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SUMMARY

'LOVE ME TILL MY HEART STOPS'

Existentialist Engagement in Contemporary American Literature

This study has analyzed the philosophical dimension of the novels of David Foster Wallace, Dave Eggers and Jonathan Safran Foer, by viewing them in light of heuristic perspectives derived from the philosophies of Søren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Albert Camus, in order to attain a better understanding of the novels' portrayal of the problems that characterize contemporary Western existence (hyperreflexivity and endless irony) as well as to better understand the way the novels suggest these problems can possibly be overcome (through the virtues of sincerity, reality-commitment and community). Below, I will summarize the insights that we have acquired over the course of the eight chapters of this study.

The novels of Wallace, Eggers and Foer represent a new trend in American literature that has gradually taken shape from the first half of the 1990s onward. Of this new group of writers, Wallace is generally regarded as the most important, pioneering member. From the second half of the twentieth century to this day, Western existence has undergone a great number of changes that have had a profound influence on the way the contemporary individual ascribes meaning and gives direction to his life. Wallace once stated: "[T]here are things about the contemporary U.S. that make it distinctively hard to be a real human being". According to Wallace, it is part of the task of fiction to portray such difficulties: "maybe half of fiction's job is to dramatize what makes it tough [to be a real human being]".[1] This part of 'fiction's job' has been shown throughout this study to form an important aspect of the novels of Wallace, Eggers and Foer: they portray excessive self-reflectivity and endless irony

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[1]   McCaffery, 'Interview', p. 131.

as the two main problems of contemporary existence, which during the preceding decades have come to pervade the everyday reality of Western culture in general, and American fiction in particular. In the novels, these problems are shown to lead to (self-)alienation and loss of meaning.

Chapter 1 focused on the first issue: excessive self-reflectivity. The novels of Wallace, Eggers and Foer portray contemporary Western existence as requiring constant self-reflection. The contemporary individual has become, in the words of Anthony Giddens, "a *reflexive project*".[2] This constant self-reflection is shown to easily take on such an excessive form that, through this constant thinking about (distancing from, doubting) the self, it leads to feelings of emptiness and even depression. For this problem, I have adopted the term 'hyperreflexivity', defined by Louis Sass and Josef Parnas as "forms of exaggerated self-consciousness in which aspects of oneself are experienced as akin to external objects."[3] Sartre's view of consciousness enabled us to understand that, in self-reflection, consciousness is turned into a thing and that this objectification conflicts with the non-thinglike nature of consciousness. According to Sartre, consciousness is sheer intentionality, solely the awareness of something other than itself. Thus, in this objectification, consciousness is alienated from itself. The risk of such alienation is made greater by the heightened reflexivity of contemporary Western existence, described above.

We have analyzed different phenomena of increasing reflexive alienation that are portrayed in the novels of Wallace, Eggers and Foer, and that are (mostly) well-known Sartrean motifs. Firstly, we saw the internalization of the look, which is where the problem of self-reflective alienation can be said to start: consciousness, by looking at itself as if at something else, objectifies itself and is thereby alienated from itself. For example, the addicted characters in Wallace's *Infinite Jest* are obsessed with whether other people can tell that the former are drug addicts. Secondly, we looked at how the self-reflective individual experiences language as objectification. Trying to control how he is perceived, the individual wants to express himself through language. But because he has come to think of his self as something unique and private 'inside' himself, while language consists of terms that are necessarily public (acquiring their meaning by being meaningful for others as well), the individual regards language as objectifying him in 'improper' terms. For example, in Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*, the character Safran refuses to employ certain commonly used words, as they can supposedly never do justice to what he thinks or feels. Thirdly, we saw what Sartre calls the 'poisoning' of experience: when self-reflection breaks in, consciousness distances itself from its spontaneous absorption in a certain action and 'poisons' it with (unfounded) judgments. For example, in Eggers's *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, Dave's scattering of his mother's ashes is interrupted by all kinds of doubts about the propriety of the whole act. Fourthly, we looked at

