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den Dulk, Allard

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CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study set out to analyze the shared philosophical dimension of the literary works of David Foster Wallace, Dave Eggers and Jonathan Safran Foer, in their portrayal of the situation of the contemporary Western individual. The study has shown that these novels are indeed connected through their shared preoccupation with similar themes, portraying similar problems and solutions, and that the most important formal aspect of these novels is their reaffirmation of the possibility of connecting fictional stories to the real world, thereby setting them apart from certain preceding trends in American literary fiction. As such, we have established that these works form a new literary trend and that what unifies these novels, what forms their common 'aesthetic', is their shared thematic preoccupation through which they engage themselves with the reality of contemporary Western existence.

But analyzing this shared philosophical dimension also implies a claim about what these literary works are, what they do, namely: that they are partly philosophical, not in the limited and subsidiary sense that they could be used to illustrate certain philosophical views, but in the sense that these literary works themselves provide philosophical insights. Throughout the thesis, these insights have been further explored and analyzed by viewing them in light of relevant heuristic perspectives derived from different philosophers. Now that we have reached the end of this study, we are able to reflect on the productivity of this interdisciplinary approach to literature and philosophy. I will also remark upon the existentialist connection between the literary and philosophical works, and on the realization of the attitude, portrayed in the novels, in the contemporary Western world.

LITERATURE AND PHILOSOPHY

The relation between literature and philosophy, and whether the former can contribute something to the latter, is the subject of a longstanding and ongoing debate. Most of the arguments in this debate refer to a number of supposedly fundamental differences between philosophy and literature; one's position then depends on whether one judges those differences to be either conducive to or incompatible with philosophical insight. Oft-mentioned distinctions are the generality that most philosophy aspires to versus the particularity of literary descriptions; also, the form: most philosophy has an argumentative structure, while literary texts are predominately structured as a narrative¹; and, on a related point: philosophy is characterized as wanting to avoid all ambiguity whereas literature frequently intentionally invites ambiguity.² Several thinkers have argued that literature, precisely because of these alleged fundamental differences, constitutes an alternative source of (or route to) philosophical insight and, as such, offers a valuable or even indispensable supplement to 'regular' philosophy.³

However, in my opinion, sharp distinctions between literature and philosophy, such as the ones offered above, amount to distortive generalizations. I am not suggesting that the characterizations lack all validity, but as they tend to emphasize the differences between literature and philosophy, such descriptions result in isolating the two from each other, which then makes it difficult to bring their connections into view. At first glance, all the contrasts mentioned in the preceding paragraph might seem like truisms. But one only has to look at the thinkers employed throughout this study to realize that such clear-cut distinctions need to be refuted: these thinkers are all regarded as 'literary' philosophers, in whose works general philosophical argumentation and particular, ambiguous literary narrative are closely intertwined.

Thus, merely emphasizing the differences between literature and philosophy hinders our understanding of the relations between them, and how literature might bring forth philosophical insight. I think that adopting an interdisciplinary approach will prove to be much more productive, and make visible where and how literature and philosophy actually come together and overlap. I hope to have contributed to this by means of this study, and, below, I will reflect on what insights can be drawn from the specific cooperation between literature and philosophy offered in it.

First of all, we can conclude that, throughout the preceding chapters, the constant interplay between the literary portrayals and philosophical perspectives proved to be very fruitful: both served to illustrate and clarify aspects that were problematic, unclear or absent in the other. For example, Kierkegaard's notion of aesthetic irony allowed us to understand the irony critique formulated in Wallace's and Eggers's

¹ At least, all the literary texts (novels) analyzed in this study have a narrative structure. But of course, literature in general also includes lyrical poetry.

² cf. Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature*, pp. 253–254.

