

Post 5: David Foster Wallace and Performatism: On Subjectivity, Separation, and the Public

[Emendated version of a much shorter talk held at the Association for the Study of Arts of the Present Conference 2015 in Greenville, South Carolina, Sept. 26th]

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In my talk, I would like to discuss how the relations between public and private are negotiated in performatism. As an example I'm going to use the work of David Foster Wallace. There are three reasons for this. First, almost everyone here is familiar with his work; secondly, Wallace himself was programmatically involved in trying to overcome postmodernism; and, thirdly, a number of commentators see him as actually having done so.¹

My point in using Wallace here is not so much to uncover original aspects of his work, but to show that his writing fits into a more general historical pattern of post-postmodernism. I believe that Wallace can best be understood when placed in an epochal context that focuses on the immanent logic of literary innovation and not on socio-economic, cultural, or political developments tangential to literature. In short, I am arguing that in order to get any coherent understanding of post-postmodernism, we first have to focus on literary history itself.

I'd like to start by briefly outlining how performatism treats the public/private dichotomy and how this differs from postmodernism.

I think we can agree that postmodern subjects are determined almost entirely by public discourse that is exterior to them. Moreover, postmodernism reacts with ironic skepticism to the modernist notion of a private sphere that allows us to experience reality in some special, authentic way. Hence one of the main problems facing any author who wants to get away from postmodernism is how he or she can cut off the endless irony of postmodernism without reverting to the modernist model of authenticity outlined above—something that would simply confirm the postmodern conviction that history is nothing more than a slightly skewed iteration of some previous cultural development.

Within the discussion on post-postmodernism there are popular and critical voices suggesting that the answer to this problem is provided by something called the "new sincerity." Unfortunately, neither the old sincerity nor the new one is very helpful in describing how post-postmodernism works. While I can't

¹ Most notably Marshall Boswell in his *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, Columbia SC 2003, Adam Kelly in "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction," in David Hering (ed.), *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, Los Angeles 2010, 131-146, and Lee Konstantinou "No Bull: David Foster Wallace and Postironical Belief," in Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (eds.), *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, Iowa City 2012, 83-122.

go into too much detail here, it will perhaps suffice to comment briefly on Allard den Dulk's recent attempt to reintroduce Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of sincerity/authenticity² into the discussion on post-postmodernism in David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Safran Foer, and Dave Eggers. Den Dulk says that he "regards sincerity as the attitude or virtue of wanting to form a stable self in the world" (2015, 170) and that "sincerity is the desire to show yourself in the public domain 'as yourself'" (2015, 170). According to den Dulk, whether this sincerity succeeds or not depends on whether the subject interacts successfully with that public domain. There are two obvious problems here that I can only touch on in passing. First, den Dulk's definition of sincerity is still tied very closely to reflexivity, which always already contains the structure of deceit within itself. Showing yourself 'as yourself' has to appear in quotes because it's a secondary representation of something that is hidden inside you and that only you know. But how do we know that what you are showing us is "sincere"? As long as a subject can reflect consciously on its own inner, privately accessible state, it can always dissemble. Secondly, the subject's ability to achieve sincerity depends on a context that is itself not intrinsically sincere; the potential for corruption is virtually unlimited. All in all, this kind of "new sincerity" is no less open to the irony of a radical deconstruction than the old sincerity was. Also, in popular usage it tends to quickly become attached to the trivial notion of whether authors are themselves upright or honest.

For these reasons, I don't use the concept of sincerity at all in my performatist approach. The crucial concept in performatism is instead that of *separation* or, more precisely, double separation, which I'll explain shortly.

