his argumentation; in fact, quite the opposite. Wallace seems to understand how to place himself “in the shoes” of the reader as well, and this essay brings into perspective precisely this ability of Wallace to see and analyse this book from the best of both worlds: as a writer and as a reader alike. It is important to note, however, that Wallace’s stance and discourse regarding the importance and the nuances of language can also be identified in this essay as well; given the changes that poststructuralism brings in terms of understanding concepts such as “author”, “text” or “meaning”, Wallace pleads for a balanced approach: “Writers are sometimes wrong about what their texts mean, or sometimes have no idea what they really mean. Sometimes the text’s meaning even changes for the writer. It doesn’t matter what the writer means, basically, for the New Critics; it matters only what the text says.” (Wallace 2009).

While arguably controversial, the idea that writers would be wrong about the meaning of their texts should be understood within the context of poststructuralism, where the concept of “meaning” itself becomes a lot more volatile. The “entity” of the text as a sole provider of meaning(s) is capable of generating as many interpretations as contexts. The idea is further discussed by Wallace in relation to the perspectives of interpreting a text throughout the (end)less capabilities of language, but in a variety of understandings regarding the uses of language itself:

For the deconstructionist, then, a writer’s circumstances and intentions are indeed a part of the “context” of a text, but context imposes no real cinctures on the text’s meaning, because meaning in language requires a cultivation of absence rather than presence, involves not the imposition but the erasure of consciousness. This is so because these guys—Derrida following Heidegger and Barthes Mallarmé and Foucault God knows who — see literary language as not a tool but an environment. A writer does not wield language; he is subsumed in it. (Wallace 2009).

In order to draw a conclusion regarding both the matter of the book and the poststructuralist paradigm – or, as how David Hering (2016:16) calls it, “a tantalizingly brief rebuttal” –,Wallace chooses to place himself as a “civilian” and discuss the matter from the perspective of the “gut feeling”, seemingly abandoning all the intellectual premises of postructuralism but, in fact, reiterating them from his own experiences, perceptions and principles regarding the autonomy, the functions and the purpose of the literary text: “For those of us civilians who know in our gut that writing is an act of communication between one human being and another, the whole question seems sort of arcane” (Wallace 2009). What Wallace appears to suggest is, in fact, not necessarily a “death” of the importance of language along with

the “death” of the author, but rather a reminder of “increasingly visible iterations of the revenant author figure, and an attendant focus on the importance of dialogue with both character and reader”, as Hering (2016:18) suggests. As an author for whom the function of language is indispensable and, up to a point, almost sacred, poststructuralism seems to remain, for Wallace, a concept that should rather be treated carefully.

2.2. Wallace and the “Great Male Narcissists”

The review known as “Certainly the End of Something or Other, One Would Sort of Have to Think”, which is a review of John Updike’s *Toward The End Of Time*, seems to bring forward a rather “vicious” – or, at least, incisive and polemical side of Wallace, the literary critic. But this “viciousness” appears to come from rather a major disappointment for an author whose influence in the American literary landscape was quite significant, but who appears to have lost precisely the elements that have defined him as one of the all-time greats. Normal Mailer, John Updike and Philip Roth are all taken into consideration here, not just Updike – Wallace calls all of them “the Great Male Narcissists* who’ve dominated postwar American fiction” (Wallace 2005:51) and who, unfortunately, “are now in their senescence” (2005:51).

Despite the “corrosive” style, Wallace balances his reviews by giving credit where credit is due. In this case, the American author does not forget or omit the fact that Updike has cemented his place in the American literature from the second half of the twentieth-century, arguing that “no US novelist has mapped the inner terrain of the solipsist better than John Updike, whose rise in the 1960s and ’70s established him as both chronicler and voice of probably the single most self-absorbed generation since Louis XIV” (Wallace 2005:51). However, *Toward The End Of Time*, for someone who has not read the novel and creates their impression based on Wallace’s review alone, seems to be the novel that has completely destroyed a legacy for Updike. Wallace talks about the protagonist as “an extremely erudite, successful, narcissistic, and sex-obsessed retired guy who’s keeping a one-year journal in which he explores the apocalyptic prospect of his own death” (52), while describing the novel as “far and away the worst, a novel so clunky and self-indulgent that it’s hard to believe the author let it be published in this kind of shape” (52). Furthermore, the most convincing argument that Wallace offers for his statement is the matter of the protagonists; not just the aforementioned protagonist of the novel, but the protagonists of most of his literary works, all suffering from a very specific character trait – being inspired too much by Updike himself:

John Updike, for example, has for decades been constructing protagonists who are basically all the same guy (...) and who are all clearly stand-ins for Updike himself. (...) They are also always incorrigibly narcissistic, philandering, self-contemptuous, self-pitying... and deeply alone, alone the way only an emotional solipsist can be alone. They never seem to belong to any sort of larger unit or community or cause. Though usually family men, they never really love anybody — and, though always heterosexual to the point of satyriasis, they especially don’t love women. (Wallace 2005:53).

