17 – Wallace and Existentialism[1]

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> "This interpretation is 'existential,' Mario, which means vague and slightly flaky. But I think it may hold true in certain cases."[2]

Despite this somewhat dismissive statement by one of *Infinite Jest*'s characters, David Foster Wallace's work is perhaps best understood in light of existentialism, that is, as critically renewing ideas and concerns from existentialist philosophy and literature. Wallace repeatedly expressed his admiration of existentialist authors: he published articles on Fyodor Dostoevsky and Franz Kafka, stated his agreement with Søren Kierkegaard's critique of irony, referred to Albert Camus in several writings and interviews, while Jean-Paul Sartre is also known to have been a "great favourite" of Wallace.[3] This chapter provides an overview of the main themes and intertextual connections that his work shares with the existentialists. Reading Wallace in light of those connections will deepen our understanding of Wallace's literary project as both formally innovative and driven by traditional, moral themes such as virtue, empathy and selfhood.

This chapter situates Wallace's writing in conversation with several key existentialists, highlighting the structural commonalities of his fiction and the in-betweenness of philosophy and literature in existentialist writing, as well as suggesting that Wallace's writing does not necessarily realize its virtues "in" the texts, "by" the characters, but often – and more importantly – by the work of the reader.

Existentialism as Philosophy and Literature

While Wallace's writing has a clearly philosophical dimension, its exploration of philosophical themes, rather than being conceptual or theoretical, is driven by a clear desire to express, and thereby allow the reader to experience, some of the most existentially urgent and painful aspects of contemporary human

[1] This chapter therefore derives part of its content from some of my previous publications on Wallace, most importantly from: den Dulk, *Existentialist Engagement*.
[2] Wallace, *IJ*, 765.
[3] Smith, "Difficult Gifts," 264.

existence. The possibility of conveying these problems in this way motivated Wallace's occupational switch from philosophy to literature, and also explains his affinity with existentialism.

Simone de Beauvoir writes: "Existentialist thought claims to grasp the essence at the heart of existence; and if the description of essence is a matter solely for philosophy properly speaking, then the novel will permit us to evoke the original upspringing of existence in its complete, singular, and temporal truth." For existentialism, because of its emphasis on subjectivity and ambiguity as the "essence" of human existence, literature provides a legitimate mode of philosophical inquiry into "metaphysical experience" – which De Beauvoir defines as the individual "placed in one's totality before the totality of the world" – because it seeks to explore experience in its "singular and temporal form," not attempting to reduce it to a "universal meaning in an abstract language." De Beauvoir explains that "it is not a matter of exploiting on a literary plane truths established beforehand on the philosophical plane, but, rather, of manifesting an aspect of metaphysical experience that cannot otherwise be manifested." De Beauvoir describes Dostoevsky's writing as a prime example of existentialist literature, as "living discovery."[4] This formulation is strikingly similar to Wallace's praise of Dostoevsky's work for its "theoretical agenda w/ living characters" and as a "model" for writing "morally passionate, passionately moral fiction" that is also "radiantly human fiction."[5]

Wallace and Kierkegaard: The Existentialist View of the Self

In the existentialist view, starting with Kierkegaard, an individual is not automatically a self but has to become one. For Kierkegaard, there is no "true core" that an individual always already "is" or "has" and that underlies selfhood. Becoming a self is the task of human existence. In his essay on Kafka, Wallace formulates an almost identical view, remarking that nowadays it is a common mistake to think "that a self is something you just *have*." According to Wallace – who explicitly compares Kafka to Kierkegaard in this respect –, we should keep in mind the central insight of existentialism, "that the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle. That our endless and impossible journey toward home is in fact our home."[6]

This is what Kierkegaard calls "becoming a self": a human being has to take up their individual facticity – their circumstances of birth, their limitations and their possibilities – integrating these into a

[4] De Beauvoir, "Literature and Metaphysics," 269-77.
[5] Wallace, "Joseph Frank's *Dostoevsky*," Container 4.12, Wallace Papers, Harry Ransom Center; Wallace, *CL*, 274
[6] Wallace, *CL*, 64-65.

unified existence, transcending one's given situation. If the individual does not take themself up in this way, they do not acquire a self. Such a human being does not "exist" but just "is."[7] Another way of formulating this is that such an individual is *alienated* from what it means to be human.

