**Wallace Short Things Introduction**

As Marshall Boswell observes in his introduction to the essays collected in *David Foster Wallace and ‘The Long Thing’*, ‘it is reasonable to wonder why critics and readers don’t regard Wallace as primarily a short story writer’,[[1]](#footnote-1) since the balance of his story-collections-to-books ratio is comparable to peers who are categorized primarily as short story writers (Boswell’s example is Lorrie Moore, but we could also try this thought experiment in the hypothetical: how many novels might it take for George Saunders to start being dubbed a novelist?). It therefore takes some substantial effort to un-think Wallace primarily as a novelist and to consider him as a writer of short fiction. This approach would involve not just identifying and taking seriously his ambitions for his work in the short form alongside those ambitions that he held for his long work, but also making some claims about his place within the history of short fiction. Writing at a time – after Carver, after Barthelme and Barth – when short fiction was resolving itself into something new and doing so in ways which were perhaps more acute in the short form than in the novel, Wallace’s short works should be considered as part of an attempt to remake short fiction with a purpose and ambition that is just as important as his groundbreaking influence on the contemporary novel. The essays in this special issue of *The Journal of David Foster Wallace Studies* therefore attempt to identify the contributions that Wallace made to short fiction and to debates within the form, to tackle the complex and debated relationship between his long and short works, and to offer analysis of particular short works and story collections in the context of Wallace’s achievements in short fiction.

Indeed, it was the publication of *The Long Thing* that provided the initial impetus for this project, inspiring the conference *David Foster Wallace and the Short Things* held at the University of Bristol, UK, in July 2015, from which many of the papers, augmented by Jeffrey Severs’ and David Punter’s contributions, are drawn. If that work operates from an implicit (if polemical/contentious) premise that Wallace’s most natural and or accomplished writerly space is the novel (perhaps ‘of ideas’, as Adam Kelly writes), [[2]](#footnote-2) or because, as Boswell remarks, ‘Wallace thought of *himself* as primarily a novelist’,[[3]](#footnote-3) this day would test the grounds for seeing short fiction as equally important to Wallace, and Wallace to it. As Chis Power wrote in his 2015 survey for *The* *Telegraph,* ‘besides *Infinite Jest* it is arguably his three story collections that represent the most important part of his work’.[[4]](#footnote-4) The conference was well attended, seeing papers by established Wallace scholars such as Clare Hayes-Brady, David Hering, and Tim Groenland, alongside those of the next generation in Rob Mayo, Dennis Kinlaw, Sigolene Vivier, and Elliott Morsia. The plenary was delivered by Stephen J. Burn, and the day was rounded off by a fascinating Skype Q&A with Wallace’s enigmatic friend and co-MFA student jt jackson. As seems to be the case with Wallace conferences and criticism more broadly, the atmosphere was congenial, collegiate, with a sense that each of the attendees, whether speaking, observing, or chairing, was participating equally in something meaningful (‘a certain sort of interrogation’, as it were), as there is with Wallace’s increasingly contentious but ever-vital writing.

The papers and their subjects were disparate, as were their methodologies, genetic criticism being a notable new and peculiarly apposite arrival, an approach facilitated, or at the very least made viable, by the Harry Ransom Center’s acquisition of the David Foster Wallace archive in 2010, an event that has, arguably, changed the landscape of Wallace studies over the course of the past eight years. Groenland identifies the importance of the archive, commenting that ‘With the opening of this archive, Wallace scholars are thus beginning to confront questions that have already become key ones in the study of several canonical high modernist authors’.[[5]](#footnote-5) For any uninitiated into the formal and thematic eclecticism of Wallace’s oeuvre, the papers presented might have been about many and not a single author, even one so globally influenced (as Lucas Thompson has argued in *Global Wallace*) and influential (as Boswell argues in the forthcoming *The Wallace Effect*). However, if one key observation united these papers it was that Wallace’s long things and short things were so tightly interwoven that distinguishing between them, cauterizing the porous borders that both separate and unite simultaneously composed and subsequently disintegrated narratives and concept-scapes was at the very least challenging and at worst nonsensical, requiring, then, even necessitating micro-surgical genetic de-coding. That said, attempting to define the boundaries between forces one to focus, to pay attention as Alice has highlighted, not simply to the coextensivity of concerns, but to Wallace’s trouble *with*, and troubling *of* genre and form, perhaps the hallmark of a career-long wrestling match with innovation on the one hand, and much lauded sincerity (albeit ‘with a motive’) on the other.

