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RACHEL LENG

DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S POSTMODERN METHOD IN
BRIEF INTERVIEWS WITH HIDEOUS MEN

INTRODUCTION

To fully understand such a slippery term as postmodernism, a central concern of this paper, the movement's literary and philosophical characteristics need to be examined. *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* describes the movement as a "complex set of reactions to modern philosophy and its presuppositions rather than any agreement on substantial doctrines" (634). As such, postmodernism rejects grand narratives emphasizing eclecticism and challenges realism. Postmodernists utilize parody, irony, and playfulness to depict a world characterized by heightened self-awareness where reality is constructed inside the individual's mind. Postmodern writers adopt this solipsistic view, believing that readers are, in a way, trapped inside their own minds. According to David Foster Wallace, this outlook leaves us alienated from experiencing the full range of human emotion, particularly human compassion.

Wallace's *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men (BIHM)* takes on the idea of solipsism prevalent in postmodern human relationships. The book has been considered by critics as "a decisive and articulate recapitulation of Wallace's...characteristic themes, including depression, solipsism, community, [and] self-consciousness" (Boswell 182). The question which this paper will address is, how can Wallace write out of the postmodern milieu to form an escape from the very isolation of that milieu? As novelist Bell noted, "Wallace has assumed the mission of seizing the methods of metafiction while rejecting its self-reflexive ends" to say "something serious and sincere about the world" (Bell). Wallace acknowledges that "part of being a human self is suffering...[But] we all suffer alone in the real world [where] true empathy's impossible" (McCaffery 1). He believes that "fiction's purpose is to give the reader...imaginative access to other selves," for it is through fiction that we can "identify with a character's pain," achieving a "nourishing [and] redemptive" unity which makes us feel "less alone" (McCaffery 1).

While the postmodern outlook on the current world situation is bleak, Wallace defines good art as "art that locates and applies CPR to those elements of what's human and magical that still live and glow despite the times' darkness" (McCaffery 6). To do so, Wallace "weaves a thick sardonic skein of irony into his work...hop[ing] to satirize 'everything that is clichéd and...banal'...to show the presence of actual human beings," pushing readers to escape solipsism through care and concern for another (Star).

BIHM is a collection of twenty-three short stories connected through the sustained theme of interviews of characters who embody narcissism and depression— symptoms of a postmodern world. In his work, Wallace focuses on the characters' desire to obtain genuine unself-conscious understanding and communication in a deeply self-aware and media-saturated contemporary culture.

This essay will explore the question of how it is that Wallace employs postmodern devices not **only** to criticize the culturally derived attitudes of contemporary culture, but also to connect with readers to get them to move beyond their solipsistic natures towards finding new and more truthful versions of the world. To that end, I will examine the short stories "Forever Overhead," "Adult World (I)" and "(II)," along with selected interviews from *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*.



"FOREVER OVERHEAD"

In the short story "Forever Overhead," a boy experiencing the early onset of puberty asks to go to the pool on his thirteenth birthday. The piece is essentially a coming-of-age story told in the second person dramatizing a young boy's plunge from the high dive as his fall from childhood innocence into a more fractious state of "true adult sadness" (Boswell 3). However, Wallace challenges the conventional structure of the genre to illustrate how sexuality and self-consciousness are inextricably intertwined.

Within "the past half year," the boy has sprouted "hard curled hairs around [his] privates" and "grown into [the] new fragility" of pubescence (5). Fittingly, he also discovers that "girl-women" have curves "totally unlike [his] own," with their "mysterious weights" and "immoderate swells" (8). During his hormone charged afternoon by the pool, the teenage boy is unsure why he had "wanted to come alone," but decides to leave the shallow children's pool to join the adults at the high dive (6). Along with his emerging sexuality, the newfound desire for solitude indicates that he is developing a state of self-consciousness, one where he experiences an inner division between himself and others.

The long line to and slow climb up the ladder represents the maturation process where the adolescent learns more about the world around him and "see[s] the whole thing" from his "overhead" perch on the high dive (11). Overwhelmed with trepidation and wary about the fates of "people who've gone before [him]," he is hit with the revelation that the board will send him "someplace which its own length keeps [him] from seeing," catapulting him into the unknown of true adulthood (12-13). The adolescent yearns to stay "forever overhead" on that board, to remain in a moment suspended in time between stasis and change, innocence and cynicism, consciousness and self-consciousness.