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2   Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 32.
3   Sass and Parnas, 'Schizophrenia, Consciousness, and the Self', p. 427.

the Sartrean notion of bad faith, which was shown to imply a reflective attempt to deceive oneself about the tension that lies at the heart of human existence (namely, being both 'transcendence', a freedom to project oneself towards the future, and 'facticity', having a factual past). In the novels, many characters try to deny either their freedom or their responsibility, for instance through addiction (in *Infinite Jest*), or by speeding past everything without giving oneself time to think (as in Will's trip around the world in eight days, in Eggers's *You Shall Know Our Velocity*). Finally, we analyzed, mainly in Wallace's work, solipsism as a psychological disorder portrayed as a fifth and final phenomenon of escalating reflexivity. In *Infinite Jest* almost all the characters suffer from depression (anhedonia); they stand at a constant distance from themselves and feel empty as a result, having no idea who they actually are. Both Sass and Wallace connect this escalation of reflexivity to the philosophical notion of solipsism, in which the outside world and other people disappear as independently real and meaningful entities.

In *Chapter 2* the second main problem was addressed: endless irony. This problem can be said to follow from that of hyperreflexivity. Constant self-reflection creates the awareness that one can never fully stand behind one's actions (for one is constantly reconsidering them). This awareness is expressed by acting in an ironic way, that is, by not taking those actions seriously, not fully claiming them as one's own. Just like self-reflection, this ironic attitude can take on an excessive, infinite form, that is no longer aimed at any goal or end. The portrayal of this attitude in the works of Wallace and Eggers implies a sharp critique or irony. In his work, Foer seems to prefer to no longer address the problem of irony directly, but rather explore the attitudes that might, or should, come in its stead.

Wallace and Eggers's portrayal of the problem of endless irony was analyzed by comparing it to Søren Kierkegaard's critique of irony, which resemble each other in four crucial respects. First of all, we were able to see that their common subject is not irony as merely a verbal strategy, but irony as an attitude towards existence, which implies a total negation of all given meaning or value. Secondly, Kierkegaard, Wallace and Eggers see the ironic attitude as establishing a total negative independence: through irony, the individual frees himself from his given, immediate situation. As such irony forms an indispensable step towards becoming a self. However, to truly effect a liberation the negative freedom of irony will have to be followed by a positive freedom, by realizing self-chosen values. Such a positivity can, by definition, not be provided by irony, which is pure negation. Therefore, irony should always be employed only temporarily. Consequently, the third similarity between Kierkegaard, Wallace and Eggers is that irony becomes problematic when it turns into a permanent attitude, which serves to escape all determinations and responsibilities. This so-called 'aesthetic' irony has disastrous consequences for the self: because no content or value is attached to one's life, the self is gradually emptied out. This disintegration of the self as a result of the attitude of endless, aesthetic irony is what the works of Wallace and Eggers criticize through their portrayal of, for example, the editors of *Might Magazine* in *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* and the addicts in *Infinite*

Jest. Fourthly, we have seen that meta-irony (being ironic about irony) cannot lead to liberation from empty irony, because ironizing irony is simply a continuation of the (endless) spiral of aesthetic negation.

The described socio-cultural transformations and the resulting problems of endless self-reflection and irony have also had an important impact on the developments in American literature over the past fifty years. We have seen that, in this respect, the fiction of Wallace, Eggers and Foer can be seen as a new literary trend following and responding to two preceding ones, namely the postmodernist metafiction of the 1960s and '70s, epitomized by the work of John Barth; and the postmodernist minimalism of the 1980s and first half of the 1990s, epitomized by the work of Bret Easton Ellis.