³ In contemporary philosophy, one could think of, among others, Iris Murdoch, Martha Nussbaum and Paul Ricoeur as putting forth such theses; cf. Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature*, pp. 220–254.

novels, but on the other hand, it was only through these literary works that we were able to properly see that such an existential attitude of endless irony forms a truly fundamental problem of contemporary Western existence. Similarly, the Sartrean view of consciousness served to clarify the role of sincerity in the works of Wallace, Eggers and Foer, while at the same time these works served to point out and correct both Sartre's own as well as the more general philosophical misconception of the phenomenon of sincerity.

Furthermore, we should remember (in contrast to what might seem to follow from the traditional distinction between philosophy as offering general, structured insight, and literature as offering specific illustrations of particularities) that the overall (philosophical) structure and substance of the explorations in this study was largely determined, not by the philosophical sources, but by the portrayals depicted in the novels of Wallace, Eggers and Foer. The novels dictated the overall structure, the philosophical route taken, and its component themes (the hermeneutic keys). Subsequently, specific aspects of different philosophies (but not a singular imposed, coherent philosophical framework) were employed (as heuristic perspectives) to further explicate the different elements encountered on this philosophical route.

In my opinion, the philosophical subject matter analyzed in this study requires this trajectory via literature. It is from the descriptions offered by the novels, that, for example, hyperreflexivity and endless irony can most convincingly be seen as contemporary problems. I know of no contemporary philosophical texts that offer equally encompassing descriptions of the different aspects of these problems. This could of course be due to a lack of acquaintance with such texts on my part. However, there might be a more fundamental explanation, namely: that a proper investigation of these problems simply cannot do without the kind of detailed descriptions provided by the novels.

It is important to note that the issues at stake, here, are existential issues, the problems and solutions for attaining a meaningful life, as experienced by the individual as part of the reality of his existence. It requires elaborate descriptions to be able to truly grasp such experiences. For example: what is it for the self to be confined in self-reflection? How should I understand the apparently contradictory assertion, made by many philosophers, but convincingly described by the novels, that a constant focus on the self leads to a loss of self? And while we are at it: what exactly does 'losing' one's self mean? Another example: what does it mean to be unable to choose and how does the overcoming of this inability take shape? The novels give access to the experience and consciousness of these complicated, many-sided and contradictory processes, which to me seems to be a requirement for understanding these existential phenomena.

But the fact that the novels give access to experience and consciousness (perhaps a quality of literature in general) could still be interpreted as a subsidiary, mainly illustrative function. However, when confronted by such a consideration, we should realize the wider scope of the issues at hand, and think not just in terms of how they are investigated in philosophy and how literature might 'assist' in that investigation.

We should remember that we are talking about existential issues, about “what it is to be a fucking *human being*” – as Wallace puts it⁴ –, and wonder how in life itself (and not just in philosophy, as an activity brought forth by that experience) we are able to understand our existence as a ‘human’ reality. We do so by means of a whole range of complex, moral concepts. How are we able to understand, store and pass on the meaning of such concepts, so that they can play a crucial role in our descriptions of existence? Does this not always require the elaborate depictions that, for instance, literature provides? Our meaningful use of such complex concepts presupposes paradigmatic cases, portrayals embodying a concept, that are common knowledge within a life-form, and that function as a standard of meaning for the use of that concept within a given group of people. As we already saw in Chapter 5, and without wanting to repeat the argument described there: literary works can be regarded as an important source of such paradigmatic cases.

Concerning the study’s subject matter: what makes the novels of Wallace, Eggers and Foer stand out, makes them important, is that they actively re-assume this function of literature, as offering meaningful, foundational portrayals of reality; a function that was discredited by the postmodernist view, which sees language and fiction as cut off from reality. For example, the works of Wallace, Eggers and Foer offer portrayals that give new meaning to the concept of sincerity, a notion that had been discounted (not perceived as meaningful) for quite some time. This shows the indispensability of the novels for the philosophical analysis offered in this study (and thus of the interdisciplinary, cooperative approach to literature and philosophy employed therein): the novels offer elaborate portrayals of contemporary Western existence, and thereby breathe meaning into concepts signifying the problems and possible virtues of that existence. As such, they form the foundation of a (philosophical) understanding of the world that was further explicated and analyzed in the foregoing.

