

SYNOPSIS

DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S SCREAMS, STUTTERS, AND STAMMERS: THE 'VISIONS' AND 'AUDITIONS' OF A 'GREAT' 'MINOR' WRITER

Thesis Submitted for the Award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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2023

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In my thesis, I show how the American author, David Foster Wallace (1962-2008), makes language scream, stutter, and stammer; and how he carves out a foreign language—a minor language—within his own major dominant language (English).

CHAPTERS

1. THE 'EVERYDAY ARTS' OF DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

In this chapter, I show Wallace's treatment of objects in his novel *Infinite Jest*; and I also employ the concept of "and," as theorized by William Gass, to show that Wallace places the conjunction, meticulously, between the everyday objects, so that the objects and the 'and's don't go unstudied.

In Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, James Incandenza, Sr. pulls up his son for mistreating a garage door. Incandenza, Sr. asks his son to treat the garage door gently (*Infinite* 157). The father tells his son that he knows that his son has looked at their garage door many times but now he wants him to "see" it (159).

In the first part of the first chapter, I read Incandenza, Sr.'s monologue on the "everyday arts" of treating "everyday objects" through the works of writers (Leo Tolstoy, Karl Ove Knausgaard), and acting teachers (Constantin Stanislavsky, Stella Adler) (*Infinite* 157). In their works, too, you can hear echoes of Incandenza, Sr.'s words: the everyday objects you know about and look at, many times, but do not see.

Tolstoy writes in his diary on March 1, 1897, about being unsure whether he has dusted the sofa (that he does quite frequently) in his room; he feels that if, after dusting the sofa, he has forgotten whether he has dusted it, then it is equivalent to not dusting (Shklovsky 80).

Viktor Shklovsky, reading Tolstoy's sofa-diary entry in his essay "Art as Device," remarks that life itself is a casualty of habit, and that mechanical circular routine movements expunge life (80). On auto-mode, you stop seeing.

To compel you to see, to protract your perception, art complicates forms, makes it complex; and it achieves all these through what Shklovsky calls the device of "ostranenie"—an artistic device that makes things strange, that de-automatizes things (80). Tolstoy uses this device, according to Shklovsky, in his essay "Shame!"

Tolstoy describes a thing, or an event, not by its name, but as though he is seeing it for the very first time; he de-automatizes the thing or event (81-82). In his essay "Shame!" Tolstoy estranges the familiar concept of "flogging": "people who have broken the law are denuded, thrown down on the floor, and beaten on their behinds with sticks," and "lashed across their bare buttocks" (82). Tolstoy's goal in his essay is to prolong the perception, by complicating the form: "The process of perception is its own end in art and must be prolonged," writes Shklovsky (80).

Wallace's narrator Incandenza, Sr. (like Tolstoy) names the object first—the garage door—before he begins to name its corresponding parts: the dull color of its handle; the latch that opens clockwise, the dead bug, the paint, and so on (*Infinite* 159). These observational exercises by Incandenza, Sr. are to train his son to pretend as though he is seeing the objects surrounding him for the very first time.

In *Autumn*, Karl Ove Knausgaard, similarly, attempts to get non-familiar with the everyday objects of the world. The book begins with a letter written by the Norwegian writer to his unborn daughter. In the letter, Knausgaard mentions that you can easily "lose sight of" objects in the world (4-5). Which is why Knausgaard writes the book, *Autumn*, for his daughter: he aspires to show her the world "as it is, all around us, all the time"; and by doing so, he expects to see the everyday objects himself (5).

Knausgaard is conscious of the close surrounding objects becoming "obvious" as you age (5). For the children, though, objects are not obvious, since they are immersed in the world; there is no distance between their own "selves"

and the world (5). On the other hand, since you have outgrown the children's way of being immersed in the world, since you no longer think of the world and yourself as indistinguishable, the world becomes obvious (5-6). Opening the door does not carry any meaning for you, laments Knausgaard; it is something that you mechanically do (6).

Like Incandenza, Sr. in *Infinite Jest*, the fictional theatre director Tortsov is also trying to make his students "see" the objects in Constantin Stanislavsky's *An Actor Prepares*. He instructs them to pay attention to the objects on the stage (as if they are seeing them for the very first time), rather than the audience (Stanislavsky, ch. 5).