The conference was conceived always with an eye towards subsequent collection and publication of essays, a kind of companion piece to *The Long Thing.* But, and perhaps surprisingly, there was not at first such an appetite for a collection of essays on the short fiction, as there was for the long fiction, a feeling that seemed to be founded on the bias towards scholarship of the longer works (any database search for Wallace reveals an inordinate interest in *Infinite Jest*), supported by occasional reference to the shorter pieces, as if they were mere supplements (let’s leave Derrida as a trace, here) to, or rather rehearsals for the more accomplished and typical longer works seen as Wallace’s most natural form, with *IJ* the gravitational hub around which constellate the ‘other’ works (the word ‘mere’ is remarkably recurrent in discussions of short fiction, as Mayo notes in his essay). Maybe, though, this attention to the longer works is not inordinate, but justified by the impact that they have had not simply on the contemporary novel but its perceived function and its communicative potential as an art form in an era that witnessed the (highly exaggerated) ‘death of the novel’; Lorin Stein persuasively suggests that Wallace’s ‘masterpiece’ has changed the ‘sounds and aim of American fiction’,[[6]](#footnote-6) ushering in a ‘third wave of modernism’, as Boswell has so influentially written.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In the years between then and now, many of the contributors to the conference (including Alice) have published monographs devoted to or interested in Wallace: David Hering’s *Fiction and Form* is a masterful clinical project of reverse engineering, unpicking the sometimes hasty stitching between story/novel; in *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace* Hayes-Brady both directly and indirectly addresses Wallace’s struggles to and to not conform, which she figures as an aesthetics of failure; Alice’s own “Focus, people!” in her monograph *Contemporary Fictions of Attention* draws out Wallace’s career-long, even definitional fascination with both the (in)capacity for attention and the things we pay attention to; Groenland’s *The Art of Editing* is the most recent addition, again focusing on the processes of composition, the formal mechanisms of selection and revision that lead to or enable subsequent formal classification. If early scholarship took for granted that each work was something like a whole, ‘complete’ project, recent scholarship, taking the genetic turn, has opted rather to tease out the intersections, examining not so much or singly the published material, but the often-dissolved sutures between dissected limbs and organs, as well as aborted, migrated, transplanted, even amputated tissue. In fact, it was Wallace’s failure to mold a coherent narrative from, to find the appropriate formal container for so many disparate parts of what has become *The Pale King* that instigated a new form of Wallace scholarship.

So, then, what arose from the conference and the works subsequently published is that Wallace was perhaps not a writer of short stories, or of creative non-fiction, or of novels, but rather that he wrote, and that those writings - loose ideational matrices aligned by mood, by feeling, by his preternatural gift for spectation and cultural analyses of the post-postmodern condition- were often crudely bound (with all of its connotations) as either short form or long form. Another variation, possibly, of Wallace’s interest in what he calls, in *This is Water,* ‘the sub-surface unity of all things’. There are moments in *Oblivion,* for example, that would sit as or more comfortably in *The Pale King* (painstakingly and illuminatingly identified by Hering)*,* just as there are moments in *Infinite Jest* that would work equally well in *Oblivion.* In the broadest sense then, the informing concepts of both *The Long Thing* and this special issue are flawed, and Wallace was simply a writer confined by the practicalities and realities of publishing: writing has to be issued in some form, and scholarship must proceed from the material reality and the assumption that there are such things as discreet forms. Wallace scholarship, then, necessarily involves a careful negotiation of interstitial textual spaces and absences, the bonds as opposed to those things bonded.

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What follows here are some words of justification for our decision to elevate the short works and an acknowledgement of the particular complications in doing so in Wallace’s case. Our first contention is that Wallace’s career reveals a uniquely strange relationship between short and long works. Part of Boswell’s argument in favor of Wallace as most significantly a writer of long things comes from the initial publication of *Broom,* which was only then followed by his first short fiction collection. By this account, Wallace began his literary training with the hierarchy of forms wholly backwards; starting his career with a novel and then moving on to the supposed apprentice-pieces of short-story. Instead of dutifully churning out short fiction to be shared for workshop criticism, Wallace wrote *Broom* ‘in more or less total isolation’.[[8]](#footnote-8) Moreover, by writing his novel as his apprentice piece, then attending the University of Arizona MFA program, and then subsequently subjecting the creative writing program’s methods to acute critique in his short fiction, Wallace’s early work turns the prevailing institutional practices and pedagogical norms of the MFA on their head. As Kasia Boddy has remarked, *Girl with Curious Hair* is a collection that should be read as ‘both an exemplary product of what Mark McGurl has dubbed the “program era” [ . . .] and as an interrogation of that era’s modes and mores’.[[9]](#footnote-9) If the creative writing program treats the short story as the site for a talent’s nascent development, Wallace’s equivalent embryonic progression happened on the scale of the novel. One interpretation of this history, then, is that Wallace began as a novelist (and a conspicuously young one at that) and so the die was cast. The other, more intriguing way of interpreting the eccentric shape of Wallace’s early career is to seriously undermine any simple reading of his short stories as practice pieces or developmental experiments. Why not read *Broom* – his ‘essentially shitty first book’,[[10]](#footnote-10) a novel that began as an attempt at a ‘jaunty thing. Kind of like a side – I figured it would be like a hundred-page thing’[[11]](#footnote-11) – as a failed short(er) thing?