However, beyond the controversial arguments, Wallace’s analysis has also been remarked and praised for the “generational” aspect of his review – not necessarily as a “clash” of the generations, but rather as a tale of past in relation to present, with Lucas Thompson (2016:2) noticing that Wallace’s characterisation of “sub40”Americans is “even more specific about the particular problems besetting his own generation” (2016:2), as the examples that Wallace mentioned in the review represent rather “a small sample of his views on what he took to be the uniquely troubling aspects of being an American”, marking not just Wallace’s perspectives from a literary standpoint, but from a social and cultural one as well. Beyond the analysis of the novel, Wallace finds the right balance between literary criticism and cultural theory, as the review is meant to represent the ways in which Wallace understands the aforementioned aspects, which “are indicative of both the depth of Wallace’s engagement with

US culture and of his strategic attempts to dictate the terms of his own reception, by signaling his own contributions to a national conversation” (Thompson 2016:2).

2.3. Wallace, Kafka, and DeLillo – Funniness and the Nature of the Fun

For all the descriptions that Wallace’s prose has received over the years from readers, critics and researchers alike, “funny” seems to be one of the adjectives that always finds its way into reviews or academic articles. Beyond the overwhelming (in parts) language and the tragic undertones of the novels and short stories, there seems to be a fun perspective to some of his writings. And despite Wallace’s tragic nuances of his biography, he seemed to have shared a significant interest regarding the ways in which “fun” can function as a literary device, mostly due to the clever nature in which a literary text can achieve this status. However, the definitions regarding what it means for such a text to be “fun” or “funny” – not to diminish the significant differences that could occur between the two terms” have been discussed and analysed by Wallace in his non-fictional texts as well. There are two essays where Wallace seems to be particularly interested in the matter: “Some Remarks On Kafka’s Funniness From Which Probably Not Enough Has Been Removed”, where the American author discusses teaching Kafka to American students, and “The Nature of the Fun”, where he discusses Don DeLillo’s *Mao II*.

An essay that is in equal parts (auto)biographical and provides a unique perspective regarding Kafka’s literary works, “Some Remarks” brings into consideration the matter of teaching Kafka to a generation of students for whom, as Wallace argues, the idea of “fun” is a bit differently understood for the American youngsters. While mentioning the idea of exformation, “based on great short stories and great jokes” (Wallace 2005:61), which have in common the fact that they share “a certain quantity of vital information removed from but evoked by a communication in such a way as to cause a kind of explosion of associative connections within the recipient” (2005:61) and associating it with Kafka’s fiction, Wallace’s argument is that Kafka is not funny in an amusing way, but rather through the subtexts and the ridiculousness of the absurd situations that determine the plots of his works:

There’s no recursive wordplay or verbal stunt-piloting, little in the way of wisecracks or mordant lampoon. There is no body-function humor in Kafka, nor sexual entendre, nor stylized attempts to rebel by offending convention. No Pynchonian slapstick with banana peels or rogue adenoids. No Rothish priapism or Barthish meta-parody or Woody Allen–type kvetching. There are none of the babing babang reversals of modern sitcoms; nor are there precocious children or profane grandparents or cynically insurgent coworkers. Perhaps most alien of all, Kafka’s authority figures are never just hollow buffoons to be ridiculed, but are always absurd and scary and sad all at once (Wallace 2005:62-63).

