



European journal of American studies Reviews 2015-4

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/11153>

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Paolo Pitari, « Allard den Dulk, Existentialist Engagement in Wallace, Eggers and Foer: A Philosophical Analysis of Contemporary American Literature », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2015-4, document 5, Online since 06 October 2015, connection on 04 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/11153>

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Allard den Dulk, Existentialist Engagement in Wallace, Eggers and Foer: A Philosophical Analysis of Contemporary American Literature

Paolo Pitari

1 I'd been familiar with the work of Allard den Dulk for a while before diving into his latest book. *Existentialist Engagement in Wallace, Eggers and Foer* stems from all of the work the man has done in his years as an academic. Taking a look at his previous publications¹ will give you a notion of den Dulk's determined focus in literary (and most specifically Wallace) studies. Focus and specialization always come with their pros and cons, and this book is no exception. For the sake of clarity, and because the pros outnumber the cons, I will postpone the cons to the end. Den Dulk's focus is by no means narrow, he himself defines the book as a "philosophical work" in which "the philosophical dimension of the novels of Wallace, Eggers and Foer" will be analysed in the light of "the philosophies of Kierkegaard, Sartre, Wittgenstein and Camus." Den Dulk is dedicated to the stuff that matters, his work on Wallace (and contemporaries) is committed to the analysis of its ethics as related to contemporary Western existence, and even though it might seem as the most obvious topic for discussion, I argue that it nonetheless is the most important, and that any argument that deviates from focusing on the ethical implications of these novels risks losing the point. Plus, this book is interdisciplinary; it introduces its readers to three different novelists and four different philosophers and thereby retains the capacity of inspiring its audience to further reading.

2 The book's structure, by focusing on the novels' main preoccupations and by being interdisciplinary and expansive, also has the merit of

addressing both neophytes and professionals to/of the subject. The newcomer can look here for a to-the-point analysis of the essence of what Wallace and New-Sincerity studies have set down in the last decade. The expert, on the other end, finds a precious contribution to the on-going discussion on the subject via an in-depth research into philosophy that hadn't yet been undertaken in such an extensive and thorough manner.² But most importantly, den Dulk's work resonates of passion. This monograph constitutes, rightfully so, the author's own existentialist engagement with his own field of study and with life in general:

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. [...] The current time stands in need of the virtues expressed by those works: sincerity, reality-commitment and community; [...] these works constitute a view of contemporary Western existence and of overcoming the problems therein that I find convincing. (267)

- 3 The shared thematic preoccupation of these novels will also be shown by den Dulk to constitute an "aesthetic sea-change in American literature." The role of the sections dedicated to the study of the four mentioned philosophers will function as providing useful heuristic perspectives to the discussion of the ideas portrayed in the works of fiction that constitute the main focus of the study. The book's structure is immediately clear-cut. Every section will have an introductory thesis on the subject at hand as known and expressed by studies published up to date; it will then be related to the novels of Wallace, Eggers and Foer, to which will then be connected the views of a philosopher of particular interest. This will enable the establishing of the ties between philosophy, fiction, theory and contemporary Western life.³

4

Part 1 is dedicated to the definition of what exactly "the problems of our time" are: it is divided into two sections: *Problems*, itself subdivided in "Hyperreflexivity" and "Endless Irony"; and *Problematic Fiction*, subdivided in "Postmodernist Metafiction: John Barth" and "Postmodernist Minimalist: Bret Easton Ellis." These constitute the premise, the theory that has long been theorized and is the bread and butter of postmodern and post-postmodern studies. What's new is that these topics are subsequently tied to Sartre's heuristic view of consciousness and self-reflection. Sartre's philosophy is shown to be tied to the problems and solutions of contemporary Western life with its conception of human nature as split between two opposite sides – transcendence and facticity– and its thesis that the self has to arise "outside consciousness [and] that consciousness has to be directed towards the world in order to discover the self," a view that den Dulk also shows to be connected to the ideas of Wallace, Eggers and Foer. The second chapter, dedicated to "Endless Irony," goes through the philosophy of Kierkegaard and thereby offers a new, thorough and systematic approach to an old and well-studied topic. Kierkegaard's philosophy separates two opposite approaches to life, the ethical and the aesthetic, the ethical being based on the utmost importance of choice and