In *Chapter 3* we saw that, in postmodernist metafiction, the experience of uncertainty and plurality in contemporary Western life leads to the questioning of reality as something clear and univocal. In Barth's postmodernist metafiction the notion of reality comes to be regarded as constructed, artificial, fake; that is, as an 'unreality'. Barth's view of fiction, specifically his work *Lost in the Funhouse*, was analyzed in light of Jacques Derrida's strategy of deconstruction. According to Derrida and Barth, philosophy and literature are motivated by very similar illusory ideals: whereas deconstruction is aimed at exposing the illusion of 'presence', which – according to Derrida – motivates the whole of Western thought (that our definitions of concepts connect to an underlying set of pure essences), metafiction is aimed at exposing 'reality' as an illusion, as an artificial construction similar to fiction. Works of metafiction self-consciously expose their own artificial structures, in order to evoke the awareness that all projections of reality are, in fact, such constructs. At the same time, Derrida and Barth regard the illusions of presence and reality as indispensable and irrepressible aspects of thought and fiction. Therefore, the aim of deconstruction and metafiction is not to destroy, but to endlessly 'exhaust' the notions of presence and reality, maintaining their unresolvability, endlessly revoking them, thereby postponing the determination of meaning. This endless cycle of affirmation and undermining was described as the reflexive-ironic strategy of both deconstruction and metafiction. Ultimately, postmodernist metafiction, because it is unable to breach the obsession with itself and the ironic exposure of its own fictional structures, withers away into noncommittal introversion, in what Wallace describes as skepticism and solipsism.

In *Chapter 4*, we have seen that the reflexive-ironic problematization of the notions of reality and meaning has become a widely held intuitive perception of the world and has been turned into fact, leading to the conviction that nothing is intrinsically valuable. This is exactly what postmodernist minimalism, epitomized by Ellis's fiction, expresses: an American reality saturated by the conviction that nothing has meaning or value. *American Psycho*, the most extreme and consistent elaboration of Ellis's fixed style and subject matter, was analyzed as an expression of the escalation of the ironic-aesthetic life view criticized by Kierkegaard. We

compared *American Psycho*'s first-person narrator and main character Patrick Bateman to Johannes the Seducer, Kierkegaard's most extreme embodiment of the ironic-aesthetic attitude. The reflexive-ironic problematization of reality and meaning effects an absolute freedom, and the sole interest of both Bateman and Johannes is the preservation of this freedom: these 'aesthetes' ironically distance themselves from any commitment to the world, which serves merely as an incitement to their fantasies. We saw that this aesthetic attitude ultimately leads to a disintegration of the self through four successive phenomena: 'alienation from others', 'self-alienation, 'solipsism' and 'skeptic frenzy', indicating the manic, endless spiral that this attitude inevitably becomes and in which everything is necessarily ever-faster experienced as meaningless.

However, we also saw that *American Psycho* cannot be regarded as a successful critique of this attitude. As the novel is strictly limited to Bateman's perspective, and excludes any possibility of an alternative view, the only way in which the novel can be said to criticize its main character, and thereby the life-view he symbolizes, is by forcing the reader to perform a constant ironic distancing from what he or she reads. Thus *American Psycho* falls prey to the same attitude of which it shows us the extreme escalation, namely a reflexive irony without end. In relation to Barth's fiction, Ellis's work takes the problem of hyperreflexive irony, and the resulting effects of skepticism and solipsism, to an even further extreme. Ellis seems to regard the meaningful description of the world (whether it is seen as reality or as fiction) as a simple impossibility. In his work, it has become fact that the world has no meaning and that all attempts to formulate meaning are equally arbitrary and unreal, and therefore useless.

In addition to describing the problems of contemporary existence, the novels of Wallace, Eggers and Foer also embody an attempt to overcome these problems. This attempt is what I have called the engagement of these literary works. As Wallace stated, expanding his above-quoted definition of the task of fiction: "maybe half of fiction's job is to dramatize what makes it tough [to be a real human being]. The other half is to dramatize the fact that we still *are* human beings, now. Or can be".[4] According to Wallace, a great deal of contemporary American fiction has neglected this second, engaged task.