I do not think that there is, nor do we need to find or formulate, a decisive quality or set of qualities that distinguishes all philosophical and literary texts from each other. I regard philosophy and literature as consisting of many widely varying, but diversely interconnected language-games; and, even though we are quite capable of drawing rough distinctions between both collections of language-games, when we approach these roughly drawn borderlines, we will find many cross bonds, and cases that take part in both collections. Most of the literary and philosophical texts employed in this study are characterized – though in varying degrees and arrangements – by such a ‘hybridity’, which in the preceding chapters has been proven to provide fertile ground for insight. In my opinion, there is no need to ‘purify’ the divide between literature and philosophy; for what else would this mean other than wanting to ‘enforce’ the divide?

⁴ McCaffery, ‘Interview’, p. 131.

EXISTENTIALIST ENGAGEMENT

At the start of this study, we noted that the portrayal of the problems and virtues concerning the realization of meaningful existence in the contemporary Western world, offered in the novels of Wallace, Eggers and Foer, seems to have strong connections to existentialist thought. To further explicate and analyze this shared philosophical dimension, the novels were viewed in light of relevant heuristic perspectives derived from different existentialist philosophers, namely: Kierkegaard, Sartre, Wittgenstein and Camus. The resulting investigation has made clear that the works of Wallace, Eggers and Foer indeed offer profoundly existentialist portrayals of contemporary existence, and that the literary trend that these works represent, could thus, as the subtitle of this study suggests, be rightly labelled as existentialist. However, these works should not be understood as simply returning to and adopting the ideas formulated by the philosophers referred to. We have seen that in certain aspects, the novels can be seen to update and correct the views of these thinkers. Whereas these existentialist philosophers can sometimes be seen to waver between a view of the self as transcendent, as coming into being ‘in the world’, amongst others, and a latent desire for autonomy, leading to a neglect of the other, the novels provide a harrowing portrayal of individuals who have become engaged in themselves and make clear that there is only one direction for meaningful existence: out of the self, towards the world and the other.

Furthermore, we could say that the affinity with existentialism lies in the attitude of engagement that the novels of Wallace, Eggers and Foer express. By taking on these themes they address the problematic condition of contemporary Western existence, acknowledge it as a situation that needs to be overcome, and embody an attempt to formulate such an overcoming. They portray characters who are involved in such engaged attempts, and as these portrayals clearly concern actual contemporary existence, the novels themselves are also expressions of such engagement. One could perhaps say that all literary trends are a critical response to something (to preceding literary trends, or societal developments in general). But in the works of Wallace, Eggers and Foer, the centrality of contemporary problems and possible solutions constitutes a distinctive engagement that can also be said to be a defining characteristic of works of existentialism.⁵

The engagement with both existential problems and possible solutions, offered in the works of Wallace, Eggers and Foer, reflects what, according to Wallace, all fiction should do, namely “both to depict [the time’s darkness] *and* to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in it”, applying “CPR to those elements of what’s human and magical that still live and glow despite the times’ darkness”.⁶ This is also how we should understand Wallace’s term “*bothness*”: the works portray the problems of contemporary existence, including the enormous difficulty of escaping

⁵ cf. Van Stralen, *Beschreven keuzes*, pp. 40, 229–230.

⁶ McCaffery, ‘Interview’, p. 131.

their grip, but they also address the avenues that are still available to somehow try to realize a meaningful, human life.⁷ This dynamic might also be an expression of what Wallace calls the oft-contested compatibility of “cynicism and naïveté”, an issue that appears in several of his works, and as such functions as a leitmotif in his writing.⁸ More specifically: the works in question describe difficult aspects of contemporary existence (‘cynicism’), but also offer a portrayal of a possible solution, a commitment (and thus a vulnerability) to a ‘positivity’, to something that is valued or affirmed again (‘naïveté’).