commitment as opposed to the aesthete's inability to overcome the entrapment of endless irony by undertaking such conscious choosing. Kierkegaard's thoughts are then shown to be directly expressed in the works of Wallace, Eggers and Foer. Chapters 3 and 4 take John Barth and Bret Easton Ellis as ultimate examples of postmodernist fiction in order to show how and on what principles those fictions were built. This is important because those fictions are shown to be directly related to the negative aspects of self-consciousness and irony described by Sartre and Kierkegaard. This is well-covered ground in Wallace studies. These sections may be noteworthy merely for the sake of flow of argument, or for newcomers, or just to note that the author agrees with what Wallace has stated in many interviews, namely that postmodern fiction has had its time and that it has now turned into one of the problems which must be overcome today.

5

Part 2 is where the solutions are provided. It starts off with a chapter entitled "Engaged Fiction" which considers Wallace's ideas on how to overcome the fiction of the likes of Barth and Ellis and shows how these ideas owe a whole lot to the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. This too is well-covered ground in Wallace studies and has also been stated by Wallace himself in various interviews. Wallace feels the need to re-create fiction that will again be able to forge a connection to the world and indicates in the late Wittgenstein,⁴ with his conception of language as community bond,⁵ his inspiration. Den Dulk here connects Wittgenstein to Sartre by showing how both think that the accomplishing of real self-consciousness requires the existence of the Other - in other words, that consciousness has to be directed outside rather than inward. The last three chapters focus on the *hows* proposed by Wallace, Eggers and Foer: these consist of: *sincerity*, *reality-commitment* and *community*, the goal of which is *engagement*, gaining a sense of purpose, honouring one's "impulse to be part of something bigger."

6

Sincerity is defined as the "existentialist attitude that places (renewed) emphasis on qualities such as, honesty, openness, trust and vulnerability." The chapter emphasises the difference between authenticity (defined as inner-directed) and sincerity (defined as outer-directed), which is, both for den Dulk and the novelists involved, a key difference. All of them see "the opening-up of the self, the connection of inner and outer that sincerity demands [as] exactly what...the contemporary individual stands in need of." But, on the other end, existentialist philosophy is recurringly tied to the term "authenticity." This gives rise to den Dulk's effort in this chapter to show how, in fact, as concerns him, existentialist philosophy is better defined by the noun sincerity rather than authenticity.⁶ Chapter 7, entitled "Reality-Commitment," concentrates on the importance of *choice* in Kierkegaard's philosophy -which you'll know, if you've read *This Is Water*, was the foundational concept of Wallace's philosophy too- and presents a full-

length analysis of the concept of choice as repetition and of the opposition between ethical/aesthetic and repetition/boredom. The final chapter, "Community," focuses on Camus as the only existentialist philosopher to explicitly emphasise the need of the other. Here the book closes beautifully by showing - as explicitly claimed in the "Concluding Remarks" - how, according to den Dulk, the novels in question represent an advancement in philosophy itself by uniting, rejecting, and re-adapting past philosophical principles to constitute an original philosophy that is perfectly suited for contemporary life. Specifically, den Dulk shows how the individualistic sides of Kierkegaard and Sartre are rejected while only a mild form of Camus's community is allowed. Therefore, den Dulk states, philosophy and literature are so connected as to be two expressions of the same idea, both are concerned with existential issues, with how to attain a meaningful life.