Chapter 5 analyzed how Ludwig Wittgenstein's later philosophy helps Wallace, in the view of fiction underlying *Infinite Jest* (and the novels of Eggers and Foer following in the wake of Wallace's work), to again speak meaningfully of solutions to the problems of contemporary existence, and overcome the problematic aspects of the postmodernist view. According to Derrida and Barth there is an inevitable gap between language and reality, and between language and thought. But one can only speak of such a gap, if one assumes that language acquires (or tries to acquire) meaning by referring to the world or thought (by attempting to bridge

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4   McCaffery, 'Interview', p. 131.

that gap). However, Wittgenstein shows, in particular in his work on ostensive definition and private language, that language does not acquire meaning by referring to something. Being able to point to a thing in the world, or to a thought in my head, presupposes that all kinds of linguistic ('grammatical') structures are already in place. These structures 'cause' the meaning of my words; they determine what counts as a meaningful use those words. Wittgenstein views language as part of a life-form, as embedded in the communal structures of groups of individuals. This view of language, in contrast to the postmodernist language view – which, as we have seen, is characterized by hyperreflexivity and endless irony –, emphasizes the importance of community, reality and trust (we have also highlighted literary renderings of these virtues of Wittgenstein's view of language in Wallace's fiction). Wittgenstein's view (which, in this respect, is akin to that of Sartre) that the self and self-knowledge arise in the world and in connection to others, averts the threat of solipsism; and the threat of skepticism is countered by the certainty about the real world and the trust in the meaning of our words, both already presupposed in the most basic things we do.

Finally, we outlined a view of literature based on the late-Wittgensteinian approach to language. Both the traditional and the postmodernist view of literature presuppose the referential picture of language (that language can only acquire meaning by referring to reality) and therefore have to conclude that literature (which, after all, does not refer to anything existent) is inevitably cut off from reality (for the postmodernist view this is the case with *all* language use). Because for Wittgenstein meaning is not determined by reference to the world or to the thoughts of the speaker, but results from the communal structures of language users, the non-referentiality of literary texts does not pose a problem: the world has already been brought into the grammatical structures of language before I can use language to offer any sort of description. From this Wittgensteinian perspective, literature can be regarded as a form of grammatical investigation. In literature, all that we have are the words of a text, which automatically include the communal structures within which those words have meaning. So, in literary texts we are forced to examine the language before us, to look at what is 'in plain view'. Moreover, as John Gibson suggests: this investigation of our cultural semantic structures can be seen to form an important foundation for our use of complex, moral (human) concepts (that is, concepts that are tied in with what we regard as human virtue). Our meaningful language use presupposes public standards, and our use of complex, moral concepts cannot take place without being 'founded' by so-called 'paradigmatic cases': examples that are common knowledge within a certain life-form. Literature and other cultural products can be regarded as important suppliers of such paradigmatic examples: they offer detailed depictions of concepts that are essential to our collective understanding of reality.

The novels of Wallace, Eggers and Foer actively re-assume this function of literature. Their novels (in accord with the importance that Wittgenstein attaches to trust, reality and community) can be seen to offer paradigmatic portrayals of the virtues

of sincerity, reality-commitment and community; they emphasize the importance of these notions for a meaningful, human existence.

Chapter 6 offered an analysis of sincerity. The novels of Wallace, Eggers and Foer portray the desire and search for an existential attitude that places (renewed) emphasis on qualities such as honesty, openness, trust and vulnerability. Several scholars have associated the novels with a desire for sincerity, but mostly without precisely defining what that sincerity means, and without adequately mapping out where we can find it in these works. Firstly, we explored the notions of sincerity and authenticity, as the two main ideals of self-becoming. We found that only sincerity can be seen to emphasize the most important traits of the conception of the self embodied in the works of Wallace, Eggers and Foer, namely, the importance of the other and of the connection between the self and its actions. This exploration enabled us to regard sincerity as a basic attitude of forming a stable (sincere) self, as opposed to the empty fragmentation of hyperreflexive irony. From this basic attitude of sincerity the individual is then again able to realize a meaningful connection to reality and to other human beings. The two latter desires, or virtues (reality-commitment and community), are made possible by sincerity, but at the same time give further substance to the sincere attitude, and, as such, are part of its realization.

