

Critical Essay:

David Foster Wallace, *Forever Overhead*

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“In this story nothing much happens. Just a boy on his 13th birthday. A swimming pool. A hot day. But it has every moment of my childhood in it, probably every moment of yours. ...he [Wallace] makes the queue to a diving board the story of every human being's progress to self-consciousness, the blessing of it and the curse”¹.

Zadie Smith, “This is how it feels to me”, *The Guardian*, 2001

As Smith observes of David Foster Wallace’s short story “Forever Overhead”, the story’s premise is simple, its action sparse, yet Wallace successfully conveys the universal experience of emerging adolescent self-awareness, turning, as critic Adam Goodheart writes “what might be a hackneyed coming-of-age tale into, instead, a small masterpiece”².

It can be said that Wallace was known primarily for his metafictional writing, self-conscious about its place in contemporary fiction, yet “Forever Overhead” is considered, unusually for Wallace, a “straightforward and accessible piece”³. It is interesting to consider what Wallace’s intentions and influences were in his decision to attempt a seemingly simple narrative in a genre that could be described as overwrought that led to a work that not only avoids cliché, but also succeeds as an effective piece of short fiction in expressing a universal human experience.

With its young protagonist on the cusp of adolescence, embarking on a quest that will signify his passage from the world of a child to that of an adult, “Forever Overhead”, “Cast in the reader-involving second-person point of view... is essentially

¹ Smith, Z. (11 October 2001) “This is how it feels to me”, *The Guardian*

² Goodheart, A. (20 June 1999) “Phrase Your Answer in the Form of a Question”, *New York Times*

³ Boswell, M. *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, p201

a coming of age story, one that, as is typical of Wallace's work, also cleverly updates the genre."⁴ Although there are multiple examples of the coming-of-age story in modern short fiction it can be said that "Forever Overhead" can trace its genesis directly from John Barth's "Lost in the Funhouse", "American fiction's paradigmatic work of post modern metafiction"⁵. When Barth wrote his piece, published in 1968, that critiques, yet embraces the coming-of-age story, the genre was perhaps already considered tired and overwrought. Barth's omniscient narrator asks: "Is anything more tiresome in fiction, than the problems of sensitive adolescents?"⁶ before continuing on with his story, using the metaphor of his protagonist becoming lost in the maze of a beachside funhouse, to examine the same theme, albeit by deconstructing the genre.

In "Forever Overhead", Wallace appears to have taken a cue from "Lost in the Funhouse" when Barth's narrator digresses (as he does throughout the work) to suggest the following: "The diving would make a suitable literary symbol. To go off the high board you had to wait in a line along the poolside and up the ladder... It was over in two seconds after all that wait."⁷

Early in his career, Wallace had been strongly influenced by Barth. The protagonist in his 1989 novella *Westward the Course of Empire Takes It's Way* takes a creative writing course taught by a Professor Ambrose, who says he "is a character in and the object of the seminal 'Lost in the Funhouse'"⁸. So it can be argued that Wallace took Barth's suggestion as a challenge. A challenge to not merely use a dive from a high board as a literary symbol, but perhaps also to address Barth's narrator's assertion that the coming-of-age genre was a tired cliché and in response, attempt the genre without the ironic self-referencing or metafictional deconstruction typical of most of Wallace's other work.

At the conclusion of "Lost in the Funhouse", Ambrose, Barth's thirteen-year-old protagonist becomes indefinitely lost, leading his narrator to reflect: "In a perfect funhouse you'd be able to go only one way, like the divers off the high board; getting lost would be impossible..."⁹. In "Forever Overhead", although Wallace's protagonist might seem momentarily lost in his thoughts as he pauses on the high

⁴ Ibid, p203

⁵ Ibid, p68

⁶ Barth, J. *Lost in the Funhouse*, p88

⁷ Ibid, p79

⁸ Cohen, S. & Konstantinou, L. *The legacy of David Foster Wallace*, p70

⁹ Barth, J. *Lost in the Funhouse*, p82

board, he recognises there is only forward momentum. It can be said that here too, Wallace took his cue from Barth, making it inevitable that unlike Ambrose, who does remain forever lost, Wallace's nameless protagonist ultimately takes the plunge despite his fleeting, impossible, wish to remain forever overhead.

