

Robert Hawkins

Prof. Edward Comentale

ENG-L369

May 9, 2014

The Two Poles of Self-Consciousness in David Foster Wallace

Introduction

In a conversation recounted by David Lipsky, David Foster Wallace made a crucial and personal distinction: “There’s good self-consciousness, and then there’s toxic, paralyzing, raped-by-psychic-Bedouins self-consciousness” (105). We all know intuitively what it’s like to experience the ends of this spectrum. The former is a sort of unity of the self with the environment – a zen-like state that it might be better to call *self-awareness*. Advocating for self-awareness is the topic of Wallace’s commencement address “This is Water” and an important component of his life philosophy. The latter is an infinite regress of shame and self-doubt that grows more and more painful the more you try to do something about it. However, the line between the two poles is hard to pin down. What must we do to transition from the bad kind to the good kind? Is *unconsciousness* a valid escape?

Wallace raised these questions in different forms throughout his career, exploring them both at the textual level and the authorial meta-level. Infinite Jest, in one of many interpretations, is essentially a novel about characters looking for ways to escape from the bad kind of self-consciousness and discover how to live with the good kind. The problem of bad self-consciousness plagues junior tennis athletes, earnest parents, recovering drug addicts, and O.N.A.N. politicians alike. It is mulled over in the text through recurring symbols of mirrors and veils.

Infinite Jest is also a novel trying to escape from the linguistic and authorial self-reflexivity of postmodernism, which Wallace criticized for “get[ting] empty and solipsistic real fast” (McCaffery 142). Wallace discovers a creative solution through endnotes, allowing him to inject his consciousness and comment on his own creation – a technique Gérard Genette called *metalepsis* – while still keeping his interjections separate from the main text. In contrast with highly self-conscious postmodernists like John Barth in Lost in the Funhouse, who subvert the reader’s relationship with the text and its characters by continually pointing out the fact that it is, in fact, a text, Wallace seeks to build a relationship with the reader by continually pointing out that *he* is behind the text, experiencing it with you.

I’d like to sort through some of Infinite Jest’s contributions to the problem of ‘raped-by-psychedelic-Bedouins’ self-consciousness, at both of these levels. Several other studies of the theme of self-consciousness in Wallace have been previously conducted, including an undergraduate thesis written by Teddy Wayne and a philosophy dissertation by Allard den Dulk. While I want to revisit several interesting examples they’ve raised, my focus will not be on the philosophical problem of bad self-consciousness itself, but on how Wallace might be suggesting we escape.

Mirrors and Veils: Self-Consciousness in the Text

Many characters in Infinite Jest struggle with near-crippling self-consciousness. Charles Tavis is noted for the “pathological openness of his manner, the way he thinks out loud about thinking out loud” (519) and would stand around the edges of groups as a child and say awkward things like “I’m afraid I’m far too self-conscious really to join in here, so in just going to lurk creepily at the fringe and listen, if that’s all right, just so you know” (517). Doucette comes to Lyle because of an increasing self-consciousness about the mole just under his left nostril (390). Ken Erdedy “couldn’t even be around anyone else if hed smoked marijuana that same day, it

made him so self-conscious” (21). This phenomenon also seems to play an important role in Hal’s breakdown in the Year of Glad – the deeper he recesses into his head, the more paralyzingly self-conscious he becomes: “I am debating whether to risk scratching the right side of my jaw, where there is a wen” (4) and “my posture is consciously congruent to the shape of my hard chair” (3).

These explicit characterizations are reinforced by recurring images of mirrors throughout the novel. Traditionally, mirrors were used as a way of simply reflecting reality and destroying any false beliefs one might hold about oneself or the world. For example, Hamlet tells his players that the purpose of acting was to “hold ... the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure” (3.2.22-24). This conception of the mirror is an enforcer of objectivity; no matter how twisted and self-serving your own self-conception is, the mirror will expose your flaws and show you as you really are. Interestingly, this usage is adopted by Mario in *Tennis and the Feral Prodigy*¹: “Nets and fences can be mirrors. And between the nets and fences, opponents are also mirrors ... This is why all opponents are scary and weaker opponents are especially scary” (176).