We can recognize this view throughout Wallace's writing. *Infinite Jest* describes its many addict characters as not having a self, as being "empty" inside. In the novel, addiction is a metaphor for not taking up responsibility for one's life, and, as a result, suffering from "internal emptiness." Conversely, the novel describes Don Gately, in his process of recovery, as "returned to himself."[8] In *The Pale King*, Lane Dean Jr.'s remark that he is "just broken and split off like all men" expresses the same view, that the self is not based on some pre-existing unity but rather something that is constantly torn between freedom and facticity and, therefore, has to be made whole. Additionally, in the chapter about the boy who wants to kiss every part of his body, the narrator remarks: "Every whole person has ambitions, objectives, initiatives, goals."[9] A person becomes whole, becomes a self, by giving direction to their own situation through choices and taking on responsibilities.

Wallace and Kafka: *Infinite Jest* and *The Metamorphosis*

One of the most famous existentialist portrayals of alienation and the struggle for selfhood is undoubtedly Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915). In his Kafka essay, Wallace describes Kafka's fiction as employing a "radical literalization of truths we tend to treat as metaphorical."[10] Indeed, Kafka's novella provides a highly insightful comparative reading to the two opening sections of *Infinite Jest*: the first section introduces Hal Incandenza as locked in a seeming but unexplained state of catatonia; the second describes the mental breakdown of Ken Erdedy.

First of all, there are striking thematic resemblances: similar to Gregor, Hal is described as non-human, even 's*ub*animalistic"[11] (related descriptions later on in the novel call to mind reptiles or insects); both characters are "imprisoned" in this state of being right from the start of the story; they have both become incapable of human speech; when they are forced by officials (the chief clerk, the university deans) to reveal themselves (by opening the door, or trying to speak up) they are both met with disgust and violently subdued. Furthermore, in Erdedy, we encounter an existential attitude similar to that of

[7] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, Part II*, 250-51.
[8] Wallace, *IJ*, 694-95, 860.
[9] Wallace, *TPK*, 42, 394.
[10] Wallace, *CL*, 63.
[11] Wallace, *IJ*, 14.

Gregor: one of reflective self-deception and denial of self-determining choice, leading to complete self-alienation; this state of being and its similarity to Gregor's are further emphasized by Erdedy's anxious identification with an insect in his living room. Furthermore, the structure of both texts also invites comparative reading. With the mysterious transformation of their main characters, *The Metamorphosis* and *IJ* both offer their narrative climax in, respectively, their first sentence and page (doubly so in the case of *IJ*, because its opening section describes the chronologically last events of the novel's narrative). As such, both texts employ "exformation" – that is, the exclusion of crucial information that forces the reader to make associations and connections – which, in the case of Kafka's stories, according to Wallace, tend to be of the "nightmarish" kind, "primordial little-kid stuff from which myths derive."[12]

In light of these connections, Wallace's description of Kafka's "literalization-of-metaphor" strategy encourages us to ask: what metaphor is literalized by Hal's fate? I contend that it's the fact that, in the society portrayed in the novel, alienation is the acceptable, default mode of existence, while "being really human" is regarded as being "not-quite-right-looking," "with big wet eyes and froggy-soft skin"[13] – in other words, as Hal is seen in the opening section: as disgusting and repulsive. Thus, whereas Gregor and Erdedy seem to embody alienation and despair, Hal might in fact be seen as having taken up the task of self-becoming. This question of lack of self and possible self-recovery brings us to Wallace's existentialist conception of self-consciousness.

Wallace and Sartre: Self-Consciousness

Wallace's fiction portrays many excessively self-reflective characters: their constant introspection fosters a misunderstanding of the relation between thought and world. In its portrayal of processes of consciousness, Wallace's work displays a clear affinity with Sartre's existentialist-phenomenological view: for both, consciousness should be directed outward. In Sartrean terms, consciousness has to *transcend* itself toward the world. As Zadie Smith writes: "If Wallace insists on awareness, his particular creed is – to use a Wallacerian word – *extrorse*," that is, facing outward; "awareness must move always in an outward direction."[14]

According to Sartre, consciousness has no substance; it is solely a relation, an awareness of something other than itself: it is sheer intentionality, a directedness-at-something. Therefore, the self – in

[12] Wallace, "Some Remarks," 61-62.
[13] Wallace, *IJ*, 695.
[14] Smith, "Difficult Gifts," 264, 268.

line with the above-described view – is not something that is already there, residing "in" consciousness; rather, the self is transcendent, it is constituted beyond consciousness, in the world. Sartre observes that self-reflective introspection attempts to turn consciousness into an object with a certain essence (an inherent self), while consciousness is sheer intentionality and thus has no such essence.[15] This objectification at the heart of self-reflection is the basic dynamic that underlies what Sartre famously describes in *Being and Nothingness* as forms of "bad faith," which all consist of trying to give oneself an essence.