For Wallace, the humor of Kafka’s works is “unsubtle — or rather anti-subtle” (2005:63), based on a type of recursive wordplay that determines “some kind of radical literalization of truths we tend to treat as metaphorical” (2005:63), in works such as *The Metamorphosis* – with the protagonist, Gregor Samsa, actually turning into an insect being the most obvious example. Wallace further elaborates by talking about “a grotesque, gorgeous, and thoroughly modern complexity, an ambivalence that becomes the multivalent Both/And logic of the, quote, ‘unconscious’” (2005:63), described as “just a fancy word for soul”. Perhaps the most conclusive example of Wallace’s inspiration from Kafka’s stories and novels can be found in *Infinite Jest*, where the counterpoint to many absurd situations (the lethal movie being literally buried inside James Incandenza’s head or the entire plot involving the Wheelchair Assassins, just to name a few) comes from the same absurd, scary and simultaneously sad outcomes that have, in terms of structure, character arc or resolution (or lack thereof), similar traits to Kafka’s works – which brings their “fun” nature (from Wallace’s perspective). The matter has also been previously discussed by Jeffrey Severs (2017:16), who argues that “what

some readers find off-puttingly unrealistic in Wallace (such as wheelchair-bound assassins) often results from his attempt to find physical instantiations of metaphysical states, tendencies that align him with the expressionism of Kafka.”, as well as Clare Hayes-Brady (2023:3), who notices “how frequently his observation of a particular skill or foible in one author’s work is applicable to his own writing, such as his observation of Franz Kafka’s radically literal humor, the ‘comedy-as-literalization-of-metaphor’ whose lack of subtlety is its power, just as it is in Wallace’s own writing.”.

As a result, Wallace concludes by describing Kafka’s humour as “not only not neurotic but anti-neurotic, heroically sane” and, nevertheless, “a religious humor, but religious in the manner of Kierkegaard and Rilke and the Psalms” (Wallace 2005:64). Considering the aforementioned perspective regarding Kafka’s “fun”, it becomes quite clear that it would not be an easy matter to convince the younger generation of Americans that Kafka is fun, but not a “funny” author. But the context needs to be taken into account as well – which is why Wallace explains that Kafka becomes inaccessible due to several cultural differences, as well as due to the ways in which American children are being “taught” by the American (popular) culture to understand, distinguish and even analyse what “fun” actually means.

Last, but not least, Wallace shares his insights regarding the “punchline” of Kafka’s “joke” – and it becomes quite clear that Kafka’s “fun” is not something to be laughing at or feeling entertained by, but rather quite the opposite, in a matter related rather to the idea of self, as Stefan Hirt (2008:99) argues that Wallace’s idea of a self “resembles Kierkegaard’s, and it is no accident that he uses Kafka as an example”, with the point being “an awareness of the self and provides an escape from solipsism” (2005: 99). The absurdity becomes the joke, the impossibility of escaping or getting away from something, only to end up in the same place, becomes the “fun” of life and literature themselves:

And it is this, I think, that makes Kafka’s wit inaccessible to children whom our culture has trained to see jokes as entertainment and entertainment as reassurance. It’s not that students don’t “get” Kafka’s humor but that we’ve taught them to see humor as something you get — the same way we’ve taught them that a self is something you just have. No wonder they cannot appreciate the really central Kafka joke: that the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle. That our endless and impossible journey toward home is in fact our home (Wallace 2005:64-65).

In the case of the second essay, “The Nature of the Fun”, we find Wallace questioning what a fiction writer is and, most importantly, how a fiction writer is meant to use language in order to convey meaning(s) and, more importantly, to express sincere feelings, thoughts and create genuine characters and stories. His approach is to be, at least for the most part, less pedagogical and more descriptive, with somewhat graphic, yet powerful images, meant to shock and, at the same time, to elucidate the conundrum. In a move that might seem controversial, both language and image-wise, Wallace chooses DeLillo’s *Mao II* for his argumentation, where the American author describes a work-in-progress book, in Wallace’s words, as “hideously defective, hydrocephalic and noseless and flipper-armed and incontinent and retarded and dribbling cerebrospinal fluid out of its mouth as it mewls and blurbles and cries out to the writer, wanting love, wanting the very thing its hideousness guarantees it’ll get: the writer’s complete attention” (Wallace 2012:193). But the issue goes back to evoking “sincerity” in one’s fiction, a principle well-known and very discussed when it comes to Wallace’s literary works. In this case, Wallace goes back, once again, to analyzing the matter from a reader’s perspective, because, as he claims, “you don’t want to fool these people; what you want is you want them to see and love a lovely, miraculous, perfect, ad-ready infant and to be *right, correct*, in what they see and feel” (2012:195).

It seems utopic and Wallace understands it like few others from his time. Simultaneously, to Wallace, this seems like a good opportunity to remind both himself and the

other readers and authors that this “quest” can lead, eventually, in the completely opposite direction – that is, finding oneself on the other side of the “fun” or, at the very least, provide a literary text that the author wants (or needs) to be and feel different. Because, as an author, “that’s still what you most want: to be completely, insanely, suicidally wrong” (2012:195).