The notion of separation is itself not new. It can be traced back to Descartes, and Levinas introduces it explicitly as a philosophical term in his *Totality and Infinity*. Levinas's separated self may be described as positive in the sense that it is a "way of being, a resistance to totality" (*Totality and Infinity*, Pittsburgh 1969, 54) and as negative in the sense that Levinas ascribes it atheistic, hedonistic, and self-centered qualities. In Levinas, this self-centeredness is eventually disrupted through confrontation with an other who cannot be assimilated to the separated subject's narcissistic sense of self. As a consequence, the separated, but now unsettled subject redirects its desire towards outside discourse to recover this transcendent otherness, albeit in a fragmentary and incomplete way. In postmodern or poststructuralist interpretations of Levinas's influential thought very few commentators pay much attention to either transcendence or separation, which tend to dissolve

² See his *Existentialist Engagement in Wallace, Eggers, and Foer: a Philosophical Analysis of Contemporary American Literature*, NY 2015. Sartre actually calls this concept "authenticity"; den Dulk, following recent scholarship, redefines it as "sincerity" (170-174). The (confusing) switch of terms suggests that the concepts they stand for are situated very closely together to begin with.

anyway as soon as the subject is exposed to others through the endless immanence of discourse.

In performatism separation returns as a literary or narrative device, but in a different way than Levinas conceived it.³ The performatist subject is *doubly* separated, in the sense that it is not only closed off from the public domain as such but also from the discourse that allows the Levinasian subject to break out of its egoistic interiority. The main distinguishing feature of the performatist separated subject is in fact that it is *opaque* or inaccessible to us through discourse. As in Levinas, it is a way of being that is formally separated from totality. However, unlike Levinas's notion of self, it does not have any negative transcendental attributes like hedonism or atheism. On the contrary, the attributes ascribed to it tend as a rule to be positive or worthy of imitation (they serve as a focal point for identification with a character), and they tend to be blocked off from discursive communication or interpretation. In short, we are presented with subjects that appear to others *as they are*, as bio-social unities outside of discourse that present themselves to the outside world directly. By definition, we cannot judge such subjects as sincere or insincere simply because the narrative texts in which they are embedded radically block our access to the workings of their interior life. In any event, the tables are now turned: instead of outside discourse drawing the separated subject outside of itself into the public domain, it is now the separated self that challenges the public context to focus on its own interiority.⁴

This kind of doubly separated subjectivity is not an end in itself. This is because radically separated subjects are usually subject to a severe *quid pro quo* resulting from their special, separate status. While they do indeed enjoy a privileged kind of privacy and interiority they are usually unable to function effectively in the public domain precisely because of that separation. Hence the seemingly impossible task of bridging the gap between public and private without corrupting the positive interior qualities that these characters usually possess. The bridging of this gap, which requires an event or an act of transcendence, takes place nonetheless in performatist narratives and is crucial to separating post-postmodernism from the postmodern. Here are the main narrative strategies involved:

³ Separated heroes can also be found in a whole array of texts from the 1950s and early '60s. Camus's Mersault in *The Stranger*, J.D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield, Heinrich Böll's Lenz in the story "Christmas Every Day," Chief Bromden in Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and Oskar Matzerath in Günter Grass's *Tin Drum* are all separated characters, and they are all authentic or sincere in the sense that they are removed from society in some way and retain a certain degree of autonomy, authenticity, and selfness because of it. Unfortunately, all these characters are close to insanity; their separation makes them into misfits unable to connect to the public domain around them.

⁴ Something similar has also been noted by Elizabeth Freudenthal in her "Anti-Interiority: Compulsiveness, Objectification, and Identity in *Infinite Jest*," *New Literary History* 1 (2010), though I find the concept of separation both more elegant and better grounded in philosophical tradition.

- The double separated subject **acts as an example for others to imitate**. In this case there is no need for an intermediary, since communication takes place directly through mimesis, which is to say through imitation. Mimesis itself takes place in the intuition (in the Kantian sense, as a sensory apprehension of reality) and does not require discourse or reflexive subjectivity. It also dissolves the difference between public and private by allowing for someone else's interiority to be put to social use.
- The doubly separated subject **performs something out of the ordinary** that changes either itself, those around it, or the situation that it is in. The root concept of performatism is based on this notion. In narrative terms, we would call this an **event**. The event creates a basic shift in a situation that allows or even requires a new alignment to its truth. Alain Badiou's philosophy provides a good starting point for discussing this sort of narrative shift. In thematic terms, the event is frequently tied to questions of **transcendence**, of radically overcoming some sort of basic situational quandary or impasse.
- Doubly separated subjects enter into a **dyadic relationship** with less radically separated subjects, i.e. subjects that are capable of some sort of reflection and/or participation in the public domain. The result is a relationship that transcends the gap between private and public, between interiority and exteriority.⁵
- Finally, the interior space supplied by the doubly separated subject is **infused with specifically authorial ideas or positions**; the privileged interiority of the character is invariably backed up on a higher, authorial level. This asserts itself in narrative structure in what I call double framing: the highest narrative level tends to confirm the values and positions expressed in the inner space of the separated subject.