In doing so, the works of Wallace, Eggers and Foer constitute a literary execution of Sartre’s notion of ‘pure reflection’ (connecting themselves to the world we live in, resuming the recognition of the irresolvable tension lying at the heart of human existence) and of what Kierkegaard calls the ‘leap’ (from the recognition of that fundamental tension, venturing to formulate such ethically motivated fiction, committing to meaning, instead of endlessly retreating from it, as in postmodernist fiction), and thereby establish what Wittgenstein and Camus describe as a community of meaning (by offering, in dialogue with the reader, insightful portrayals into contemporary problems and virtues required in response to those problems).

The contrast between this engagement and the problematic life-view it responds to is aptly summarized by the two different denotations of the title of Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*. On the one hand, in the novel, there is a film called ‘Infinite Jest’, which symbolizes the problematic reflexive-ironic attitude: the film sets off in its viewers an infinite, self-obsessed desire for entertainment, non-committal pleasure, that ignores the world completely, and, in the end, proves to be fatal. On the other hand, there is the novel *Infinite Jest*, which is expressive of a completely different ‘infinity’: not excessive reflexivity and endless irony leading to solipsism and skepticism, but a novel that facilitates endless re-engagement, as an ethical choice that is constantly taken up again.

Also, in this context of engagement and commitment in and through literature, I would like to remark upon the state of consciousness that reading literary works in general (or at least, most of them – see below) and the analyzed novels in particular, can be said to bring forth; a state of consciousness that constitutes a realization of the view of the (engaged, committed) self outlined in this study. To me, this state of consciousness while reading seems to be one of the grounds on which we base our broad, intuitive distinction between most novels and most philosophical texts, and, therefore, also tells us something about what the former might add to the latter. I follow Ger Groot and Patricia de Martelaere in their suggestion that an important part of reading literature is not so much forgetting the unreality of the story (the so-called ‘willing suspension of disbelief’) but forgetting the self, that

⁷ Wallace, ‘David Lynch Keeps His Head’, p. 211.

⁸ IJ, p. 694; EUP, p. 63; Wallace, ‘Westward’, *Girl with Curious Hair*, p. 304; cf. “Wallace’s work, in its attempt to prove that cynicism and naïveté are mutually compatible” (Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, p. 17).

is: truly attending to something outside the self, consciousness directed toward the world as it is portrayed in the story. It might be for this very reason that our engagement with fiction is so real and deep.⁹ The forgetting facilitated by fiction should not be interpreted as a form of blissful escapism. On the contrary, as the words of the text demand to be given meaning, the self can no longer (self-reflectively) immunize or insulate itself, as it does so often in daily life (when watching the news, when stuck in traffic, when standing in line in the supermarket)¹⁰, but has to commit to realizing the meaning of the reality brought on by the words.

So, reading a novel might in some ways be regarded as a model for the realization of engagement: in the situation described above, the novel represents a possible source of meaning, something worth thinking about, worth the reader's attention and trust, whereupon the reader indeed commits to the novel in such a way, so as to realize the exchange of meaning. As we have already seen throughout this study, these virtues – sincerity, reality-commitment and community (attention, trust) – are part of what happens in the works of Wallace, Eggers and Foer, but they are also qualities of these novels in themselves, aspects of what they do, as texts. The novels represent something worth trusting in, committing to, and are aimed at achieving meaning through a dialogue with the reader. Establishing this engagement with the novel is what Wallace describes as the reader 'putting in work', and thereby realizing that he is in a 'deep, significant conversation with another consciousness'.¹¹ Compare this to postmodernist metafiction and minimalism that, both in their own way, frustrate this very process of commitment to meaning: Barth's metafiction by pushing the reader back into self-consciousness and Ellis's minimalism by leaving the reader with no meaning or value at all. By contrast, the works of Wallace, Eggers and Foer are explicitly aimed at realizing such an engaged consciousness.