To return to *Infinite Jest*'s Erdedy: the novel's second section portrays this character's hyperreflexive mind as it spirals to the point of psychological breakdown. The section conveys how excessive self-reflection objectifies, distorts and completely estranges one from one's own thoughts and feelings: "[Erdedy] thought very broadly of desires and ideas being watched but not acted upon, he thought of impulses being starved of expression and drying out and floating dryly away, and felt on some level that this had something to do with him and his circumstances and […] would surely have to be called his problem." Other passages in the novel, on Ennet House and Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), further illustrate how hyperreflexivity leads to a total alienation from the self, where "the cliché 'I don't know who I am' unfortunately turns out to be more than a cliché."[16]

Wallace & Dostoevsky: "The Depressed Person" and *Notes from Underground*

Another portrayal of hyperreflexivity, Wallace's short story "The Depressed Person" can be further understood in comparison with Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864). Wallace expressed his admiration of Dostoevsky at length in his review of Joseph Frank's biography of the Russian novelist. Wallace admired two main aspects of Dostoevsky's work that form an insightful comparative frame for "The Depressed Person," namely: Dostoevsky's cultural critique *and* his ability to cast such critical-theoretical ideas into fictional form – that is, his ability to write "morally passionate, passionately moral" prose that is also "radiantly human fiction." Wallace mentions *Notes from Underground* as one of the best examples of these qualities.[17]

Both "The Depressed Person" and *Notes* portray their protagonists as a type, as an embodiment of the tendencies of their respective cultural formations. A footnote on the first page of *Notes* states that

[15] Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego*, 1-7.
[16] Wallace, *IJ*, 26-27, 204.
[17] Wallace, *CL*, 274, 258.

"such persons as the writer of such notes not only may but even must exist in our society."[18] Similarly, "The Depressed Person," because of its title and eponymous, nameless main character, demands to be read, not just as a portrayal of deep psychological despair, but as the diagnosis of a type that is bound up with our specific time. Wallace writes that the power of *Notes* lies in its "admixture of the universal and the particular." That is, on the one hand, the novella and its protagonist are "impossible really to understand without some knowledge of the intellectual climate of Russia in the 1860s." On the other hand, the underground man's traits are recognizable to all of us: "we can all see parts of ourselves" in him, Wallace writes.[19] The depressed person offers a similar admixture of general and particular, with features recognizable through time, but also firmly rooted in her own historical period.

Furthermore, both texts describe these traits of their protagonists as a form of illness. In the opening sentence of *Notes*, the underground man states: "I am a sick man… I am a wicked man." He suffers from a "heightened consciousness" that imprisons him in an "inertia" of spiteful, "wicked" thoughts.[20] Wallace's story, too, starts by stating its protagonist's illness: "The depressed person was in terrible and unceasing emotional pain, and the impossibility of sharing or articulating this pain was in itself a component of the pain and a contributing factor in its essential horror."[21] Throughout, the depressed person constantly scrutinizes her thoughts and feelings *and* the attempts to formulate these, all of which seem insufficient, impeding all conclusions and actions (as none can be established over others), thus making her life meaningless.

However, while both the depressed person and the underground man are in deep despair, there also seems to be – to use formulations from *Notes* – something "crafty," a paradoxical "pleasure," in their expression of (that is, in their "moaning" about) their pain. This is what the underground man calls his "spitefulness" or "wickedness": due to his heightened consciousness, all possible actions have become meaningless and the underground man is locked in inertia, filled with self-loathing about the emptiness he suffers as the result of his own conscious inertia.[22] At the same time, this heightened consciousness – his awareness of the full implications of the beliefs of his time – gives the underground man a feeling of superiority. The depressed person also seems to use her suffering manipulatively, in her interactions with her therapist and with the members of her Support System, in order to deepen her own humiliation – urging others to tell her exactly how loathsome she is – but also to somehow establish her

[18] Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, 5.
[19] Wallace, CL, 256.
[20] Dostoevsky, *Notes*, 5, 10.
[21] Wallace, *BI*, 31.
[22] Dostoevsky, *Notes*, 15.

superiority over them – constantly underscoring her own complete awareness and honesty, while questioning that of others.[23]