To gain a better understanding of this basic attitude of sincerity, the heuristic perspective of Sartre's view of consciousness was resumed. Sartre's view required correction and reconstruction, as his critique of sincerity was shown to be inconsistent with his own descriptions of consciousness. Subsequently, we were able to rehabilitate sincerity as the basic existentialist virtue of the contemporary Western individual. We saw that 'good faith' is the pre-reflective acceptance of human-reality, which is characterized by the tension between transcendence and facticity, and awareness of the need to become a self in connection to the world outside consciousness. Subsequently, 'sincerity' was shown to reflectively resume the insights of good faith. Sartre calls this resumption a 'pure reflection': consciousness becomes aware of itself without depriving itself of its spontaneity, of its directedness towards the world. The characters Mario Incandenza and Oskar Schell (from *Infinite Jest* and *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, respectively) were analyzed as paragons of good faith, who, through their intuitive awareness of the task of self-becoming, function as exemplary characters demonstrating a life-view that other characters are subsequently shown to arrive at through a more difficult, reflected route. The attitude of sincerity was analyzed through the descriptions of Will Chmielewski from *You Shall Know Our Velocity* and of Don Gately and Hal Incandenza from *Infinite Jest*. These characters function as paradigmatic cases that underpin the understanding of sincerity outlined above. They overcome their reflexive-ironic attitude by realizing the transcendent character of the self; in other words, by realizing that, to achieve a meaningful existence, consciousness has to be connected to the world outside itself.

Chapter 7 further elaborated this need for reality-commitment, that is, the need for the individual to connect himself to the world, by choosing. This was done by resuming the perspective of Kierkegaard's philosophy, in which choice (as the

alternative to endless irony, which implies not-choosing) marks the transition from the aesthetic to the ethical life-view. We have seen that for Kierkegaard the sincere acknowledgement of the all-determining importance of choice has three successive features, which were each explored in connection to one of the novels: firstly, the awareness that only when negative freedom is followed by positive freedom, does existence acquire meaning; secondly, sincere despair, as the realization that one's aesthetic life-view is a dead end, and that a change should be made; and thirdly, the realization of urgency, or passion (choice or action is imbued with the pressing need to be performed).

The realization that one has to choose leads to the question: how does one arrive at the choice one has to make? We have seen that this requires relating one's factual past (what Kierkegaard calls the self's 'gift') and the freedom of one's future (the self's 'task') to each other. Whereas the aesthetic attitude entails a denial of the need to acknowledge both these 'ingredients' of the self, all the main characters of the novels under consideration eventually try to integrate their past and future into a stable self for which they assume responsibility. We have seen, in both Kierkegaard and the novels, that this process of relating past and future, of becoming a self, is inevitably without end; it has to be repeated over and over again.

This Kierkegaardian notion of 'repetition' was shown to have three aspects. The first aspect is repetition as responsibility. Here, we saw that irony, in a controlled form, has an important (though strictly limited) role in the ethical life, as the element which initiates the regular resurfacing of the ethical choice, if it is to properly remain a choice. Repetition as responsibility means that the individual constantly has to return to the present, as the only moment in which he faces a choice and is able to *make* a choice and realize a responsibility. The second aspect is repetition versus boredom: committing to choice means accepting its recurrence, and not dreading it out of fear of boredom with 'the same'. We have seen that the instances of the aesthetic attitude portrayed in the novels of Wallace, Eggers and Foer, are at the same time instances of the fear of boredom. By enduring the repetition inherent in ethical life, the main characters in the novels eventually surpass the fear of boredom, and thereby overcome the aesthetic attitude. The third and final aspect is repetition as transcendence: choice implies committing to something that transcends the individual, that does not lie fully within the individual's control (something in the world or another person). This surrender is symbolized by the Kierkegaardian image of the 'leap': it expresses the uncertain character of an action that the individual nevertheless undertakes, because it is important to him, uncertain as the outcome may be. We have seen this image of choice as a leap in *Infinite Jest*'s passages on AA and in *You Shall Know Our Velocity*'s repeated emphasis on the physical action of jumping.