As a result, "Forever Overhead" could be seen not only as a response to Barth's suggestion regarding a suitable literary symbol, but as yet another attempt, as has been claimed of *Westward the Course of Empire Takes It's Way*, to "treat Barth's achievement as the oedipal father of his own artistic enterprise"¹⁰.

Thought, or more specifically hyper-aware conscious thought versus passive, acceptance or not-thinking, is a recurring theme in "Forever Overhead" and ultimately what enables Wallace's protagonist, unlike Barth's, to find his way through obstacles, metaphorical and concrete, to reach his goal. "You thought it over. There is a high board. They will want to leave soon. Climb out and do the thing"¹¹, up until this point where the boy articulates this goal and decides to act, all he does is think. He ruminates on the changes to his pubescent body, his wish, thwarted by his family, to be alone on his birthday and after observing his family from a distance reflects "Your family likes you... You are largely good". Of his relationship to his younger sister "you are her ally", and his parents "... proud of you, satisfied"¹². His world is stable, otherwise unremarkable. Once he emerges from the pool to begin his journey to the high board however, he makes a concerted effort not to think, explaining to himself: "You have decided that being scared is caused mostly by thinking"¹³. The boy doesn't admit to nervousness, there is no expression of panic or dread, however Wallace conveys the protagonist's apprehension using a sensory stream-of-consciousness approach that describes the physical sensations and observations of the boy, with a clarity and detachment that suggests a hyper-awareness, or clear-headedness, brought on by his determination to block out his fear and follow through with his goal: "You almost all have crossed arms, chilled by a late dry rising wind on the constellations of blue-clean chlorine beads that cover your backs and shoulders."¹⁴

¹⁰ Boswell, M. *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, p203

¹¹ Wallace, D. "Forever Overhead", *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men*, p7

¹² *Ibid*, p7

¹³ *Ibid*, p8

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p9

As the boy moves closer to his goal and observes the woman in front of him dive from the high board, seemingly unthinkingly “like a stone down a well”¹⁵, the reality of his quest reasserts itself. Observing the way that she and the other divers had lined up passively, as part of the constantly moving line up the ladder and off the board, “Few talk in the line. Everyone seems by himself”, he decides, “...she was part of a rhythm that excludes thinking. And now you have made yourself part of it too.”¹⁶ It is at this point that the boy concludes: “this needs to be thought about...”¹⁷, but when he steps onto the board the very act of thinking leads, outwardly, to paralysis. The narrator doesn’t experience the moment as such, instead he finds that the unthinking observations collected on his journey to the high board have now crystallised into an epiphany about the automaton-like processes of adult behaviour required to function in society that has, from his point-of-view, enabled time to slow. From the high board he has an uninterrupted view: “Look at it. You can see the whole complicated thing”¹⁸. It is at this point, it might be said, that like Barth’s protagonist, the boy becomes lost, although unlike Ambrose, this thirteen-year-old is merely lost in his own thoughts, unable to move forward, time has stopped for him: “No time is passing outside you at all. It is amazing... If you wanted to you could really stay here forever, vibrating inside so fast you float motionless in time, like a bee over something sweet.”¹⁹

When the man behind him in line admonishes him for stalling, the boy is shocked to realise “There’s been time this whole time”, that there is “No more time for thinking. Now that there is time you don’t have time.”²⁰ It can be said that for all the boy’s wish to remain forever overhead, paused between the child’s and adult’s worlds, Wallace is pointing out the futility of resistance to the machinations of society and adult life, and like Barth, also the risk of becoming lost, in the funhouse or forever overhead, if one pauses to think too deeply about it: “A still, floating bee is moving faster than it can think. From overhead the sweetness drives it crazy.”²¹

