Man and His Identity: David Foster Wallace’s Trilogy and the End of Modernism and Postmodernism

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Abstract:
During history, one of the most influenced realms is the world of literature. That is to say, each literary work has been under the influence of the period in which it has been written. Therefore, all the dominant features in each era play very significant roles in shaping literary works created in that particular age. Besides, the notion of identity is a very crucial factor in each literary work in all eras and all authors creating works pay much of their attentions to the identity of the characters which can be the representation of man’s dominant identity in that specific period. Based on such an important factor, the aim of this article is to investigate the notion of man and his identity in David Foster Wallace (1962-2008) trilogy—The Broom of the System (1987), Infinite Jest (1996) and The Pale King (2011)—in accordance with this sequence of eras of Modernism, Postmodernism and Post Postmodernism (especially at the end of two primary ones) through the critical gates of philosophers and critics such as Raoul Eshelman, Stuart Sim, Jean-François Lyotard and Fredric Jameson.

Keywords: Identity, Post Postmodernism, Postmodernism, Modernism, Man

Introduction:
Like English Renaissance (1500–1660), Restoration Age (1660–1700), Romanticism (1798–1837) and Victorian Period (1837–1901), each period one day comes into its end and the features and the characteristics belonging to that age that play the roles of differentiating factors will no longer be acceptable and adoptable. Considering this fact, Modernist and Postmodernist periods have seen their termination because of the fact that they are no longer desirable for the authors and scholars, and it is clear that the need for a new paradigm is more promising than before. Due to the rapid growth of technology—which wholeheartedly influences all minute aspects of people’s lives, their relationship, the way of thinking and so on—the main factors of the two previous eras of Modernism (master narrative and the controlled identity of people) and Postmodernism (the fear of technology and anti-development movement) are condemned to extinction.

In this chain of transformation and replacement of master philosophies, the most attacked and the most challenged issue in man’s life again is his identity. The identity of man in Modernism, as mentioned before, has got no actual meaning owning to the fact that it was totally limited and was under the control of authorities; consequently, the individuality as a concept was a nonsense feature and all that remained for him was nothing but alienation and solitude. When the inevitable time of Postmodernism emerges, this kind of severe control and monitoring was removed, but there still existed
some sorts of limitation and boundaries in new form and new way, the most significant of which was the anti-technological movement or fear of technology. In these two periods, TV played a very important role creating a one-way communicating path through which people have to be the sole watchers, having no awareness but accepting whatever they are given to.

To put it simply, David Foster Wallace(1962-2008) as an author presented all these three subsequent eras of Modernism, Postmodernism and Post Postmodernism and adjusted the sequence and chronology of his works, especially his trilogy—The Broom of the System (1987), Infinite Jest (1996) and The Pale King(2011)—in accordance with this sequence. In his trilogy, Wallace tried to represent the manifesto of man and the identity of man in Modernism and two later eras in a way that all the crises and problems of people in these eras, especially the two primary ones and the background for the third one, are shown.

Methodology:

For the time being, the ages of Modernism and Postmodernism are gone with history and the period of Post Postmodernism is on the top of the philosophical debates. Raoul Eshelman in his book Performatism or the End of Postmodernism (2008) states that:

Performatism may be defined most simply as an epoch in which a unified concept of sign and strategies of closure have begun to compete directly with—and displace—the split concept of sign and the strategies of boundary transgression typical of postmodernism. In postmodernism—as hardly needs to be explained in great detail any more—the formal closure of the art work is continually being undermined by narrative or visual devices that create an immanent, inescapable state of undecidability regarding the truth status of some part of that work. Hence a postmodern building might create its own peculiar architectonic effect by placing an art nouveau swirl next to a modernist right angle, ironically suggesting that it is obligated to both styles and to neither. And, a postmodern novel or movie might present two equally plausible, parallel plot lines that remain undecidable within the confines of the novel. (1)

He believed that performatism might be characterized as an age in which a brought together idea of sign and techniques of termination have started to contend specifically with—and dislodge—the split idea of sign and the systems of Postmodernism. He refers to the fact that in Postmodernism, the closure of the craftsmanship is persistently being weakened by fictional and visual tools that make a natural, inevitable condition of skepticism and undecidability in regards to reality status. Consequently, through the gates of literature a postmodern piece of novel (or even a Postmodern movie which comes into the account of literature and philosophy if it is categorized to be extracted from a literary work) may display two similarly conceivable, equivalent plots that stay undecidable inside the boundaries of the novel.