While paralyzed in a state of self-doubt, he realizes that the process of taking the plunge is unavoidable as it is "part of a rhythm that excludes thinking," like "a machine that moves only forward" with "no reverse gear" (8,13,15). He can only follow in the footsteps of countless "people with real weight" who have jumped before him, whose only remnants are "two dark spots" at the tip of the diving board (14).

The story ends with his irreversible plunge into the pool, a one-way drop into violence and change "like a stone down a well" (12). The boy "disappears into a well of time" where he will become a different being (15). Wallace portrays the young boy's plunge into water/time to represent the post-modern individual's inevitable initiation into the "Adult World," a place where childhood innocence will eventually be displaced by experienced self-consciousness. Wallace shows us that world in all its narcissistic self-consciousness in his two part story, "Adult World (I)" and "Adult World (II)."

"ADULT WORLD"

In titling this story simply "Adult World (I)" and "Adult World (II)," Wallace tacitly refers the reader back to the second story in the collection, "Forever Overhead" wherein leaping off the diving board the boy moves ineluctably into the world described herein. Absence of names of characters or events from the title suggests that this world is every adult's world in one way or another, including the reader's. The author does not allow the reader to enjoy the status of a mere passive observer, who enters narcissistically into someone else's world, but ensures that she is constantly aware how she is both in the story (A.W. (I)), and outside it (A.W. (II)), clearly a postmodernist writer's liberty in breaking down the walls of narrative decorum.

"A.W. (I)" makes the reader echo the excessive sexual and self-conscious concerns which afflict the postmodern individual. This time, Wallace assumes the viewpoint of Jeni, a "young wife" who worries that "her technique in making love" with her new husband "was somehow hard on his thingie" (162). To expose the incomplete lives devoid of genuine compassion led by the married couple, Wallace reduces the narrative to a mere sketch by casting "Adult World (II)" in the form of authorial notes. Through this skeletal structure, he also emphasizes the vicious irony in how the reader, who is "marooned in her own skull," actually experiences the same isolation of the characters (McCaffery 1).

"A.W. (I)" introduces the newlywed anonymously as an "immature...[and] emotionally labile

young wife” who sometimes “berated herself for her insecurities” (165-6). Initially, it seems as though Jeni is a selflessly considerate lover, unfaltering in her attention to try and change for her husband’s pleasure. However, it is revealed that “her irrational worry that something was wrong with her” is simply a twisted form of selfishness (162). Throughout the piece, much focus is placed on describing Jeni’s obsessive self-analysis which prevents her from completely enjoying the “revelational pleasure of coming together as close as two married bodies could come” (162). She is constantly bothered by “worries... [that are] all about herself” and suspects that “the whole problem could be just in her head”(163-4). To Jeni, the problem is “impossible to sort out rationally in her mind,” and even more impossible to “explain in any rational way” to her husband, leaving her feeling “alone and trapped in her worry” (166). As a postmodern individual, she is imprisoned within herself by her recursive self-doubt making her incapable of selflessly engaging in the intimacy of lovemaking.



By admitting that “she felt that her fear was selfish,” Jeni attempts to justify her “anxiety about whether [her husband] enjoyed [himself]” and desperate need to “stop worrying and feel more sure that their sexlife together pleased him as much as it pleased her” (167). As her self-consciousness escalates, we follow her through her various attempts to overcome the problem, including her trip “out to Adult World...[to buy] a Dildo” so she could secretly “practice her oral sex technique” on it (164). Jeni comes to believe that “either something [is] really wrong with her, or something [is] wrong with her for irrationally worrying about whether something [is] wrong with her,” a recursive conclusion that “make[s] reflections of itself inside itself” (170). This self-reflexive stream of inconclusive “logic” only makes Jeni feel “increasingly out of control” and fall “deeper and deeper inside herself and inside her worry... [becoming] more and more unhappy,” the never-ending dilemma of postmodern individuals (172,176).