In the second half of the first chapter, I pluck out two long sentences (sample sentences #1 and #2) from a section of *Infinite Jest* and read them through Gass's concept of "and." In his essay "And," Gass tells you that the dictionary contains the word 'and' only because it wants to show its fidelity to tradition, to put up a show of being complete; no one actually checks the entry on 'and' (*Reader* ch. 47). The 'and' is anonymous and invisible; and, at the same time, it is a vital word for excess and thus induces breathlessness (ch. 47). In sample sentences #1 and #2, Wallace creates an excess—makes you gasp for breath—by using 13 and 28 'and's respectively.

In sample sentence #1, Don Gately is about to burgle a house along with his associate; in the dark bedroom, they search for a safe with flashlights before discovering that Guillaume DuPlessis, the owner of the house, is present. The Gately-sections in *Infinite Jest* overflow with the coordinating conjunction, 'and'; it makes you breathless.

In the sample sentence #1 of Wallace, you become a burglar too, seeing DuPlessis's dark bedroom's objects as if with a high-filter flashlight, studying the objects one at a time: a bottle and a glass and so on (*Infinite* 57). The slew of 'and's reminds you, again and again, that it's a dark room, and that the flashlights can catch only one object at a time in its circumference.

Wallace places the 'and's, meticulously, between objects not only for you, the burglar/reader, to see the objects, but also for you to see the 'and's; not to let the objects and 'and's go unnoticed.

The unwatched 'and' does not carry any meaning, reports Gass; the 'and' plops on the page as it pleases, while the writer is sweating through nouns and verbs, etching and erasing them (*Reader* ch. 47). Conversely, the watched 'and' is swarming with surprising lessons on language if only you care to watch it, says Gass (ch. 47).

In sample sentence #2, for instance, I show that three conjunctions are 'and's of cause, two are 'and's of consequence, six are adverbial 'and's ("how" is the question these 'and's answer), and three 'commas' are not 'commas' at all, but covert 'and's.

2. THE 'INVISIBLE FORCES' IN DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S FICTIONS

In this chapter, I provide two new ways of reading the Hal-episodes in *Infinite Jest* by using the concepts of: 1) novella; and 2) forces. In addition, I show how words in Hal-episodes are not being used in a "proper," "symbolic," or "figurative" sense, but as "intensities."

In the opening scene, of *Infinite Jest*, Hal Incandenza gives silent responses to the questions of the deans during his admission. Hal appears not to be altogether there in the room; he is as though present with a portion of himself withdrawn (*Infinite* 3). Hal flails, wriggles, and waggles; he emits animalistic sounds that horrify the deans (14).

What has happened to Hal for things to have come to this? I explore this question in the second chapter. In previous criticism of the novel, six possibilities have been given regarding Hal's inability to communicate in the opening scene of the novel: 1) Consequences of meeting Luria Perc; 2) Ingestion of "DMZ" (a hallucinogen); 3) Fallout of marijuana abstinence; 4) Childhood isolation + marijuana abstinence + loneliness; 5) Disturbing sincere expressions; 6) Ingestion of the film *Infinite Jest*.

Wallace, according to *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story*, structures the Hal-episodes in a way that precludes the reader from dwelling on any one of the above possibilities (Max, 193).

And so how do you read a novel that inevitably makes you hit a dead end whenever you pursue the what-has-happened-to-Hal question?

I propose reading the Hal-episodes of *Infinite Jest* through Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of "novella." The French philosophers tell you in '1874: Three Novellas, or "What Happened"' (a chapter in *A Thousand Plateaus*) that the literary genre of novella revolves around the question: "'What happened? Whatever could have happened'" (225)? The year in the title of their chapter—1874—refers to the publication year of the French writer Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly's story collection, *Diaboliques*. In this collection, the novella 'The Crimson Curtain' compels you to ask at certain hairpin bends of the narrative, "Did I miss something? Something has surely happened for things to have come to this?"

In the novella, Albertine comes to Bressard's room barefooted, and every night he warms her cold feet first (d'Aurevilly 45). But one night, he fails to make blood flow into Albertine's feet and she dies (45-46). What happens to Albertine? What exactly does she die from? It remains unknowable (*Thousand* 226).