Wallace and Kierkegaard: Irony

The theme of self-consciousness leads us to irony (and Wallace's oft-misunderstood critique thereof): constant self-reflection entails constantly distancing oneself from one's thoughts and, as a result, from one's words and actions; in other words, it leads to a permanent ironic attitude. Irony has been one of the main hermeneutic concepts in critical approaches to Wallace's work, often centered on the relation between the critique of irony formulated in "E Unibus Pluram" and the possible workings of irony in *Infinite Jest*. Wallace himself stated: "I too believe that most of the problems of what might be called 'the tyranny of irony' in today's West can be explained almost perfectly in terms of Kierkegaard's distinction between the aesthetic and the ethical life."[24] Wallace's irony critique resembles Kierkegaard's in several key aspects.

For Kierkegaard, irony is not just a verbal strategy, an indirect or ambiguous form of language use, but an attitude towards existence, which initially fulfils an important role in the development of the individual. Through irony, the individual frees themself from "immediacy," from what is "given" – the individual's upbringing, social background, culture – that is, their facticity – and realizes that they do not coincide with this. Through irony, the individual obtains a negative freedom, a freedom-*from*. As such, irony constitutes for Kierkegaard an indispensable step towards freely choosing a personal interpretation of one's moral life, an (ethical) positive freedom, a freedom-*to*. However, irony cannot be the source of that "positivity," because it is pure negation. Therefore, irony, in its liberating potential, should be employed only temporarily.[25]

In his essay "E Unibus Pluram," Wallace, too, acknowledges that irony can initially be a valuable means of freeing oneself from what have become standard, immediate ways of seeing things that do not hold true anymore. But Wallace also notes, quoting Lewis Hyde, that "Irony has only emergency use. Carried over time, it is the voice of the trapped who have come to enjoy their cage." To this Wallace adds that irony "serves an almost exclusively negative function. It's critical and destructive, a ground-clearing.

[23]Wallace, *BI*, 55.
[24] Quoted in den Dulk, "Beyond Endless 'Aesthetic' Irony," 325-45.
[25] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 246-58.

Surely this is the way our postmodern fathers saw it. But irony's singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks."[26]

Like Wallace, Kierkegaard recognizes the danger of the ironist getting wrapped up in their ironic freedom, and turning irony into a permanent attitude. This is the defining characteristic of the aesthetic life-view. The aesthete uses an endless irony to avoid all commitment and retain their negative freedom. Wallace's critique targets the same form of irony: an automated, total irony that is no longer a means to overthrow hypocritical, unquestioned truths, but rather an instrument of cynicism that leads to despair. The contemporary Western individual, confronted with endless possible ways of shaping their life and therefore with the feeling that they have to shape it into exactly what they want it to be, can easily come to resemble Kierkegaard's aesthete, wanting to retain their freedom and bring their life into accord with their fantasy. According to Wallace, this contemporary ironic attitude has become "poisonous," resulting in "the contemporary mood of jaded weltschmerz, self-mocking materialism, blank indifference" and, as such, is the cause of "great despair and stasis in U.S. culture."[27]

The addicts portrayed in *Infinite Jest* clearly resemble Kierkegaard's aesthetes.[28] The result of the addict's aesthetic ironizing of values and actions is the feeling of emptiness and despair that *IJ* describes as "anhedonia" or depression (a term that Kierkegaard also uses): "a kind of emotional novocaine," "a hollowing out of stuff that used to have affective content."[29] In *The Pale King*, we can recognize the aesthetic life-view and its consequences in Chris Fogle's descriptions of his old life as a "wastoid," and when he considers "that I might be a real nihilist, that it wasn't always just a hip pose. That I drifted and quit because nothing meant anything, no one choice was really better."[30]

To overcome the empty despair in which this life-view runs aground, the negative freedom established through irony should be followed, as mentioned above, by taking up the responsibility to give shape and meaning to one's life, thereby realizing a positive freedom. This is the choice that, for Kierkegaard, characterizes the ethical life-view.