As a result, we get yet another definition of fiction from the American author; this time, focusing not on the text, not on the reader, but on the authors themselves. A definition that, by referring to the author’s struggle, discusses about literature itself and how the truly outstanding literature comes from a place of authenticity and, most importantly, from an author who is true not just to literature, but to themselves as well: “Fiction becomes a weird way to countenance yourself and to tell the truth instead of being a way to escape yourself or present yourself in a way you figure you will be maximally likable. This process is complicated and confusing and scary, and also hard work, but it turns out to be the best fun there is.” (Wallace 2012:198-199).

2.4. Wallace and Polish Poetry – A Review of *Mr. Cogito*

It is no secret that Wallace’s European influences go beyond classics such as Kafka or E. M. Cioran. Lucas Thompson (2023:65) even argues that Wallace was “always on the lookout for ways of appropriating technical devices and narrative strategies from elsewhere (particularly from Europe – specifically Eastern Europe – and Latin America)”, with the purposes being “both advancing the tradition of US postmodernism he saw himself as having inherited, and of making a case for his own fiction as a serious participant within broader literary culture and traditions” (2023:65). However, Wallace’s review of Zbigniew Herbert, a Polish post-war poet, seems still somewhat surprising, and opens up his American readers to a lesser-known literary space. The American author perhaps the best-known book of Herbert. Thompson (2016:55) argues that Wallace “also invoked a coherent geographic territory in his review of Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert’s *Mr. Cogito*”. What seems to be outstanding in this review, however, is how David Foster Wallace, whose polemical tone we have noticed in the previous essays, seems to have nothing but enormous praise for the following volume. He goes even further by describing the Polish poet as “one of the two or three best living poets in the world, and by far the best of what you’d call the ‘postmoderns’”. Wallace elaborates regarding the “Cogito-persona” that Herbert creates for his poems, arguing that his Herbert’s volume “permits ironic absurdism and earnest emotion not only to coexist but to nourish one another”, also described by Thompson as “a case in point: Wallace valued the collection for its ‘bravely earnest’ central character” (2016:158).

Despite the short length of the essay, Wallace still finds enough room to become controversial and accuse not just an entire generation, but the entire spectrum of the American poetry altogether. However, it is not mere criticisms of “European poetry is better than American poetry”, but rather an attempt to bring forward the context in which American poetry is written, which would lack authenticity in its attempts to find its way and would not be, in comparison, as percussive as the following volume: “Compared to *Mr. Cogito*, the whole spectrum of American poetry—from the retrograde quaintness of the Neoformalists and *New-Yorker*-backyard-garden-meditative lyrics to the sterile abstraction of the Language Poets—looks sick” (Wallace 2012:121-122). The ending does not seem to provide a nuanced conclusion; in fact, quite the opposite. Wallace appears to suggest, through yet another controversial take, that the absolute form of poetry needs to be created and understood through a social and cultural context based on harsh realities: “Maybe as political conditions get more oppressive here, we Americans’ll get good at it, too.” (Wallace 2012:122).

2.5. Short and Concise: Wallace in "Overlooked: Five Direly Underappreciated U.S. Novels > 1960"

One of the main arguments in the following paper is that some of Wallace's literary reviews and essays tend to push the limits of non-fictional texts, to a point of experimentation where they tend to function after similar rules to some of his fictional works. When (and where) they do not, they still seem, however, to establish a paradigm based on a free-form (with postmodern approaches), where the standard structure of an essay seems to be challenged, questioned and even compressed to a series of non-traditional approaches to the genre of literary criticism, which (re)define the ways in which a review should look, sound or contain. Therefore, the current and subsequent subchapter will focus on a series of reviews that seem to have been written in different styles, with different approaches and unique ways of conveying the American writer's argumentations regarding the analysed literary works.

The following part will focus on three reviews from a collection called "Overlooked: Five Direly Underappreciated U.S. Novels > 1960", where Wallace brings into consideration a series of, from his perspective, either lesser-known or underrated American novels that, as Wallace considers, should deserve more praise and recognition. What is particularly remarkable, however, is his ability to "twist", up to a certain extent, the "formula" of a review by reducing it to its bare minimum, providing very short, yet quite insightful remarks regarding the novels he is discussing. For example, the review of *Steps*, a 1968 novel by Jerzi Kosinski, is a prime example of quality over quantity; in this case, Wallace manages to explain what the novel is about, provide a clear and concise statement, provide some insights into the novel's notoriety (or lack thereof) and even briefly explain its connection to Kafka's literary works:

This won some big prize or other when it first came out, but today nobody seems to remember it. *Steps* gets called a novel but it is really a collection of unbelievably creepy little allegorical tableaux done in a terse elegant voice that's like nothing else anywhere ever. Only Kafka's fragments get anywhere close to where Kosinski goes in this book, which is better than everything else he ever did combined. (Wallace 2012:203).