Bressard decides to desert Albertine's corpse and run to his colonel (d'Aurevilly 49-50). The colonel asks him to immediately get out of the town, and tells Bressard that he, colonel, will meet Albertine's parents, and will write to Bressard about it (50). But the colonel soon dies in a war; and so, again, you'll never know what happens after Bressard leaves the town, and how the colonel takes care of things vis-à-vis Albertine's death (*Thousand* 226).

The whole move of the novella has nothing to do with reflecting on something from the past: the novella puts you in touch with something that cannot be known (227). Can it be that "nothing" really has happened? This, too, is a possibility in a novella (227).

A "nothing" produces "something," or makes "something" happen (227). What is this "nothing"? It is a secret (227). Deleuze and Guattari tell you that the concept of novella has an umbilical relation to secrecy. The secret that the novella carries around is of the undiscoverable type; the form of the novella's secret is impenetrable (227). Whatever has happened to Hal, similarly, remains unknowable; the form of Hal's secret is imperceptible.

In Wallace's short story, 'The Soul is Not a Smithy,' there are elements of the novella too. Richard Johnson comes in as a substitute Civics teacher in school;

Johnson is teaching American Constitution (*Oblivion* 68). Instead of writing “due process of law,” Johnson inadvertently writes “due process KILL of law” on the chalkboard; he takes a few steps back, and looks at what is written in a surprised manner (86). Johnson’s hand keeps inserting words not in the Constitution; he also, simultaneously, emits a single-note “scream,” definitely not of his own volition (91). The cops ask Johnson to step away from the chalkboard; but Johnson continues writing “KILL,” again and again (99). Just as in Hal’s case, you can never explain what has happened to Johnson; you have to read the Johnson-episodes using the concept of a novella, which puts you in a relation with something that cannot be known (*Thousand* 227).

Johnson does not have any criminal history, nor does he have any record of mental health issues that might explain his behavior in the Civics class (*Oblivion* 73). The Johnson story cannot provide you with knowledge of the past; it appears to have forgotten about the past; or it might even be that “nothing has happened” in the past—it is perhaps “nothing” that makes “something” occur in the Civics class. “What is this nothing that makes something happen” (*Thousand* 227)? It is novella’s relation to secrecy, whose form remains impenetrable (227).

Or, perhaps, the “nothing” that makes “something” happen in the Civics class—the “nothing” that makes “something” happen in the opening as well as the end sections of Hal-episodes—is of the future, rather than of the impenetrable past: the invisible forces of the future.

In *The Logic of Sensation*, Deleuze tells you that Francis Bacon’s scream paintings establish an alliance between the visibility of the scream and “invisible forces” of the future (61). Bacon does not show horror in the scream paintings, and this feature precludes his work from turning into a spectacle; his screams simply capture and reveal invisible forces, declares Deleuze (*Logic* 181).

The unnamed narrator in Wallace’s ‘The Soul is Not a Smithy’ tells you that Johnson appears to be struggling, mightily, against an “evil or alien force” at the chalkboard; and that this “force” is strong-arming Johnson to interpose words in the Constitution; and that this “force” is also making him scream (*Oblivion* 91). What horrific thing does Johnson witness? What is causing him to scream?

Nothing! Nothing is invisible forces producing the scream. Johnson's actions are not in response to a spectacle; it is because of the imperceptible forces acting on Johnson's body.

Hal, too, is a victim of the invisible forces of the future. The forces produce inhuman sounds and noises in Hal (*Infinite* 14). The forces also effect out of kilter gestures in Hal: his arms writhe and waggle (14). The invisible forces are knocking on Hal's body, and Hal's visible body is grappling with the invisible forces, and it is within this visibility that Hal's body struggles, creates a possibility of winning.

The deans are unable to understand Hal in the opening scene of *Infinite Jest* because his words do not belong to a language of sense anymore. For the deans, Hal's words are merely a voice carrying serial sounds of a goat's bleating: nonsense (*Infinite* 14); it is the situation of a becoming-animal of a man. In the situation of becoming-animal, Hal establishes a virtual alliance with a goat. And in this alliance, Hal becomes more than the person he is by forming an "inter-individual body" with an animal (Patton 79-80).