The (il)logic of postmodernism, though, flips this meaning on its head. It shatters the mirror into fragments. These fragments become a channel of narcissism and distortion, like the endless walls of Barth’s funhouse. In John Ashbery’s “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror”, the mirror becomes terrifying through its negation of self: “This otherness, this/‘Not-being-us’ is all there is to look at/ in the mirror,” (259). This is also the mirror of Jacques Lacan, later refined empirically by cognitive psychologists, who pointed out that at some transitory age, children look

¹It also seems important that Mario is the only central character in the novel who is totally free of self-consciousness, and is therefore a sort of antidote for the pathologies of the other students (390)

into the mirror and see their reflection as *object* rather than subject. For an interpersonal version of this idea, consider how Orin's Subject becomes an object as he watches himself seducing her in the mirror's reflection (565-567).

Teddy Wayne's undergraduate thesis raises one particularly interesting example of the mirror's objectifying effect. Molly Notkin owns a large mirror, originally created by James Incandenza, which she has 'retroironically' framed a second time, so that the original frame of the mirror is part of the object itself. In front of this mirror, a young woman on Ecstasy is dancing and "watching herself with unselfconscious fascination" (230). She turns to the audience and praises the beauty of her own body, whereupon everyone claps softly. The moral of the story here seems to be that self-consciousness is only possible through the juxtaposition of both subject and audience; it's a hyper-awareness of how one appears to others, which requires one to be a subject in the first place. The Xtatic woman, through some combination of drugs, mirror, and company, has come to see herself just as the audience sees her – as an object. She has discovered a way of freeing herself from self-consciousness through *unconsciousness*, but this makes her even more pitiful.

The duality of subject and object seems to be at the heart of why Wallace thinks self-consciousness is so crippling. In a culture where we are constantly under pressure to perform and maintain appearances for others (e.g. in "E Pluribus Unum"), it is hard to *just* be a subject without thinking of oneself as object as well. It may be, then, that one force holding people in the paralysis of self-consciousness is a fear of some disconnect between the two – needing to constantly monitor one's status as an object to make sure that it's coming across correctly. This disconnect is, of course, precisely the fate that Hal suffers toward the end of the novel. It is the opposite transition of the Xtatic girl. His disconnect does form a self and break him out of

solipsism, or *unconsciousness*, but it throws him into the clutches of self-consciousness, which is still far away from the pinnacle of self-awareness that Wallace champions.

While Hal does not successfully achieve self-awareness, Joelle is much more successful, using her veil as a tool. She realizes that another part of what makes self-consciousness so crippling is its *annularity* or *recursiveness*: “What you do is you hide your deep need to hide, and you do this out of the need to appear to other people as if you have the strength not to care how you appear to others” (535). People hide their need to hide, are afraid of their fear, and are self-conscious of their self-consciousness. As with many small, emotional phenomena in the fractal structure of *Infinite Jest*, the simple idea that an emotion snowballs by feeding on its own waste is magnified to geopolitical scales with the system of annular fusion creating the Great Concavity. Just like annular medicine “treat[s] cancer by giving the cancer cells themselves cancer,” annular fusion uses waste to generate more waste (571-74). While the annular process make good things like medicine and energy better and better, it makes bad emotions worse and worse. How can we escape from the cycle?

Joelle’s answer, taken from the philosophy of the Union of Hideously and Improbably Deformed (U.H.I.D.), is to cut off the infinite regress by openly acknowledging the existence of the original emotion – self-consciousness about appearance, in her case². It doesn’t get rid of the original emotion, but it does prevent any second-order emotion from feeding on the waste of the original. U.H.I.D. “allows members to be open about their essential need for concealment, . . . unashamed about the fact that how we appear to others affects us deeply, about the fact that we want to be shielded from all sight” (535). She accepts her nonacceptance, which brings her peace.

She immediately points out the limitations of this philosophy, though: “A lot of the forms

²Recall that mirrors cover all four walls of Joelle’s room (223)

of self-hatred there is no veil for. U.H.I.D.'s taught a lot of us to be grateful that there's at least a veil for our form" (536). Drug addiction is one such form; addicts get self-conscious about not being able to stop, or about hurting the people they love, but it's an interior wound driving their self-hatred. One way to think of Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.), then, is a sort of non-literal veil where members are open about their essential need for something to fill the emptiness they see in their lives. By standing up at the podium, telling their stories, and Identifying with other speakers, they break the infinite regress of addiction. Part of Gately's progress against self-consciousness, for example, is learning through A.A. to "be just about as verbally honest as possible at almost all times, now, without too much calculation about how a listener's going to feel about what he says³" (370).

