“Saint Dave” and the Genesis of the Modern Literary Genius

My work with the University Scholars program focuses on the literary legacy of David Foster Wallace, considering his writing—beginning with his undergraduate thesis through his final unfinished novel, in addition to his personal unpublished writings—as well as critical and reader responses that have all shaped his literary reputation and cultural influence. In the seven years since his passing, the scholarship and publicity around his life and work have crafted a figure that his contemporaries facetiously refer to as “Saint Dave”—for his seeming idolization following his death and apparent candidacy for the de facto title of literary genius. As the field of “Wallace Studies” grows, so does the controversy surrounding his literary accomplishments, and the challenge to reconcile the man, the literary icon and the work.

I spent this summer at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, where the David Foster Wallace archive was recently established. In exploring his drafts, unpublished works and personal papers I looked to answer several questions: What can be understood about the authorial experience and the writing experience behind a work? How can it help us to understand the genesis and cultural transformation of the author into the figure of “literary genius,” if at all? What is Wallace’s relationship with his own literary reputation and public response? These questions are asked in an attempt to address broader questions about the cultural significance and literary impact of the projected author figure. Why do these figures emerge? What cultural purpose do they serve? How do they affect the readings of their texts? How does the value of the literary genius figure compare to the value of their literary output?

Close-readings of the annotated drafts of Wallace’s works and his correspondence with his editor reveal a deep sense of anxiety surrounding his works following the publication of Infinite Jest—his first novel to receive major critical and commercial success—specifically, his ability to complete them at all as well as his ability to fulfill expectations of his potential. This will need to be compared with how he presented himself in interviews for literary profiles to consider whether this provides any insight into the author’s role in the fashioning of literary persona. Further work needs to be done to consider the external fashioning as well. I plan on tracing patterns in the literary criticism over time to understand what factors have shaped his possible transformation into the figure of the literary genius as well as what fuels the accompanying controversy. I also plan to compare my findings with scholarship on other literary “genius” figures to find general patterns in the shaping of the genius and its cultural impact.