Wallace and Camus: Community, "Good Old Neon" and *The Fall*

Most of Wallace's characters suffer from alienation and despair, and some of them might be seen

[26] Wallace, *SFT*, 67.
[27] McCaffery, "Interview"; Wallace, *SFT*, 63, 49.
[28] See also Boswell, *Understanding*, 138.
[29] Wallace, *IJ*, 692-93.
[30] Wallace, *TPK*, 293.

to find a way out. In response to alienating self-reflection and irony, Wallace's works and those of existentialism affirm the above-described need for outward-directed awareness (which can be fruitfully understood as the striving for "sincerity" oft-associated with Wallace's literary project)[31] and for meaningful choice and commitment (which includes enduring the "boredom" that comes with sustained attention to and repeated affirmation of one's responsibilities).[32] However, rarely are such portrayals unambiguous: Wallace's work also shows how the language of self-recovery can be falsely appropriated, and how the virtues of attention and choice are often not realized by characters in the text. This sometimes leads to a criticism of Wallace that has been levelled against the other existentialists as well – namely that their portrayals fail to realize the authenticity they might be seen to advocate, and instead offer solely the failure of the virtuous, of the sincere and the committed. I think such criticisms are inaccurate. Actually, what the works of Wallace and the existentialists can be said to do is to prompt readers to become aware of their own role in the realization of (in)authenticity in response to the text.

A good example of this is Wallace's emphasis, in response to alienation and despair, on community, on the need for the other – an emphasis that Wallace's work shares, above all, with that of Camus. Wallace and Camus both emphasize the necessarily communal character of meaningful existence. Camus describes the importance of community as following from absurdity: because the world lacks the meaning that the individual expects of it, the individual rebels to demand meaning and in this rebellion becomes aware of the connection to the other.[33] Wallace repeatedly expressed his admiration for Camus and refers to the French author in several of his works, including *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*. "It makes my soul feel clean to read him," Wallace wrote in a letter; and in an interview he stated that "our job as responsible decent spiritual human beings" lies in the "existential engagement" that Camus advocates.[34]

Wallace's story "Good Old Neon" and Camus's novella *The Fall* (1956) similarly aim to generate such a cathartic reawakening to responsibility in their readers. The two texts display strong resemblances in content and structure. In *The Fall*, protagonist Jean-Baptiste Clamence describes to a silent interlocutor how, after years of being a Parisian lawyer specialized in "noble cases," he became aware of the "falsehood" of his virtue and retreated to Amsterdam, "indulging in public confession as often as possible. I accuse myself up hill and down dale."[35] In the opening sentence of "Good Old Neon," main

[31] See also den Dulk, "Good Faith and Sincerity."
[32] See also den Dulk, "Boredom, Irony, and Anxiety."
[33] Camus, *The Rebel*, 22.
[34] Max, *Every Love Story*, 298-99; Karmodi, "Interview."
[35] Camus, "The Fall," 273-356.

character Neal states: "My whole life I've been a fraud."[36] He explains that this has led him to kill himself, and that he speaks to his addressee from beyond death. The rest of the story catalogues Neal's self-diagnosed fraudulence, which consists of his actions being purely motivated by the positive impression they will create in other people, and his unsuccessful attempts – through therapy, church, meditation and so on – to overcome this fraudulence. Thematically, both fictions portray excessive self-critique, fueled by an absolutist self-reflection, involving feelings of both fraudulence and exceptionality. Formally, both are confession stories narrated from a first-person perspective (which, toward the end of both texts, turn out to have been "imagined," albeit to different extents); and both posit an interlocutor, outlined as a character in the text, that ultimately functions to make the reader the direct addressee of the text. As such, "Good Old Neon" and *The Fall* function as a *mise-en-abyme* of the act of reading.[37] Both in their stories of self-accusation – itself a form of "reading" one's own behavior – and in how they position the reader, these texts propose an idea of what it means to be a reader – what the importance and responsibility of the reader, as an "other," is with regard to the self-critique portrayed.

Wallace wanted to "reaffirm" that fiction is "about what it is to be a fucking *human being*," and that it's a "living transaction between humans," "that writing is an act of communication between one human being and another."[38] These statements reiterate how for Wallace, and in existentialism, philosophy and literature relate to each other. Wallace's fiction aims to contribute to our philosophical understanding of concrete human existence, not by offering conclusive truths about its characters, but, similar to Kierkegaard's "indirect communication" – which uses pseudonyms and fictional narrators to express different life-views from within – by requiring the reader to "put in her share of the [work]," working through the problems and perspectives presented therein, and thereby furthering our understanding.[39]

[36] Wallace, *OB*, 141.
[37] See also: Ellison, "Camus and the Rhetoric of Dizziness," 322-48.
[38] McCaffery, "Interview," 131; Wallace, *SFT*, 144.
[39] McCaffery, "Interview," 138.