In the following remarks I'd like to briefly apply these criteria to David Foster Wallace's fiction and essays. I wish to emphasize that I did not abstract these criteria solely from Wallace's text, but rather developed them independently over about a fifteen-year period using a wide variety of East European, West European and Anglo-American narrative sources. Seen this way, Wallace exemplifies a larger epochal development that is not limited to himself or to a specifically American experience.

The most radically separated type of being in Wallace is obviously the lobster, which he treats in his well-known essay "Consider the Lobster" (in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays*, London: Abacus, 2005; henceforth

⁵ I borrow this distinction from Zarifa Mamedova's *Narren als Vorbilder: Die Überwindung der Postmoderne in der russischen Literatur der 1990er und 200er-Jahre*, Munich 2015, in which she proposes a typological distinction between "separated" and "split" subjects, the latter acting as a bridge between separated subjects and conventional discursive rationality.

CtL). On the one hand, Wallace shows how the lobster, as a separated but sentient being, experiences pain, even if it can't express it in speech. On the other, Wallace describes in great detail how lobsters are devoured *en masse* in public at the aggressively schlocky Maine Lobster Festival. The (obvious) ethical point Wallace is making is that we have to make an individual choice, and that in doing so we may well decide in favor of sentient beings that are radically separated from us by nature. Our duty is to reflect ethically on what gives us pleasure, which is something that neither the lobsters can do nor the lobster-eating public wants to do. The ethical subject, by definition, acts as a mediator between the separating, edible being and the hedonistic, unreflecting public. The "anchor" of this ethics is however a radically separated, ontologically defined given, namely the lobster.

The closest human being to the lobster in Wallace's prose is undoubtedly Mario Incandenza, who Wallace repeatedly describes as resembling a spider (another biologically separated being encased in a shell-like pod). Unlike lobsters, Mario cannot feel pain, but he is radically separated from the world around him in other ways (the narrator writes "he doesn't seem to resemble much of anyone [the Incandenza brothers] know" *Infinite Jest*, 101). Mario is also not subject to the criteria of being sincere or insincere in the usual sense of the word.⁶ He is, like the lobster, simply the way he is: he forms a bio-social unity that is presented to both the characters around him and to us as an unchanging given. He can obviously think (he is not retarded) and has a highly spiritual interior life (he prays at length every night), but our access to this interior life is blocked almost completely by the narration (we know what he thinks, but we don't know why). As Timothy Jacobs and other critics have pointed out, Mario combines the charismatic persona of Dostoevsky's Alyosha Karamazov with ideal attributes that Wallace highlights in his essays and fiction: Mario believes very strongly in God, he is a very good listener, and he is interested in "real stuff," even if it may be sentimental. Wallace invests a good deal of energy in describing the happy rigidity of Mario's separation: for example, he smiles and laughs involuntarily, and he can't feel pain. Mario doesn't perform anything suggestive of transcendence (he walks around a lot and, like Sisyphus, he likes to walk uphill), but he does have something charismatic about him that rubs off on almost everyone he meets. Finally, Mario is able in spite of his separation to form dyadic bonds with his brothers as well as with people like Barry Loach or Gerhard Schtitt, whose tennis-playing

⁶ Because the author/narrator blocks access to Mario's interiority, commentators like den Dulk are forced to project their philosophical ideas back onto his opaque, separated existence, which operates through intuition and not through reflection. Den Dulk says as much himself (182): "Mario displays this [sincere] behavior intuitively."

philosophy is essentially one of separating oneself from the outer part of the game and concentrating on the inner self.⁷

