

**Allard den Dulk, *Existential Engagement in Wallace, Eggers and Foer: A Philosophical Analysis of Contemporary American Literature*. New York/London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015. xii + 301 pp.**

**IAIN WILLIAMS – THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH\***

In this important philosophical study of three contemporary U.S. novelists David Foster Wallace, Dave Eggers, and Jonathan Safran Foer – Allard den Dulk (Amsterdam University College) provides a timely contribution to the debates surrounding what comes ‘after’ postmodernism. Echoing Robert McLaughlin’s identification of an “aesthetic sea change” in American literature’, den Dulk argues that a recent group of authors have emerged that unite in a ‘reaffirmation of the possibility of connecting fictional stories to the real world’ (4, 261).<sup>1</sup> In den Dulk’s analysis, ‘contemporary Western culture’ is in crisis due to two interrelated problems – solipsistic ‘hyperreflexivity’ and a skeptical attitude of ‘endless irony’ – ‘that for many individuals lead to (self-)alienation and loss of meaning’ (1-2). Den Dulk splits his study in two, with the first part highlighting ‘problematic fiction’ – with John Barth’s ‘postmodernist metafiction’ and Bret Easton Ellis’s ‘postmodernist minimalism’ offered as representative examples of hyperreflexivity and ‘endless irony’ respectively (88) – whilst the second identifies the emergence of ‘engaged fiction’, focusing on Wallace, Eggers, and Foer. These latter authors, he contends, stage their resistance to the crisis by affirming virtues of sincerity, reality-commitment, and community, allowing them to reintroduce ‘meaningful, foundational portrayals of reality’ as a corrective to ‘the postmodern view, which sees language and fiction as cut off from reality’ (264).

There are a number of small issues with den Dulk’s methodology: the book is tightly organised around the philosophical tradition of existentialism – in particular, Kierkegaard, Sartre, later Wittgenstein, and Camus – with den Dulk subdividing each part into several short chapters which are themselves broken down into multiple subsections. This does allow for a strongly coherent argument, but it also results in a sense of restriction at times. Den Dulk’s theoretical investigation into the existential roots of the contemporary crisis is assured, and yet his illustration of this with textual examples from his chosen novels can be a little

---

\* Iain Williams is a final-year PhD candidate at the University of Edinburgh. His research focuses on David Foster Wallace’s engagement with notions of authenticity. He can be contacted at I.Williams-1@sms.ed.ac.uk.

<sup>1</sup> See also Robert L. McLaughlin, ‘Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World’, *Symploke* 1-2 (2004): 53-68.

lacking, and would benefit from deeper close-reading. Indeed, although den Dulk is open about Wallace being his 'primary focus', Foer receives notably less critical attention than the other two authors, and is thus perhaps surplus to requirements (8). Moreover, in a book that identifies irony and hyperreflexivity as two central contemporary problems, it is ironic that his writing style is itself hyperreflexive, constantly diverting attention to different parts of his text.<sup>2</sup> These issues do not, however, preclude the clarity of his prose, or the strength of his larger claims. Indeed, the conceptual level is where the monograph excels.

Den Dulk's study is one of the first to deal with the contemporary irony vs. sincerity debate at length, and he is particularly astute (following Kierkegaard) in pointing out the necessity of differentiating between verbal or Socratic irony, and irony as an aesthetic or existential stance.<sup>3</sup> Although initially hesitant to use the currently fashionable 'New Sincerity' label (162), den Dulk offers a working definition of the concept, distancing himself from the conception of sincerity as the expression of an 'authentic' (that is, autonomous) individual to argue that 'this (redefined) virtue of sincerity implies a consciousness that has to "exist" the tension of the becoming being that it is, and therefore has to constantly cast itself towards the world' (163). Although den Dulk never makes it entirely clear how this 'sincere self' is any less compromised than an 'authentic self', his focus on this 'one direction for meaningful existence: out of the self, towards the world and the other' allows him to suggest that these novels offer a realization of a tentative 'Camusian community'; a sense of solidarity that is created in attempting to resist the absurdity of existence (265, 243). Indeed, in identifying and expanding upon Wallace's own admission that his work might constitute a 'very mild form of Camus' (230), den Dulk has provided a valuable contribution to Wallace Studies specifically. More generally, his book is an admirable, stoic defence of the traditional 'function of literature', asserting that we can overcome the problems of contemporary Western existence by turning to literature that attempts to engage with reality and thus 'realize a meaningful, human life' (264-265).

---

<sup>2</sup> Wallace himself criticised 'academese' for featuring 'wearying t-crossings like "I will isolate three of this claims in particular, disagreeing with two of them and agreeing with the other"'. See 'Greatly Exaggerated', in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (London: Abacus, 2010), 141.

<sup>3</sup> See also Adam Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction', in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. David Hering (Los Angeles/Austin: SSMG Press, 2010):131-146; Adam Kelly, 'Dialectic of Sincerity: Lionel Trilling and David Foster Wallace', *Post45*, <http://post45.research.yale.edu/2014/10/dialectic-of-sincerity-lionel-trilling-and-david-foster-wallace>.