7

Just a couple of warnings to end this review: this book, as hinted at in the beginning, has its cons too. Mainly the fact that it is not that good at defending itself against its counter-arguments. The passionate and inspiring side of den Dulk's voice has the downside of making you wonder whether to fully trust him or not. Is he too sentimentally involved to notice where some of the arguments might fail? There is apparently nothing Wallace has ever said or written with which he disagrees. Section 4.1 is dedicated to the rebuttal of Scott's and Boswell's theses that the works of Wallace end up being ironic themselves. Den Dulk claims to uncover the fallacy in their argument by stating that they overlook passages of the primary texts that would prove the contrary. But den Dulk himself defends its own thesis merely by stating that there are certain other passages which prove he's right, but he never shows them, and instead provides Wallace quotes (from interviews) as if those equalled the actual textual analysis of his novels. His counter-argument is therefore null. The same goes for his argument in favour of the term "sincerity" against "authenticity." He simply states: "on the other hand, the objections against *sincerity*, outlined above, seem to me to be unfounded," and *that* basically constitutes his answer to the counter-argument. Moreover, as part of the argument for sincerity as the basis of existentialist thought, den Dulk launches on the enterprise of redefining Sartre's philosophy and trying "to formulate a consistent terminology, one that is in line with Sartre's general view of consciousness." Except he then affirms: "I am not concerned with being faithful to everything that Sartre has written...seeing that...my final goal is [providing] a useful heuristic perspective for understanding the case studies. [...] Moreover, I would like to emphasize that in this discussion with Sartre, [...] I am already bringing along what I have found in Wallace, Eggers and Foer." Is this acceptable? I'd say no. If you are to redefine someone's philosophy, it has to be through sheer analytical reading and your motivation must be the primary text only. If your reading is altered by your pre-defined needs and presuppositions, then, it seems to me, your argument is vain.

8

This is a very good book, probably the best I've read in Wallace studies, it is very good reading for people who find the topic interesting and would like to give it a try, and a fine reading for those who are already students of the subject. Just don't take everything that's into it as bullet-proof reasoning, as some stuff that is presented as obvious may actually be arbitrary and easily counter-argued. Concluding, I would suggest not to think of Wallace, Eggers and Foer as superheroes of existentialist contemporary life before you've given it a lot of time, reading and thought.

NOTES

1. Here are some:

- "American Literature: A New Aesthetic of Sincerity, Reality and Community." In *Reconsidering the Postmodern. European Literature Beyond Relativism*, edited by Thomas Vaessens and Yra van Dijk, 225-241. Amsterdam: AUP, 2011.
- "Wallace and Wittgenstein: Literature as Dialogue Concerning the Real World." In *Philosophy and Literature and the Crisis of Metaphysics*, edited by Sébastien Hüsich, 343-358. Würzburg: Verlag Königshausen & Neumann, 2011.
- *'Love Me Till My Heart Stops': Existentialist Engagement in Contemporary American Literature*, PhD diss., VU University Amsterdam, 2012.
- "Beyond Endless 'Aesthetic' Irony: A Comparison of the Irony Critique of Søren Kierkegaard and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*." *Studies in the Novel* 44. 3 (2012): 325-345.
- "Boredom, Irony, and Anxiety: Wallace and the Kierkegaardian View of the Self." In *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing": New Essays on the Novels*, edited by Marshall Boswell, 43-60. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014.
- "Good Faith and Sincerity: Sartrean Virtues of Self-Becoming in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*." In *Gesturing Toward Reality: David Foster Wallace and Philosophy*, edited by Robert K. Bolger and Scott Korb, 205-227. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014.

2. "The contribution of this study to the existing (and rapidly expanding) body of scholarly work on Wallace, Eggers and Foer lies in the elucidation of the philosophical themes that connect the novels in question and of the literary development that these novels embody. Although some of their connections as well as the possible affinities with existentialist philosophy have already been remarked upon in a number of publications on this new group of fiction writers, an extensive, systematic philosophical analysis of the mentioned themes has not yet been undertaken" (9).

3. All chapters/sections/ideas discussed in this review are in the book tied to textual evidence from the novels. I will not address those sections because I

find it more useful, in the sake of concision, to present the ideas rather than the proof.

One more side-note: den Dulk doesn't focus on the novelists' whole oeuvres but on Wallace's *Infinite Jest* and Eggers's and Foer's first two novels: the former's *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* and *You Shall Know Our Velocity* and the latter's *Everything Is Illuminated* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*.

4. The Wittgenstein of *Philosophical Investigations*.

5. Rather than an imperfect means of communication between people and reality, and among people, as seen in Deconstruction and postmodernism.

6. This chapter also includes a whole section dedicated to the redefinition of Sartre's philosophy as linked to these two key terms.