This brings me to the next type of separated being, and that is the professional tennis player. “Divinely gifted” (CtL,155) tennis players like Michael Joyce, Roger Federer, or Tracy Austin are for Wallace bearers of a kind of performative transcendence (he states this directly in the title of his piece on Federer). These athletes function by shutting out “the Iago-like voice of the self” (CtL,154) and by concentrating on the game in what seems to be a superhuman way. At the same time, as the pieces on Austin and Joyce make clear, these athletes are severely restricted in intellectual and social terms—to the point where we can’t tell at all what is going on inside of them (they are in other words entirely opaque). Wallace says that the real mystery for him is whether such a person is “an idiot or a mystic or both and/or neither” (CtL 155). These gifted athletes are necessarily blind and dumb about their own genius, but not because of any *quid pro quo* between intelligence and athletic skill, but because, as he says, “blindness and dumbness are [not] the price of the gift, but [...] are its essence” (CtL, 155). This is an almost perfect instantiation of what I have called double separation: the separation allows these athletes to perform transcendent acts but cuts them off from engaging in meaningful discourse about those acts.

The public, by contrast, doesn’t have these divinely given athletic skills, but is unlike the athlete able to “see, articulate, and animate the experience of the gift” (CtL 155) that they don’t have. In this way a kind of complementary unity is formed between individual athletes and the public. This unity is centered around the “divine gift,” which transcends discursive oppositions: it is opaque in terms of its source and inner workings but visible to everyone in public performances.

This fusion of the public and the private is also possible in an amatory, individual way. In *Infinite Jest*, when Orin is courting the “transhumanly beautiful” cheerleader Joelle van Dyne (*Infinite Jest*, 290) this takes place on a purely mimetic, performative level:

[...] the only real cardiac-grade romantic relationship of Orin’s life took bilateral root at a distance, during games, without one exchanged personal phoneme, a love communicated—across grassy expanses, against stadiums’ monovocal roar—entirely through stylized repetitive motions—his functional, hers celebratory—their respective little dances of devotion to the spectacle they were both trying [...] to make as entertaining as possible (*Infinite Jest*, 294).

⁷ Separation incidentally doesn't mean that separated characters don't interact with other characters; it simply means that the interaction tends to be a one-way street, with the separated character remaining largely unaffected by that interaction (e.g., Mario's inability to feel pain).

Like the tennis players, Orin is a kind of separated athlete (he's plays on a team but as a punter has one sole function). Here another description of the venue in which he performs:

[...] a lot of it seemed emotional and/or even, if there was such a thing anymore, spiritual: a denial of silence: here were upwards of 30,000 voices, souls, voicing approval as One Soul. [...] Audience exhortations and approvals so total they ceased to be numerically distinct and melded into a sort of single coital moan, one big vowel, the sound of the womb, the roar gathering, tidal, amniotic, the voice of what might as well be God (*Infinite Jest*, 295).

The point is not that Wallace himself or his characters are infused by any sort of "sincere" spirituality, but that a transcendent performance enables these characters to achieve unity and spirituality in spite of their participating in public discourse.⁸ This fusion of public and private, of exterior and interior, applies no less to the author-reader relationship. Separated positive heroes like Mario, who enjoy almost complete authorial sanction, force readers to either accept or reject them and their values. Readers accepting these figures (and one has little choice but to do so in narrative terms) form a public unity that is simultaneously a unity with the author's intent.

This transcendent fusion of the public and the private is expressed most radically in Alcoholics Anonymous as depicted in *Infinite Jest*. AA is both public and private, open and closed—anyone can come to the meetings and no one can be excluded from the organization no matter how bad their behavior. At the same time, everyone is marked as an individual member—everyone says their first name—and is also expected to engage in dyadic bonding with a sponsor and do good works within the organization. AA also works through an extreme reduction of self and uses a clichéd, banal language that is performative in nature; it is language that if followed, works ("one day at a time," "fake it until you make it" etc.). As with Mario, this kenosis or reduction of self is accompanied by belief in a Higher Power (who can be defined according to individual wishes rather than in accordance with a dogmatic source). At the same time, all AA members are unified by their addiction; reflection on that addiction is depicted as being detrimental to recovery because of its one-sided focus on the self. Since Wallace considers addiction to