In *Chapter 8*, we looked at the final virtue needed to achieve a meaningful existence, namely, that of forming a community with other human beings. The striving for community portrayed in the novels of Wallace, Eggers and Foer has been analyzed in light of Camus's philosophy of the rebellion against the absurd, because

the perspectives of Sartre and Kierkegaard were shown to insufficiently address the role of other human beings in meaningful self-becoming. First, Camus's two central notions of absurdity and rebellion were connected to the heuristic perspectives employed in the rest of the study: absurdity to Sartre's description of the tension inherent in conscious, human existence, and rebellion to Kierkegaard's critique of irony as a critique of the total freedom that ends up in meaninglessness. Subsequently, the importance of the other was shown for Camus to flow from these observations: the realization that the world is absurd, that it lacks the meaning that the individual expects of it, results in the individual rebelling to demand meaning, and in this rebellion becoming aware of his connection to the other.

A similar connection to the other is realized in the novels, albeit as the result of a more tentative movement, which was analyzed as consisting of attention and trust. We have seen that attention (as the outer-directedness of consciousness, as attending to another human being) is the effort or energy underlying choice and commitment. The attention *for* the other brings with it an openness *towards* the other, and this willingness to be vulnerable and to endure the uncertainty that accompanies the exchange with the other, presupposes trust, a certain amount of faith. So, attention was described as a movement out of oneself and out of distrust, resulting in a commitment that is trust, which is what connects the self to the world, to the other.

This bridge, formed by the notions of attention and trust, between Camus's notions of solitary absurdity and rebellious community, made possible the analysis of the two main effects of the rebellion against absurdity. The first is the so-called 'solidarity of chains' that puts an end to the solipsistic loneliness of the individual and replaces it with a connection to others. The novels' main characters are described as establishing communities of people supporting each other. The second important effect of community is that it founds a dialogical process of meaning-acquisition between the connected individuals, which replaces their former skepticism. In the novels meaning is acquired through the dialogues that the main characters engage in, through 'feedback' between community members.

In the *Concluding Remarks*, we reflected on the productivity of the interdisciplinary, cooperative approach to literature and philosophy employed in this study. We concluded that, instead of wanting to define what distinguishes literature and philosophy, we should look at instances of where they come together and overlap. We have seen that the novels of Wallace, Eggers and Foer were indispensable to a proper understanding and philosophical analysis of the problems of contemporary Western existence and of their possible solutions, offered in this study. Furthermore, we concluded that the literary works of Wallace, Eggers and Foer offer profoundly existentialist portrayals of contemporary existence and could thus be rightly labelled as existentialist novels. However, these literary works should not be understood as simply returning to and adopting the ideas formulated by the mentioned philosophers. In certain aspects the novels can be seen to update and correct the views of these

thinkers, especially concerning the role of the other; the novels make clear that there is only one direction for meaningful existence, namely: out of the self, towards the world and the other. Finally, we remarked that the actual realization of the analyzed attitude in the contemporary Western world is of course a development that is still on its way. The outcome of this process will depend, partly – in conjunction with many other societal developments –, on whether the portrayals offered in the novels of Wallace, Eggers and Foer (and the literary trend that they have pioneered) will come to function as influential paradigmatic cases, as widely shared standards within our life-form.