In the situation of becoming-animal, the bleating sounds capture Hal's voice and make his words blurry; his words are not being used in a "proper" or "symbolic" or "figurative" sense; his words become, as Deleuze and Guattari put it in their book *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, "a distribution of states": intensities (22). With language being used in an intensive manner, it escapes its own territories.

3. DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S MINOR USE OF THE MAJOR LANGUAGE

At the beginning of 'Authority and American Usage,' a 61-page essay on Bryan A. Garner's *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage*, Wallace declares himself to be a prescriptivist (a "linguistic conservative"); but then the American author distances himself from prescriptivists (or variants of it) on occasion; he even portrays himself, on one occasion, as a descriptivist (a "linguistic liberal") (*Consider* 79). What strategy does Wallace employ to tackle the tricky issues of American usage? What persona does Wallace project?

In the first part of the third chapter, I read Wallace's usage essay the way American author, George Saunders, reads Chekhov's short story, 'Gooseberries.'

In the usage essay, I claim, Wallace displays a persona not unlike Chekhov; the structure of their arguments are similar; namely, both the structures sidestep one-dimensionality.

The structure of 'Gooseberries' thinks, says Saunders, in terms of "on the other hand" declarations: Ivan loathes happiness; on the other hand, he is rapturous while swimming; Ivan's gestures in the water are self-centered; on the other hand, Burkin's constant tendencies to rein in Ivan are also irritating (Saunders, ch. 6).

Similarly, the structure of Wallace's usage essay thinks in terms of a series of "on the other hand" statements. Wallace creates a persona in the essay who strives to sidestep one-dimensionality: Wallace declares himself to be a prescriptivist—a "snoot" (*Consider* 71n. 8); on the other hand, he is not a dogmatic snoot, the kind who finds no need to explain to the students about why Standard Written English (SWE) is a desirable dialect to master (106); Wallace criticizes the descriptivists for thinking of themselves as "scientists," for thinking they are observing "scientific phenomena" of the way people use language, when what they are merely observing are behaviors of human beings and tabulating it (89); on the other hand, he finds a number of traditional prescriptive rules to be "stupid," and those endorsing it to be "contemptible and dangerous" type of snoots (100).

In his usage essay, Wallace orders his black students about not using Standard Black English (SBE) in their essays; and that they have to follow the rules of the SWE (108). On the other hand, though, Wallace himself puts the homogenous system of SWE in disequilibrium in his fictional and non-fictional works. In the second part of the last chapter, I show, through Deleuze's theory of "agrammaticality," how Wallace decomposes English through creation of syntax.

To create syntax, Wallace does not collate two different languages in his sentence; rather, he creates a minor language inside his own language (*Dialogues* // 4). Bilingualism or multilingualism in a single language is a "line of flight or of variation" that prevents the major language from being homogeneous, says Deleuze (4).

Deleuze and Guattari tell you in *A Thousand Plateaus* that language, in its essence, is a “heterogeneous, variable reality”; which is why the French philosophers criticize the scientific endeavor of linguists to create a structure defined by homogeneity and the “power (*pouvoir*) of constants” (*Thousand* 118).

The scientific model of studying language—of abstracting constants from variables—is entwined with the political model; because in the political model, too, “language is homogenized, centralized, standardized, becoming a language of power, a major or dominant language” (117). Deleuze and Guattari write:

The compulsory education machine... imposes upon the child semiotic coordinates possessing all of the dual foundations of grammar (masculine-feminine, singular-plural, noun-verb, etc.). Language is made not to be believed but to be obeyed, and to compel obedience... Language is not life; it gives life orders (88-89).

The dominant language’s assumption of control proceeds sometimes along a localized and sometimes massive area; sometimes at various centers simultaneously: the dominant language, SWE for example, finds various ways to homogenize, centralize (118).

If one kind of language is termed a major language—a language which is used to move you about, and which is defined by power (*pouvoir*) of constants; the second kind of language is termed a “minor” language; it is defined by the power (*puissance*) of continuous variation; the minor language puts the major language—the constants—into variation (*Thousand* 118).

A writer’s strength working in the realm of major language lies in carving a minor language through syntactical contortions; the writers who are able to do this are anointed “minor” and the “only greats” by Deleuze and Guattari (122). And Wallace, I claim in my thesis, is one of them; he is a “great” and “minor” writer (122).

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