On the other hand, Wallace also gave an account of his own birth as a writer that mildly contradicts the novel-first narrative of his career progression, yet does not do anything to resolve the weird relationship between his long and short works. The Larry McCaffery interview reminds us that the first literary work that, as Wallace phrased it, ‘rang his cherries’ was a short story, not a novel.[[12]](#footnote-12) As Wallace tells it in the interview, the Yeatsian ‘click of the well-made box’ that characterized his pleasure in formal logic was something that he found for the first time elsewhere in reading short fiction, and subsequently found in his own writing in the short form too: ‘The first fictional clicks I encountered were in Donald Barthelme’s “The Balloon” and in parts of the first story I ever wrote, which has been in my trunk since I finished it’.[[13]](#footnote-13) Writing and reading therefore began for Wallace in the short forms. Moreover, in the same interview (a portrait of the artist as a young analytic philosopher) Wallace goes on to identify this ‘click’ as comparable to Joyce’s epiphany, that hallmark of the writer’s reworking of the short form for the twentieth century. Wallace presents short fiction’s closural, one-shot pleasures as something that he discovered on his own terms, outside the writing exercises and the institutionalized short story in the context of the creative writing program. There is therefore another way of telling the story of Wallace’s early development as a writer as a progress from early work on the short story to later work on a novel, but which still offers an alternative to the institutionalized apprenticeship model associated with the short story in the context of the creative writing program.

During his career, Wallace would experiment not just with the short story as a standalone piece but with all kinds of literary objects that made conventional formal distinctions irrelevant or impossible. The ungainly, overgrown, quality of ‘Westward’, for instance, is the consequence of the story overrunning the limits of its own form, as that novella written in the margins of a short work bursts through the bounds of the short story itself. The connected but incomplete series that is *Brief Interviews* both invokes and makes impossible the kaleidoscopic coherence of a short-story sequence. *Oblivion* – in which stories such as ‘The Soul is Not a Smithy’ or ‘Incarnations of Burned Children’ act as trailers for or off-cuts from the longer work in progress – might be better understood, as David Hering puts it, as part of ‘one huge linear “discrete project” that shed or engendered other projects during its progress’[[14]](#footnote-14); a grand project bigger than just a novel or a group of stories, a thing even longer than a long thing. Conversely, ‘Incarnations of Burned Children’, when lending its name to *The Burnt Children of America* (2003)and becoming the centerpiece of a formative collection that aimed to define a new generation of writers, demonstrates the potential of short forms to aggregate and anthologize in ways that long forms can’t. Or consider *The Pale King* itself, a piece of writing that so thrums with longing for formal unity that it is transmitted clearly to any reader who asks, with Luc Herman and Toon Staes, ‘Can *The Pale King* (Please) be a Novel?’[[15]](#footnote-15) but which is still not really quite a novel. In Wallace’s work, the relationship between the short work and the long work is an unusually complex one, marked by failures that are nonetheless generative and creative.

The contradictions that bedevil any account of Wallace’s short works register equivalent contradictions in the cultural status afforded to the short story form itself. As Andrew Levy has argued, the short story has been ‘simultaneously lauded and denigrated’ because of two seemingly incompatible characterizations: first that the form is a ‘practice field’ best suited for the exercise of ‘immature simplicity’, second that the short story requires ‘greater discipline and skill than longer forms’.[[16]](#footnote-16) This contradiction also registers in the genre’s history: is the short story the unit in which genre writers can crank out multiple variations on the same pulp themes for magazine publication, or is it the site where Joyce and Woolf perfected the techniques of modernist experimentation before marching on to revolutionize the novel? The short story is too often seen as ‘the hermetically sealed device idealized by New Criticism’, Paul March-Russell suggests, but can be understood alternatively as a ‘contradictory and episodic form’ that registers incompleteness and discontinuity.[[17]](#footnote-17) Short fiction therefore becomes a location where many of Wallace’s pre-occupations (the institutions of literature, popular culture vs the avant-garde, difficulty, and the relationship between finishedness and failure) can find a natural expression by picking up debates that are already in progress within the form.