⁸ See Maria Bustillos, "Philosophy, Self-Help, and the Death of David Foster Wallace," in Roger Bolger and Scott Korb (eds.), *Gesturing Toward Reality: David Foster Wallace and Philosophy*, NY 2014, 121-139. According to Bustillos, who had access to Wallace's personal library, Wallace was a careful reader of Christian literature of all kinds. She thinks he was religious; his biographer T.J. Max does not. From the performatist point of view it is irrelevant whether Wallace was personally "sincere" in his religious conviction; what is crucial is his instantiation of religious conviction in Mario, AA, and other points in the novel.

be a universal American problem, AA can also be seen as kind of a universal antidote to America's obsession with pleasure. Here, typically Dostoevskian suffering (as exemplified by Don Gately) makes AA into a positive ethical force; it acts as a catalyst for creating individual ethical sensibility and a feeling of community that has distinctly sacral features. As a Slavist, I wonder if Wallace, who was familiar with Russian intellectual history through Joseph Frank's monumental biography of Dostoevsky, was deliberately aiming for what in Russian is called *sobornost'*, an intuitively achieved kind of spiritual communality that was important to Dostoevsky and to Russian thinking in general.

Wallace leaves no doubt in his work that the private, interior space can also be abused. Evil arises when the "Higher Power" of AA is denied in private, as when the cat and dog killer Randy Lenz cuts out the pages of William James's *Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion* to hide his stash of cocaine. Also, the veils worn by the Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed quite evidently create a false kind of aesthetic privacy based on Kierkegaard's concept of hiddenness (this has been pointed out by Marshall Boswell, 140). Finally, any mass public enjoyment not tempered by an apprehension of suffering is necessarily suspect, as the ocean cruise on the *Zenith*, the Illinois State Fair, or the Maine Lobster Festival depicted in his essays demonstrate (the same also applies, obviously, to the movie *Infinite Jest*, which entertains its viewers to death). However, this false sincerity does not vitiate the goodness of Mario, who remains untouched by it because he is an ontological figure and not a psychological one: he operates through the intuition provided by the author and not through self-reflection in which we vicariously participate.

In purely narrative terms, *Infinite Jest* employs both the endless irony of high American postmodernism and the distinctly non-ironic mode of performatism that creates sacralized, ontologically separate forms of interiority that have the power to form higher unities. While it's possible to debate just how open or closed the novel is and to what extent it still participates in postmodern irony,⁹ it seems to me that there can be little doubt about the authorial intent of the novel. By embedding interior, ontologically privileged spaces into his novel and essays and by infusing these spaces with his own privately held, but publicly visible ethical values, Wallace is engaging in what Lee Konstantinou calls postirony and what I would call double framing. It's possible to read against the grain of this sort of postirony, but it can only be done by ignoring

⁹ Marshall Boswell, for example, argues that *Infinite Jest* achieves a kind of closure (*Understanding DFW*, 176). Lee Konstantinou has shown how double framing works in the story "Good Old Neon," (see "No Bull," 96-98) and suggests the term "postirony" to apply to Wallace. Iannis Goerlandt in his "'Put Down the Book and Slowly Walk Away': Irony and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*," *Critique* 3 (2006), 309-328 suggests that the book provides a metalevel above the narration causing readers to "acknowledge that the novel's ambiguity [...] cannot be resolved on the level of narration" (325).

the formal givens of his work, which the author continually tries to impose on us in the narrative.

To sum up, I would say that Wallace's work is made up of an eclectic jumble of ideas that can't be reduced to one philosophical approach, be it that of Wittgenstein, Sartre, Dostoevsky, or pragmatism. What is most striking about Wallace is that, in both *Infinite Jest* and in his essays, he uses a variety of strategies that sacralize an opaque, interior realm and at the same time create a publicly accessible, communal unity among subjects who intuitively identify with or imitate that realm. I've highlighted these strategies to show two things: first, that they are incompatible with both postmodern practices of ironically undermining interiority and with modernist concepts of sincerity and authenticity, and, secondly, that they are not some sort of singular, randomly occurring development, but follow a performatist pattern that has been played out many times over in narrative works appearing over the last fifteen years or so. I don't have the time or space to go into these works here, but I would refer interested readers to the bibliography and other blog entries on my performatism.de website.