Eventually, she “make[s] the frantic humiliating call” to her previous boyfriend to ascertain if he had “imagin[ed] making love with other women during their lovemaking together” (165,179). Jeni’s suspicions that her husband also has a “secret, impenetrable part to his character that fantasizes about lovemaking with other women” communicates the impossibility of true empathy, as even the great physical intimacy involved with lovemaking cannot join two lovers in complete emotional understanding (180).

Thus Wallace breaks off with “A.W. (I)” and moves into “A.W. (II),” [1] but instead of finding the same narrative voice with its established proximity as was mediating the story in “A.W. (I),” the reader turns a page and suddenly it has become permeable. Wallace pokes his head up as though to remind her suddenly that it is, after all, only a story; the narrative is merely being mediated by the author, and in the end, the reader will be alone, simultaneously aware of her passive spectation, as well as her need to actively try to bridge the gap between the two modes of narration. Here, the text reads like a writer’s notebook, abandoning all artifice of reality in demanding that the reader “work hard to access the pleasures” that Wallace’s fiction affords (McCaffery 2). This section, then, articulates most explicitly and unavoidably what postmodern methods Wallace employs to communicate his larger purposes to the reader.

What those purposes entail, Wallace reveals, is in part “to aggravate the sense of entrapment and loneliness and death in people, to move people to countenance it, since any possible human redemption requires us first to face what’s dreadful, what we want to deny” (McCaffery 12). Wallace brings about this effect by “trying to prohibit the reader from forgetting that she’s receiving heavily mediated data, that this process is a relationship between the writer’s consciousness and her own, and that in order for it to be anything like a full human relationship, she’s going to have to put in her share of the linguistic work” (McCaffery 12-3). Here is where we comprehend what Wallace means by applying CPR to art where he is “trying somehow both to deny and affirm that the writer is over here with his agenda while the reader’s over there with her agenda” (ibid 13). The paradox is committed when the writer at one and the same time allows “the reader to sort of escape self by achieving some sort of identification with another human psyche...and also trying to antagonize the reader’s intuition that she is a self” (13). While Wallace does not believe that the paradox can be resolved, he does believe that “it can somehow be mediated—‘re-mediated,’” right at the place “where post-modernism rears its head” for the writer—“by the fact that language and linguistic intercourse is, in and of itself, redeeming” (13).

The real irony here is that while the reader is suddenly aware of her alienation from the text, having been divorced from her passive spectation by the intrusion of the writer, she is now in a position to remedy her loneliness by putting the book down and joining the community of others populating her real world. Wallace layers that irony with his conclusion to Jeni’s story of deepening self-consciousness and isolation. To quote Yeats, she ends up in the “foul rag-and-bone shop” of her own mind, making a conscious choice to love herself by making love to herself thus enclosing herself completely in her solipsism.

BRIEF INTERVIEWS WITH HIDEOUS MEN

The title work, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, consists of eighteen interviews with men split into four sections interspersed throughout the story cycle. The forms of the interviews themselves are varied: some are one-sided dialogues of arguments between lovers; others are dramatic monologues of males responding to a series of unspoken questions; still others are dialogues between male speakers from “overhead” conversations. While all of the “brief interviews” share the same question and answer format, readers never see the actual questions being asked, only the stark denotation “Q” in place of absent queries. By using this structure, Wallace thrusts the reader into the role of the interviewer, making her a character that is a part of and “inside” the story itself. In this way, Wallace enables readers to interact directly with the procession of “hideous men” who relate stories of their callous behavior towards women. From a one-armed misogynist who uses his deformity to trick sympathetic women to sleep with

him to a lothario whose pick-up techniques parallel those of a serial killer, the men are conceited, narcissistic, and brutal in their treatment of women. Not only do they openly discuss their experiences, many even try to mitigate the cruelty of their actions by confessing to their own awareness of its hideousness.

