

THE PROBLEM OF FREE WILL IN DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

Paolo Pitari (author)

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The overreaching argument of Paolo Pitari's book is that David Foster Wallace ultimately failed in his aspiration to write a kind of fiction that would meaningfully deal with and "redeem despair" (1) in US society. This idea is suggested right from the outset in the book's title that characterizes free will as a "problem" in the novelist's oeuvre. Pitari suggests that this existentialist contradiction throughout Wallace's work stems from the fact that he found himself at a fork in the road, seeking to reconcile the meaningfulness of life with free will. Observing that such an attempt, whether in philosophy or fiction, is inevitably doomed to fail, the author posits that Wallace's works, precisely because of their insightful failure, encourage us to reconsider our interpretation of the world as one that inherently entails despair.

Indeed, the novelist's project aimed at finding a way to redeem our fundamental terrors of life—including loneliness, solipsism, and self-judgement—which eventually lead to despair. Nevertheless, his attempt bore no fruit insofar as he looked for redemption within the very framework of our existing beliefs such as free will, which itself involves despair. In other words, the book argues that free will cannot be considered a fundamental truth, prompting the possibility of creating meaning in life, because assuming free will to be true also implies the fact that all the intolerable problems which Wallace wrote about are irredeemable.

The book is divided into three parts with chapters that might be read independently or in relation to one another. One of the merits of Pitari's book is that it effectively draws on a vast number of philosophical sources to spell out his argument. He analyzes the question of free will versus determinism across Wallace's works, from his first published story "The Planet Trillaphon" (1984) to his final writings, such as the

posthumously published *The Pale King* (2011), where the characters often struggle with existential issues originating from the impossibility of exercising free will.

Section one sets in motion the book's investigation of Wallace's oeuvre by offering up an analysis of the nature of truth in his works and its potential to unravel meaning. Here, the author usefully addresses the influence of Tolstoy's and Sartre's ideas about art and literature, respectively, to illustrate Wallace's deep concern with literary truth. Having established a helpful theoretical framework, in section two Pitari transitions from Wallace's non-fiction to his fiction in order to demonstrate that his literary commitment was essentially founded upon an ethical basis. Therefore, understanding the causes, means, and objectives underlying his literary project, through the aid of his non-fiction, helps the reader navigate Wallace's fiction, especially when confronting the tangible challenges arising from the problem of free will.

Regarding the novelist's non-fiction, the book presents several theoretical discussions to explain the conceptualization of the writer's literary ideal. At the heart of the argument here is the idea that Wallace's non-fiction can be described as a sociology that provides a diagnosis of the widespread loneliness in the world as well as an attempt to solve this contemporary predicament through fiction. Further elucidating such a sociological analysis is the author's discourse about Lasch's influence on Wallace concerning narcissism as a manifestation of self-hatred rather than self-love in American society.

If chapters three and four focus explicitly on Wallace's work from a sociological viewpoint, the following three concentrate on cultural, economic, and ontological issues, respectively, to better delineate the sociological foundation of Wallace's preoccupation with truth in literature. Thus, the reader comes to learn that: a) Wallace's and Bauman's existentialism result in the impossibility of affirming free will and an ethics of compassion, leading to a nihilistic individualism that both are wary of; b) insofar as existentialism and neoliberalism refer to the same philosophical perspective established on free will, Wallace's project of existentialism as a corrective to neoliberalism is contradictory, much similar to Becks's idea of individualization understood as a corrective to capitalism; and c) Wallace profoundly shared Giddens'

existentialist point of view on free will, and a comparison between the two reveals the consequences of believing in it: despair and ontological insecurity.

Finally, section three propounds a comparative examination of Wallace's and Dostoevsky's critical thoughts. Chapter eight throws light on the battle between good and evil in their works all along while the following chapter draws on Bakhtin's dialogism to amend a number of misinterpretations of Dostoevsky and Wallace, proposing that they share a fundamental unity in existentialism. Delving into the belly of the beast by analyzing the problem of free will in *The Pale King* and *Crime and Punishment*, the final chapter heralds the struggles of Wallace's characters to show that the result of the existentialist contradiction is the same in both writers' works. For Pitari, Wallace and Dostoevsky intended to find a redemption for despair and evil in the world but eventually did not succeed because they could not renounce free will and submit selfhood to destiny.

Pitari thoroughly engages with the problem of free will, leaving room for further research as to whether such a "failure" might have bred insights into the best next thing after postmodernism. In fact, he brings up Kelly's characterization of the "New Sincerity" which, read in the context of free will and determinism, opens up new avenues of exploration into attempts to represent what has supplanted postmodernism, usually pieced together under the banner of post-postmodernism as a descriptor for contemporary US fiction. On that note, for instance, one might wonder if the sincere expression of one's personal thoughts, "may sometimes be [...] vicious" (3).

All in all, the book courageously offers an original interpretation of free will in Wallace's oeuvre by recourse to the works of significant thinkers in the Western tradition, including Severino, Nietzsche, and Leopardi. In doing so, it sets a valuable precedent for a work that tackles the novelist's contested ideas about freedom and truth in a rigorous manner, not only through literary and philosophical lenses but also from the novel standpoint of literary sociology, making *The problem of free will in David Foster Wallace* a well-executed interdisciplinary investigation in Wallace studies.

WORKS CITED

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