Endnotes and Interjections: Self-Consciousness in the Author

John Barth's story "Lost in the Funhouse" is the paradigmatic example of postmodern authorial self-consciousness. On the surface, the story is about a pubescent boy named Ambrose visiting an amusement park, and specifically its funhouse, with his family and a young girl from his neighborhood. He's had some previous, rather mystifying sexual experience with the girl, but he's unable to act on his desires once they've been filtered through his precocious, intellectualizing thought process. The funhouse, with its confusing, distorting mirrors, is a transparent metaphor for coming to terms with his sexuality. By itself, this would make for a fairly standard coming-of-age narrative, but it's Barth's style that makes it distinctive.

Every time he uses some literary device – italics, multi-sensory imagery, simile, anything – he interjects to explain it: "Description of physical appearance and mannerisms is one of several

³Note that Avril Incandenza has the polar opposite of this quality, which may make her the *most* self-conscious character in the novel. She doesn't utter a single word or action without thinking through how every person around her will perceive it. This is something she has in common with Neal from "Good Old Neon," another of Wallace's great studies of pathological self-consciousness.

standard methods of characterization used by writers of fiction. It is important to ‘keep the senses operating’” (74). Barth also comments self-deprecatingly on his own plot pacing and style: “We should be much further along that we are; something has gone wrong; not much of this preliminary rambling seems relevant” (79). These interjections are intentionally off-putting for the reader. Every time we start to become interested in Ambrose or the way he feels, Barth breaks us out of the fictional world via some cold, theoretical observation about how fiction works. Plus, if he’s the *author* and doesn’t like the pacing, why doesn’t he just *rewrite* it?

Wallace satirized Barth’s meta-fictional voice in “Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way”⁴, taking his authorial self-consciousness one step further. In Wallace’s story, Ambrose has become a professor of creative writing and is about to open a profitable line of funhouses, among a number of other surreal plot points. Self-conscious not only of his own story’s development but also of Barth’s self-consciousness, Wallace writes: “Again, the preceding generation of crippling self conscious writers, obsessed with their own interpretation, would mention at this point, just as we’re possibly getting somewhere, that the story isn’t getting anywhere, isn’t progressing in the seamless Freitagian upsweep we should have scaled by this, mss. p. 35, time” (269). Although Wallace later regarded “Westward” as a failed experiment, his goal was to overcome the self-consciousness of meta-fiction and ultimately “reaffirm the idea of art being a living transaction between humans” (McCaffery 142).

In Infinite Jest Wallace takes some creative steps toward his goal of creating a ‘living transaction’ between author and reader. Like Barth, this goal requires him to make his presence known and interrupt the reader. Unlike Barth, he only wants to have a conversation with you. He has no interest in using his presence to make theoretical comments about the artificiality of his

⁴collected in Girl with Curious Hair

own text or to play word games with the reader. The use of endnotes is instrumental in maintaining this middle ground. If the reader goes too long without detecting the author's presence, they might get lonely and trapped in their own head. Periodic flips to the back of the book disrupt the flow of text without *dominating* it and also give the reader a consciousness to converse with, breaking the loop of authorial self-consciousness by including the reader.

That consciousness often plays the role of the scholar, supplying encyclopedic information about technical concepts, like chemicals (n. 1, 6, 12), abbreviations (n. 23, 83, 102), and citations (n. 81, 114, 144). According to Anthony Grafton's history, this is the traditional role of endnotes in academia. However, these traditional notes appear next to others that make the reader question exactly who is there behind the text. For example, when the narrator of Infinite Jest reveals that resident E.T.A. psychologist Dolores Rusk wants to probe Hal "on issues of space and self-definition and something she keeps calling the 'Coatlucue Complex'" (516), endnote 216 only comments "no clue." Evidently the Coatlicue Complex refers to a real, if characteristically obscure, psycho-analytic concept (Staes 67), but instead of supplying some scholarly explanation of this fact, the consciousness behind the endnotes throws up their hands. As far as the traditional function of footnotes go, these non-informative asides seem pointless – the "cruft of fiction" (Letzler 307).