PART 1: B.I.#02

Throughout the interviews, the “hideous men” frequently feign complete openness—an ironic, media educated, and self-aware pose—as they understand exactly how critical honesty is to manipulate the judgments and reactions of their “audience.” In B.I.#02, a one-sided dialogue takes place where a man tries to justify the act of leaving his lover by turning it into a plea for her to empathize with his complex personality. Explaining that he is leaving because “his relationship record indicates a guy who’s bad news,” the male is aware of his own faulty tendency to “[come] on very fast and hard in the beginning of a relationship...to make [women] truly believe [he is] in love” and then having a “sort of sudden reversal of thrust” in which he “find[s] ways to pull away [and] back away” (91,95).

Amid his excessive assertions of “honesty,” the male is self-conscious to the extent that he freely declares every contradiction in his technique of “trying and be honest instead of dishonest,” pointing out that “it’s even possible that [his honesty] here trying to head off the pattern of sending out mixed signals and pulling away is just another type of pulling away” (99). Wallace ironizes the speaker’s self-reflexive examination of his narrative, making it clear that it is really only a show.

Nevertheless, the speaker attempts to redeem himself by suggesting that he is “becoming more able to understand...and be honest with [him]self” and never had any “evil” intent of “lying to [women]” (96). His act of “rationalizing” the dishonesty of his relationship history reveals that he is “some kind of psychopath who can rationalize everything...to delude himself into believing he cares so that he can continue to see himself as a basically decent guy” (97). His leaving becomes a plea for her sympathy to understand that he is “trying as hard as [he] can to love [her]...[and is] terrified [he] can’t love” (98). Ultimately, what he worries about most is not about how he is going to hurt her, but about “being constantly afraid of what [she is] thinking all the time,” a defining characteristic of hyper-self-conscious individuals unable to escape from the recursivity of their own obsessive thought (99).

Clearly, readers can see that the speaker does not deserve such sympathy: the only goal of his “honesty” no matter how repetitive and self-conscious is deception. By exposing the “hideous” man’s true motive to deceive, Wallace’s jest becomes obvious: the man deceives by telling the truth, bringing irony full circle, ironizing irony. And even though our natural sympathy is inclined towards the woman, Wallace ironically challenges us to empathize with the man’s “hideousness” with the belief that by doing so, “we can then more easily conceive of others identifying with our own” pain and feel “less alone inside” (McCaffery 1).

PART 2: B.I.#20

With Wallace’s bleak postmodern dramatization of a solipsistic, passive society, one begins to doubt that the postmodern individuals represented by characters in the book are capable of empathy. However, it is evident in B.I.#20 that Wallace remains true to his motive of creating “good fiction” to depict the narcissistic world influenced by postmodern constructs and at the same time “illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in it” (McCaffery 5).

Concluding *BIHM*, the last lengthy interview is a critical piece that serves as a culmination of all the devices and themes which have been made prominent in previous interviews. The narrative is once again a one-sided dialogue where a male engages with a silent female questioner. The speaker relates how he, a “reasonably experienced, educated man,” intended to approach a woman with a “strictly one night objective” but ended up “fall[ing] in love with her” after she “related the story of the unbelievably horrifying incident in which she was...nearly killed” (287-289). Like all the other “hideous” men, he is marked by his self-consciousness. Declaring that he is “aware of how all this sounds,” but has “no choice but to be brutally candid” about his attitude towards the woman, he addresses her as a “Granola

Cruncher” whose “essential at-center-life-is-just-a-cute-pet-bunny” vision he dismisses as mere “intellectual flaccidity” (289). The “pickup” technique which he employs and describes to his auditor is typical of the self-reflexive strategies that have constantly been operating in all the interviews. The reader, who is put inside the text within the role of the listener, is therefore made aware of the possibility that, as with all the other hideous men, the speaker’s “honesty” is potentially a trap whose real purpose is deception.

However, this interview differs as it operates from multiple layers and numerous frames, where a self-conscious businessman attempts to relate a woman’s unselfconscious experience about genuine empathy. By narrating his experience of being persuaded by the woman’s narrative, he is, in effect, trying to persuade his listener through a narrative about a narrative. With this complex and layered structure, Wallace engages the reader in a story that affirms the power of empathy in the face of unimaginable terror.