The second review to be considered for the current paper is the one where Wallace discusses *Angels*, a 1983 novel written by Denis Johnson. Once again, quite short, but there is a lot of praise from Wallace, especially after a harsh critique of a poetry volume. Within one phrase, Wallace is more generous with this lesser-known novel than he is with many other better-known books of the time:

This was Johnson's first fiction after the horripilative lyric poetry of *The Incognito Lounge*. Even cult fans of Jesus' Son often haven't heard of *Angels*. It's sort of Jesus' Son's counterpoint, a novel-length odyssey of mopes and scrotes and their brutal redemptions. A totally American book, it's also got great prose, truly great, some of the '80s' best (Wallace 2012:204).

By far, the most intriguing, surprising and the essay that manages to convey more praise and shock at the same time – and a personal favourite, for that matter – is the review for Cormac McCarthy's 1985 novel, *Blood Meridian*; or, *The Evening Redness in the West*. For this one, Wallace maximises the minimalist approach, taking "less is more" to a completely new dimension. While still keeping it ambiguous, with readers being free to consider it either a positive or a negative review at the same time, it is surely a review that won't let anyone indifferent about the novel; in fact, it might be argued that its enigmatic nature functions in the favour of *Blood Meridian*. The review, still one of the most unique ever written by the American author, takes experimenting to another level and proves, yet again, the versatility of the review as a (non)-literary form: "Don't even ask." (Wallace 2012:204).

2.6. Wallace and “The Best of the Prose Poem”

The last, but definitely not least part of the current paper focuses on a review that challenges not necessarily the genre, but rather the form and the meaning of the term; in fact, what aspects does a reviewer need to take into account when writing a review? Should one discuss merely the contents or the entire book as an object, for that matter?

Wallace takes these questions to their utmost literal form, and the review of “The Best of the Prose Poem”, an anthology dedicated to several literary texts that revolve around the aforementioned paradigm, is meant to evoke, in what seems to be almost a poststructuralist and deconstructing quest, precisely this matter. His purpose appears to be one equally formal and rather statistical: starting from aspects such as the dimensions of the book itself and continuing to the weight of the anthology (in grams), a bio-note for the editor of the anthology and the number of words dedicated to the prose poems themselves – just to name a few –, Wallace encapsulates the aspects that most reviewers would find redundant, perhaps in an attempt to both (re)define what a review should(n’t) contain and, at the same time, to challenge the general perception of what a “professional” review looks like. For the following review, the first aspects that seems particularly striking is the way the ideas are being structured, with bullet-points; which, on one hand, gives the impression of an unfinished draft or literal notes that should be further developed into an essay but, on the other hand, provide every single detail that Wallace finds necessary in order to provide for a complete and accurate review. Whether each detail is relevant or not, that seems so be left for the reader to decide, which brings into consideration, yet again, the matter of relevancy when it comes to content, form and the coherence and cohesiveness of the ideas:

- “Basic aesthetic/ideological *raison d’être* of the above forms: to comment on, complicate, subvert, defamiliarize, transgress against, or otherwise fuck with received ideas of genre, category, and (especially) formal conventions/constraints. (See by analogy the historical progression *rhymed accentual-syllabic verse* → *blank verse* → *vers libre*, etc.)” (Wallace 2012:244).

Between the technical details, it is important to mention that we still get to hear Wallace’s perspective on the anthology: “Obvious but crucial distinction: between a prose poem as an individual artwork and the Prose Poem as an actual literary genre.” (Wallace), which, arguably, turns the review into both a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the book. Still, Wallace maintains the polemical tone here as well, especially when it comes to what finds to be the least favorite parts of the anthology, in matters that revolve, as expected, around the language of the poems, as well as the themes and general expressions of the literary works: “Most common problems with the substantial % of the book’s prose poems that are mediocre/bad: (1) The p.p.’s argument/theme/point/project is either too obvious or too obscure; (2) The p.p. lacks formal control, logic; it comes off flabby, arbitrary, dull”. (Wallace 2012:253).