¹⁵ Ibid, p11

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid, p13

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid, p14

When Zadie Smith writes that “Forever Overhead” “... has every moment of my childhood in it, probably every moment of yours”²² it can be said that she is referring to the way in which Wallace is able to conjure a universality of experience from the specific, with what she describes as: “Concrete details so finely rendered they seem to have been drawn from the well of our own memories.”²³ Although Smith suggests it is Wallace’s ability to zoom in on these details, bringing them into sharp focus, that enable the reader, “fuelled by nostalgia²⁴” to feel them as their own, it can be argued that it is also the startling unexpectedness of the details selected, and therefore what could be described as a shock of recognition that also creates this effect. The details selected seem at first glance almost too banal to warrant a mention, the SN CK BAR with a missing letter, the varicose “blue shattered” veins and cellulite “like cheese”²⁵ of the woman in the queue, (neither of which the narrator understandably knows words for) and the pressure of the ladder’s rungs against the insoles of the boy’s feet which “dents them”²⁶. Even the seemingly imprecise description of the diving board itself as: “just a long thin flat thing covered with a rough white plastic stuff”²⁷ is vivid enough to be instantly recognisable. However, perhaps the most unexpected detail of all is two dirty spots on the end of the board, the “Two vague black ovals”²⁸. These, the narrator surmises are the residue from the soles of the feet of every person who has used the board before him: “...bits and shards and curls of skin that dirty and darken and tan as they lie tiny and smeared in the sun at the end of the board”²⁹. The narrator returns to these “two black collections of what’s left of before”³⁰ more than once as he stands on the board, time slowing down. Seemingly repulsed, he decides (as the reader may also) that, “they should clean the board.”³¹ If the reader had never seen dark circles like Wallace describes, they can now easily picture them. When an otherwise insignificant and banal detail, as dirty marks on the end of a diving board, is rendered with such clarity, it not only enables the reader to place themselves in the same physical spot as Wallace’s narrator, but it also serves as an authoritative detail,

²² Smith, Z. (11 October 2001) “This is how it feels to me”, *The Guardian*

²³ Smith, Z. *Changing My Mind*, p262

²⁴ *Ibid*, p262

²⁵ Wallace, D. “Forever Overhead”, *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men*, p10

²⁶ *Ibid*, p10

²⁷ *Ibid*, p12

²⁸ *Ibid*

²⁹ *Ibid*, p13

³⁰ *Ibid*

³¹ *Ibid*

anchoring the narrative in a reality, even with details that may be outside the realm of some reader's childhood experience.

In her essay *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men: The Difficult Gifts of David Foster Wallace*, Smith asks of "Forever Overhead"'s protagonist: "What is he jumping into, in the end? Is the tank death, experience, manhood, a baptism, the beginning, the end?"³² At first glance Smith may be suggesting Wallace's intention is ambiguous, yet she could also be acknowledging the possibility that the boy is jumping into all of those things. At the point where the reader expects the boy to make his final decision whether to jump or not, the narrative shifts from present to future tense as he predicts the movement of the board propelling him into his own future: "The board will nod and you will go, and eyes of skin can cross blind..."³³. The piece ends with the single word: "Hello."³⁴ It is an arrival, a beginning *and* an end.

It can be said that in "Forever Overhead", Wallace accepts the challenge, laid down by Barth in "Lost in the Funhouse", to use a dive from a high board as an alternative coming-of-age metaphor that, unlike the funhouse "moves only forward"³⁵. In addition it can also be said Wallace's intention is to acknowledge and express the universal experience of burgeoning self-awareness in a way that, in contrast to Barth's metafictional approach, seeks to evoke empathy and a sense of verisimilitude in the reader using precise, recognisable, but specific detail. The result is not only nostalgic, but in some sense revelatory. In imbuing this thirteen-year-old with the new-found awareness and recognition of the interconnected system of everything around him, and in which he must now insert himself, Wallace articulates a universal experience that Smith, defining its poignancy, writes: "The boy seems to see clearly what we, all those years ago felt only faintly."³⁶

³² Smith, Z. *Changing My Mind*, p266

³³ Wallace, D. "Forever Overhead", *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* p14

³⁴ Ibid, p14

³⁵ Ibid, p12

³⁶ Smith, Z. *Changing My Mind*, p263

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