Throughout the interview, the speaker relates a story told to him by a woman about getting picked up by a “psychotic sex criminal” (301). Initially, he seems contemptuous of the woman’s clichéd explanation that she felt an ominous “energy field” and “instantly knew in the depths of her soul that the fellow’s intention was to brutally rape, torture, and kill her” (294). However, there is a shift in tone when he realizes that she has an “unexpected ability to recount [her experience] in such a way as to deflect attention from herself” (296). Counterpoised to the ‘hideous’ men’s narcissistic narratives, the woman’s effectual story-telling is characterized by her “sincere . . . attempts to simply describe what it must have felt like” (297). Through the retelling of a woman’s earnest effort to tell her story through the self-reflexive narration of a self-conscious storyteller, Wallace uses self-reflexivity to invite the reader to commit to an act of empathy.

The content of the woman’s story makes this objective clear. She explains—or rather, the speaker explains that she explains—that she saves her life by using “her penetrating focus to . . . feel and empathize with the sex offender’s psychosis,” piercing through his external facade to “forc[e] a nascent, compassion-based connection between their souls,” rendering him so emotionally defenseless that he spared her life (302). By “choos[ing] to give herself, sincerely and compassionately,” she empathizes with the rapist human-to-human and denies him “the ability to dominate and take,” obliging him to see her not as a mere object, but another human being (310). Through her story, the woman demonstrates that lovemaking demands communication and reciprocity: the walls of self-conscious deception can only be broken down if lovers are able to empathize and establish a “genuine connection” with each other (317).

As the businessman describes, the woman’s “high degree of unself-conscious attention and concentration” is what makes her story succeed as it “helped [him] focus almost entirely on the anecdote itself and . . . imagine . . . what it must have felt like for her” (297, 316). For the woman’s mysterious act of empathy at the heart of the story to remain effective, it has to be protected from the “element of self-consciousness” which would introduce “itself [as] an object of focus, like some sort of diffraction or regress of self-consciousness and consciousness of self-consciousness,” creating a chasm of emptiness within and between individuals, resulting in a “division—a hole in the world” preventing the experience of selfless emotional connection (311-2). In lovemaking, this refraction creates a void between and leads to greater isolation and self-absorption for both partners.

In each of the “interviews,” the reader is exposed to men who employ “sham-honesty” to conceal their self-absorption and relish in perpetuating masochistic or disingenuous practices while taking refuge in postmodern constructs. However, in B.I.#20, Wallace emphasizes the fact that empathy, the act of inhabiting other selves, is the only way to transcend our own “divided and doubly complex” interiors to reconnect with our hidden “true selves” (311). Within a story about storytelling, Wallace pushes us to believe that storytelling itself can become a form of “focusing,” an ingenious way to pierce through the wall that divides one’s own inviolate interior from that of one’s lover, to enter that part of the soul which still lives and breathes.

CONCLUSION

Eight years after its publication there is more evidence now that we need writers like David Foster Wallace to awaken us from our virtual world slumber. With the onslaught of reality TV, where voyeurs sit on their sofas and peep into the lives of other people, where high priests of self-help dish out sound-bite therapy while rapt radio audiences listen in, the postmodern malaise of isolation affects us more than ever. By narrating the experiences of the private lives of his characters, Wallace reveals how the postmodern display of self-consciousness is now a culture-wide phenomenon. In a society where the intents of a serial rapist are similar to those of an experienced businessman, lovemaking is no longer an act wherein one abandons self-consciousness and is able to find a genuine moment of unity with another, but has become a means through which the postmodern "hideous" individual descends deeper into the horrors of hyper-self-awareness and solipsism.

Through his work, Wallace forces us to objectify the postmodern individual's experience and draws our attention to the flaws of contemporary culture, using self-reflexivity as a vehicle to expand and enrich the isolated interiors of his readers. He makes us work, and in that work reminds us that we are alone and ought to do something about it. His writing disorients, yet re-educates, the reader about the absurdity of our culture by enacting a postmodernist critique on that culture. He exposes the pervasive nature of cultural irony by ironizing it, a layered strategy which serves to detach the reader from the diegetic universe of the text and create a space away from the destructive influence of self-consciousness where direct empathy can still exist.

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