Letzler argues that non-essential footnotes like 216 or 296, which describes a recipe for the fake blood James Incandenza uses in his low-budget films, are a way of demanding that the reader "devise some way to read through the book" and process its excess of data (310). I'd like to suggest an alternative, related to the issues of self-consciousness discussed above. Note that many of these non-essential footnotes resemble Barth's complaints about the pacing and structure of his own writing, including something the narrator neglected to mention. For example, n.117

apologizes for having “. . . overshot the place to mention that Mario’s head . . . is hyperauxetic,” continuing with “. . . also overshot the spot to include that Mario’s a homodont” in n.119. As with Barth, the reader might ask why he didn’t just go back and rewrite the section in order to mention this earlier. What’s the point of self-consciously apologizing for some editorial decision when he’s in complete control?

In the context of Wallace’s desire to have a two-way relationship with the reader, one answer is that these asides give the reader some sense that Wallace didn’t just craft together some set of words and then walk away, leaving us alone with the product of his labor, even if this is by definition true of all written language. Instead, his voice comes out of an oral tradition. It’s the voice of a narrator sitting in a room with us, trying to piece together all these interesting stories, forgetting some details, and looping back to fill them in. In the oral tradition, it’s entirely acceptable for the speaker to go off on tangents, include minor pieces of non-essential trivia, and adjust the tone to fit listener’s reactions. Through this shift, driven primarily by the creative use of endnotes, Wallace reasserts the primacy of the spoken word against the post-structuralist emphasis on the written word . He escapes from the self-consciousness of the ‘dead’ or ‘superfluous’ author, becoming a fully self-*aware* presence with whom the reader can communicate.

Conclusion

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “The use of literature is to afford us a platform whence we may command a view of our present life, a purchase by which we may move it.” If one of the central problems of modern life is pathological self-consciousness, as Wallace diagnoses in “E Unibus Plurum,” then *Infinite Jest* suggests a solution, not just of *unconsciousness*, but of self-awareness, “being conscious and aware enough to choose what you pay attention to and to choose how you construct meaning from experience” (*This is Water*). Joelle learns to

acknowledge the basic problem by wearing a veil or speaking openly about your experience at A.A. The acknowledgement can't take the basic problem away – you can still see your reflection through a veil – but it can truncate the infinite regress of self-consciousness that feeds on the shame of that basic problem. Joelle eventually learns to “Keep it in the Day” (859). As Gately puts it, “an endless Now stretching its gull-wings out on either side of his heartbeat. And he'd never before or since felt so excruciatingly alive. Living in the Present between pulses” (860).

However, literature as an art form must move forward in order to keep presenting newer, more powerful platforms from whence to view oneself, especially as the problems facing us change. Wallace's technical innovation in the use of unconventional, conversational endnotes helped push the medium toward a more compassionate and fulfilling kind of literature. The modernists disguised the author in order to create “narratorless” texts; the postmodernists resurrected the author only to strip him or her of authority, leaving a self-conscious and empty presence on the page (McHale 199). Wallace suggests a new role of the author, fully self-aware of the fraught intricacies of the author-reader relationship, but still willing to “sort of die in order to move the reader, somehow” (McCaffery 149). He gave the world a gift.

References

- Ashbery, John. "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror." *Poetry* 124.5 (1974): 247 – 261.
- Barth, John. *Lost in the Funhouse*. Doubleday, 1968.
- den Dulk, Allard. *Love Me Till My Heart Stops: Existentialist Engagement in Contemporary American Literature*. Ph.D. thesis, VU University Amsterdam, 2012.
- Genette, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Cornell paperbacks. Cornell University Press, 1983.
- Grafton, Anthony. *The footnote: A curious history*. Harvard University Press, 1999.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. W. W. Norton, 2006.
- Letzler, David. "Encyclopedic Novels and the Craft of Fiction: Infinite Jest's Endnotes." *Studies in the Novel* 44.3 (2012): 304–324.
- Lipsky, David. "The Lost Years and Last Days of David Foster Wallace." *Rolling Stone* 1064: 100–11.
- McCaffery, Larry. "An Interview with David Foster Wallace." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13.2 (1993): 127.
- McHale, Brian. *Postmodernist fiction*. Routledge, 1987.
- Staes, Toon. "The Coatlicue Complex in David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest." *The Explicator* 72.1 (2014): 67–71.
- Wallace, David Foster. *Girl with Curious Hair*. WW Norton & Company, 1989.
- . *Infinite Jest*. Back Bay Books, 1996.
- . *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments*. Back Bay Books, 1997.
- . *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life*. Little, Brown and Company, 2009.
- Wayne, Teddy. *Addiction to Itself: Self-consciousness in David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest*. Undergraduate Thesis, Harvard University, 2001.