In this regard, Stuart Sim, on the behalf of Lyotard, in his magnificent book The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism (2001) states that: Lyotard himself takes a cyclical view of cultural history, in which postmodernism and modernism succeed each other over time in unending sequence. Thus there have been postmodernisms in the past (figures like François Rabelais or Laurence Sterne qualifying as postmoderns for Lyotard), and there will be both modernisms and postmodernisms again in the future. It is just possible to argue that we are already into a post-postmodernist world, in which different cultural preoccupations – such as the reconstruction of grand narratives – are making their presence felt. Scepticism has gone in and out of fashion over the course of philosophical history, and it may well be that the current round has served its usual purpose in drawing attention to the weaknesses of certain philosophical positions and that a less negatively orientated philosophical programme can take its place for the immediate future. Already calls are being made in the realm of aesthetic theory to move past postmodernism with the hybrid of modernism and postcolonialism known as ‘altermodernism’, which aims to transcend the restrictive world of ‘isms’ altogether and in the process create a new, more dynamic relationship between artists and their audience. So be on the lookout for any similar ‘post-postmodernist’ initiatives: be but vigilant, also, for any drift back into intellectual authoritarianism. (12-13)

Like Lyotard, Sim believed that there is a kind of repeating perspective for cultural history and in this circle the subsequent ages of Modernism and Postmodernism succeed each other. They both believed that as there have been postmodernisms previously, there will be surly both Modernism and Postmodernism for a second time in future. Therefore, as they say, the only conceivable issue to contend is that we are as of now into a Post Postmodernist world, in which distinctive social
distractions such as the recreation of some sort of grand narrative (however, different from the previous ones in terms of form and the way of representation) are coming into existence. They, in fact, state that the notion of skepticism has vanished. As of now calls are being made in the domain of aestheticism to move past Postmodernism intending to rise above the prohibitive universe of ‘isms’ and to generate a novel and more vigorous association amongst specialists and their spectators.

The era of Postmodernism is involved with great changes in the development and the process of shaping identity which can be connected most specifically to the fast commodification of cultural characteristic in the development and effect of the technologized and electronic form of media and computer based systems. The social vicissitudes characterizing the age of postmodernity, more comprehensively, in any case, are inserted in a broad arrangement of improvements in the bigger monetary and political fields of community and society. The act of re-organization of capitalism, the convergence of united mass media, a novel form of universalization of capital and communicating frameworks and IT, and the development of new sorts of social and political developments underlie the boundary and arrangement of a new-fangled and multifaceted cultural and social realm.

Actually, the long debates on identity and personality issues have come to be encircled by a developing discrepancy between the philosophical challenges of Modernism and the later era, Postmodernism, characterized as restricting epistemological points of views, progressive periods of history in the improvement of different sociocultural circumstances. This discrepancy denotes a combination of changes in cultural, social, and scholarly life in the 20th century, with suggestions to the formation and development of identity and methods of conjecturing the notion of subjectivity.

Going through the divergent fields of Postmodernism, there are repeating topics of the separation, dispersion, and decentralizing of the meaning of society and culture that were stablished in the previous era. The situation of Postmodern starts with the social density and incongruousness coming from the basic changes in the capitalist arrangement, the effect of media advances, and a monstrous development of private utilization. This is why that authors such as Jameson have concentrated on the outcomes of time-space pressure going with social commodification and the procedures of the fragmentation of society and culture installed in financial and technology-oriented improvement.