Last, but not least, another remarkable aspect of this review (beyond Wallace talking about himself at the third person) is Wallace’s critique of the entire genre of the prose poem, as well as the juxtaposition of the two concepts. Again, the fundamental problem noticed by the American author is related to style, form and language, in a paradox that he finds both against the idea of formalism and, at the same time, defined by the very things the prose poem tends to lack or not develop enough:

- Like all self-consciously transgressive poetic forms, the p.p. is, by both definition and intent, anti-formal. That is, it is distinguished as a form primarily by what it lacks, viz. stuff like line breaks, enjambment, formal rhyme- or metrical schemes, etc.” (Wallace 2012:253).

3. Conclusions

It is arguable that, for David Foster Wallace, reviews, essays and literary criticism in general can be interpreted as a form of literature, leaving room for all sorts of experiments in form and meaning. Perhaps, up to some extent, one of the main arguments of the current paper is that there is room for speculating, based on the previous evidence and arguments, that Wallace envisioned criticism as a literary genre as well, with there being little to no difference between a literary and a non-literary text; in a way, even a review can be discussed and interpreted as a form of literature itself. Also, in terms of style, Wallace often appears to opt for a “non-traditional”/ less academic approach in his reviews and essays, as we saw in the two previous subchapters, especially in the review of “The Best of The Prose Poem”.

Contextualising is also a key-element in Wallace’s reviews and essays; not just the novels, poems or essays themselves, but the cultural (and/or philosophical) paradigm(s) that they revolve around. From Kafka to Herbert, DeLillo or Hix, Wallace pays close attention to the context in which the literary works have been elaborated; furthermore, the parallels he draws to American literature and culture – even when talking about American authors – seem to be specifically meant to highlight both Wallace’s ability to carefully notice and analyse the social and cultural factors of different literatures, as well as the global understanding of literature as a whole. As previously seen, Wallace is no stranger to East/Central-European literature either; in fact, it is arguable that he is influenced by writers such as Kafka or Herbert, which might be read as a global approach to his essays and fiction.

For Wallace, delving into literary criticism allows him to notice and examine the similarities and differences that occur in terms of style, theme and the relation between the intensity of experiences and the literary approaches in poems and novels. The reviews and essays represent a fertile ground for Wallace to notice and discuss the problems of his own generation of American writers in the fictional works of writers from different continents and generations.

The selection of essays, however, was just a part of Wallace’s legacy in terms of essays and literary reviews; there are still many other essays and reviews, each of them bringing a remarkable perspective in terms of style, content and form, a matter that could be explored further. Finally, it is arguable that what remains from Wallace’s literary reviews and essays is a more bold, risky, yet quite rewarding experience of writing, analyzing and understanding literature, on one hand and reviewing literature, on the other. Wallace’s bold, innovative (in terms of style and form), controversial (in terms of arguments) and challenging reviews and essays can be read as both an attempt to “blur” the lines between fictional and non-fictional texts, as well as proof that a review must be, beyond all innovations and experiments, genuine and sincere with its readers and author(s) altogether.

References:

- Hayes-Brady, Clare. (Ed.). 2023. *David Foster Wallace in Context*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hering, David. 2016. *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA.
- Hirt, Stefan. 2008. *The Iron Bars of Freedom: David Foster Wallace and the Postmodern Self*. Ibidem-Verl, Stuttgart, Germany.
- Severs, Jeffrey. 2017. *David Foster Wallace’s Balancing Books: Fictions of Value*. Columbia University Press.
- Thompson, Lucas. 2016. *Global Wallace: David Foster Wallace and World Literature*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA.
- Thompson, L. 2023. “David Foster Wallace and European Literature”. In Hayes-Brady, C. (Ed.). 2023. *David Foster Wallace in Context*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 57.66.
- Wallace, David Foster. 2005. *Consider the Lobster: And Other Essays*, Little, Brown and Company, Hachette.
- Wallace, David Foster. 2009. *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* [ebook edition]. Hachette.
- Wallace, David Foster. 2012. *Both Flesh and Not: Essays*. Little, Brown and Company, Hachette.

Notes on the author

Raul Săran is a Research Assistant at The Faculty of Letters, History, Philosophy and Theology from the West University of Timișoara. He is an IWL alumnus, after attending Harvard University's Institute for World Literature in 2022. He defended his Ph.D. thesis, concerning the concepts of tragedy and tragic flaw in David Foster Wallace's fiction, in November 2023. His main research areas include American and Romanian modern and postmodern literature, Comparative and World Literature, film studies and media studies. He has published articles in both national and international peer-reviewed journals, as well as book reviews in *Orizont*, a literary magazine of the Romanian Writers' Union.