Having outlined this engaged, virtuous form of fiction, an objection or uneasiness might rear itself: have I not tried to describe a sort of 'end of literature'? It might seem as if I am suggesting that the 'right' form of literature has now been realized, in the works of Wallace, Eggers and Foer, that all is well now and that no further literary development is necessary or perhaps even possible. In reply to this suggestion I would like to emphasize that the literary works of Wallace, Eggers and Foer should be seen in relation to the problems of our time, as an attempt to address these problems and suggest ways to alleviate or even overcome them. This is also how these works have been analyzed in this study. I do not claim that they embody the best, most perfectly literary and philosophical literature ever written; indeed, I do not think that it would make sense to suggest of any literary corpus that it constitutes such a final form. However, I do think, as I have stated in the Foreword, that these works constitute a view of contemporary Western existence and of overcoming the problems therein, that I find convincing. These fictions strongly emphasize certain

⁹ De Martelaere, 'Echter dan werkelijk', pp. 141–142; Groot, *Vergeten te bestaan*, pp. 24–25.

¹⁰ cf. Wallace, *This Is Water*, pp. 68–73.

¹¹ cf. McCaffery, 'Interview', p. 142; Miller, 'Interview'.

existential and literary virtues (some of which can be said to be qualities of almost all literature; see the above-described engaged consciousness), because these seem to have been lost in the shuffle of preceding trends.

Does this mean there is no place for 'darker' works in my view of literature? I would like to emphasize that the works of Wallace, Eggers and Foer are in certain respects very dark: for example, the descriptions offered, in Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, of the suffering of some of the addicted characters, are gruesome. Many aspects of contemporary Western reality are undeniably dark and horrible, and therefore feature unabatedly as such in the works of Wallace, Eggers and Foer. My critique of Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* is not aimed at the fact that the novel is dark, that Patrick Bateman is a disturbing character or that his descriptions of torture, rape and murder are absolutely horrifying, but at the fact that all of this functions as part of a novel that can only be seen, in the end, to echo its main character's contention that there is no meaning and value to be found or formulated in this world.

As stated above, I have analyzed the works of Wallace, Eggers and Foer from the perspective of what these novels say about the problems and possible solutions for meaningful existence in the contemporary Western world. In my opinion, the current time stands in need of the virtues expressed by those works: sincerity, reality-commitment and community. Unfortunately, I can very well imagine that there will come a time that deeply mistrustful or introspective literature is again very much needed, but then it will be in answer to societal developments that are diametrically opposed to the ones from which these novels arose.

LOVE ME TILL MY HEART STOPS?

So what about the actual realization of the view portrayed in the novels, of overcoming the problems of contemporary existence and finding new sources of meaning? I have suggested that the fact that complex, moral concepts acquire new, different meanings, that a notion like sincerity is increasingly perceived as meaningful again, through paradigmatic cases such as the ones offered in the works of Wallace, Eggers and Foer, signifies a transformation of our life-form.

I think we can conclude that the 'negative' concepts employed in this study, 'hyperreflexivity' and 'endless irony' – although they undoubtedly do not constitute the only way of looking at the contemporary phenomena of self-reflection and irony – offer an illuminating perspective on our experience of contemporary Western existence. As such, they might even be considered as ringing true (as describing something that indeed 'has been the case' over the past decades).

Of course, the actual realization of the virtues of sincerity, reality-commitment and community intended to address these problems, has a more tentative status: these processes are still on their way. The outlined elements of engagement have the status of describing a *possible* overcoming of the problematic contemporary situation, as this situation and its problems are still largely in place. The culture-wide

crystallization of this possible overcoming has come into motion but is still in full progress. The renewed emphasis on the notions arising from the works of Wallace, Eggers and Foer, as possible components of our self-becoming, will have to solidify itself as part of this cultural transformation.

It has been my contention that the portrayal of these notions offers a meaningful perspective, from which to understand and further shape contemporary Western existence, and that I have therefore tried to explicate and analyze in this study. However, whether the offered (philosophical explorations of the) literary portrayals will indeed be able to function as influential paradigmatic cases – that is, as widely shared standards within our life-form –, is up to the readers, of the novels, and, to a lesser extent, of this study.

As Wallace's short story 'Octet' concludes: So decide.