Naturally, Wallace has begun to be included in overviews of the contemporary short story: Martin Scofield in the *Cambridge Introduction to the American Short Story* identifies Wallace as a writer whose very recent work (as of 2006) offered ‘a fresh and sometimes startling handling of the form’[[18]](#footnote-18) (237); Paul March-Russell’s 2009 *The Short Story: An Introduction*,identifies him (with George Saunders and Robert Coover) with the aspect of the postmodern short story that engages most strongly with Baudrillardian simulation[[19]](#footnote-19); Kasia Boddy finds Wallace continuing to stage the short story’s ‘struggle between familiar discourse and itself’ – as cliché, banality, or institutionalized language – which, in Wallace’s writing, registers as language that ‘overflows into the footnotes’ as terms cannot contain the things they attempt to describe.[[20]](#footnote-20) With this recognition of Wallace’s essential place in the canon of the short story comes the question of his contribution to the form, and it is that which these essays will aim to answer.

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In the opening essay, David Punter playfully rehearses some of the narrative techniques and idiosyncrasies of *Oblivion*: themes and words surface, dissolve, only to re-emerge both de- and recontextualized in essay/collection. As Wallace skillfully deploys a series of strategies and subterfuges that simultaneously employ and undermine the idea of form, and more particularly of the short form, Punter argues, or perhaps more accurately insinuates that Wallace explodes short fiction. In this essay, what becomes apparent is that *Oblivion* is not so much a collection, as a texture, unified not by theme alone, but by effect, by feeling.

Jacob Hovind, working through Wallace’s place in the history of the form, examines his use of one of short fiction’s most typical features: the epiphany. Closely aligned with his move toward renewed communicative potential, Wallace’s interest in insight depends upon sincerity. Hovind argues that Wallace most be considered as a ‘post’epiphanic’ exponent of the short form; while working toward some sense of revelation, Wallace, typically, resisted simply adopting a technique that had lost much of its power, that had become ‘used up’. However, Hovind suggests, Wallace still sought to both represent and to inspire in the reader something like a revelatory moment.

Rob Mayo’s concerns have to do with categorization and with the process of editorial ‘deciderization’. Writing on *Brief Interviews,* Mayo interrogates not only the idea of short form, but the many different forms that it either takes or is assumed to take. Taking issue with the suggestion that *BI* is a story cycle, as opposed to a ‘mere’ collection, Mayo argues that the compositional process involved renaming, re-organization, and the moving of stories between different nascent ‘micro-cycles’. The essay raises broader questions then about the ways in which the short form itself is the product of troubled micro-forms,

Pia Masiero takes a narratological path into *Brief Interviews*, identifying how techniques of focalization, deixis of person, and the representation of minds allow the stories to diagnose the ‘infected systemic loop’ that distorts gendered communication. Through a stand-out reading of ‘Think’, Masiero develops an argument about how Wallace’s short forms encourage a fleeting entry into other minds and other bodies, ‘the possibility of wearing just for one moment the other’s embodied perspective’.

Tim Groenland, in ‘“Fragmentco Unltd”: “Cede” and *The Pale King*’, explores the relationship between Wallace’s long and short works through careful scrutiny of the unpublished fragment called “Cede”, partly published as “Backbone” in *The New Yorker* and included in *The Pale King* in this reduced form. Groenland traces the focus on ancient Rome in those sections of ‘Cede’ *not* published in the short story or included by Michael Pietsch in *The Pale King* to demonstrate that they are part of an intricate thematic threading that runs across other sections of Wallace’s final novel.

In the final essay of this issue, Jeff Severs examines Wallace’s strategies for negotiating fictional endings. Readings from *Girl With Curious Hair* allow for a consideration of Wallace’s early short works as repeated attempts to ‘refine or improve upon his first novel’s ending’, Severs argues. Ranging across Wallace’s short works, Severs ultimately understands Wallace’s short stories as carefully crafted opportunities for falling silent.

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2. Adam Kelly, ‘David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas’, in *David Foster Wallace and ‘The Long Thing’*, ed. Marshall Boswell(New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Boswell, vi. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
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11. Wallace in Lipsky, 260. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
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