The vital issue to be discussed here is the end of Postmodernism and the identity of man at the end of this time which is the beginning of the new era, that is, Post Postmodernism. The concept of identity represents a crucial example of the historical split between postmodern and post-postmodern ideas. The idea of man’s identity shows a pivotal case of the authentic split amongst Postmodernism and Post Postmodernism thoughts. In this regard, Fredric Jameson on the analysis of the notion of Postmodernism states that “one of the key themes of postmodernism is the death of the subject itself—the end of the bourgeois monad or ego or individual” (1991: 15).

The figure of speech of a scattered, divided, and moldable feeling of identity is one of the generally undisputed cases of Postmodernist feedback. However, the idea behind Post Postmodernism recommends that such debates about personality and the identity of man have progressively relegated this investigation as an undeniable quality. A particular main monad is presently subsumed to a sort of identity as a developed resemblance of particular, individual decisions. The inspiration driving these decisions matters not exactly as the force of one’s dedication to them. In this regard, as Jameson believes, Post Postmodernism is more involved with the consequences of Postmodernism, not the truths of it.

findings:
It is undeniable to say that the central point is here and the reason for this lies in the fact that the age and philosophy of Post Postmodernism concentrates mainly on the identity and fundamental subjectivity of man and the end of Postmodernism, a sort of identity which is considered as “hollow-center.” This subject has an intriguing impact in a way that it is able to change the concentration from a quest of comprehension into a perpetual procedure of elucidation and interpretation that is expected to end in no concluding part and end. Regarding the notion of identity, this implies that an individual is in search of not comprehending oneself or others, rather he seems to be examining and refining the meaning of particular decisions and the way of interpretation which are supposed to be in. Therefore, in this regard, the aim of this part is to show the identity of man at the end of Postmodernism and the preliminary steps of emergence of the new age of...
Post Postmodernism in David Foster Wallace’s two last novel, *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*. David Foster Wallace in his masterpiece, *Infinite Jest*, gives a detailed and philosophical passage to better introduce the condition of man at the end of Postmodernism as:

(3) But there's some sort of revealing lesson here in the beyond-short-term viability-curve of advances in consumer technology. The career of videophonies conforms neatly to this curve's classically annular shape: First there's some sort of terrific, sci-fi-like advance in consumer tech — like from aural to video phoning — which advance always, however, has certain un-foreseen disadvantages for the consumer; and then but the market-niches created by those disadvantages — like people's stressfully vain repulsion at their own videophonic appearance — are ingeniously filled via sheer entrepreneurial verve; and yet the very advantages of these ingenious disadvantage-compensations seem all too often to undercut the original high-tech advance, resulting in consumer-recidivism and curve-closure and massive shirt-loss for precipitant investors. In the present case, the stress-and-vanity-compensations own evolution saw video-callers rejecting first their own faces and then even their own heavily masked and enhanced physical likenesses and finally covering the video-cameras altogether and transmitting attractively stylized static Tableaux to one another's TPs. (*IJ* 138)

As he states, at that time, there were many great advantages and benefits for the newly introduced kind of technology, but there were also many doubts about the fact that whether there existed some disadvantages about it or not. This kind of dangling and unstable situation, for a man who is jammed between Postmodernism and Post Postmodernism, creates a kind of loose, unidentified and doubtful identity which is characterized by uncertainty and consequently anxiety, sadness and stress. When this in-between man (who has no awareness about the ways that this kind of new technology can suggest him in expressing his sadness) thinks of such a horrible situation (as he himself considers), he starts rejecting it without any seemingly logical reason and the only excuse he finds is the fear of visual appearance that might be a sort of ugly representation of his own face. Philosophically speaking, one can say that this situation (maybe unreasonable for a Post Postmodern man who lives in the world of computer based technology, but not for a Postmodern man) is inevitable for the emergence of the new era due to the fact that the first step of accepting something wholeheartedly is to suspect it — later in the novel the characters wholeheartedly accept the advantages of new-fangled computer based technology in a way that they seem not to be able to live without it. In fact, Wallace in his novel repeatedly tries to shows the current dispute between individuals and intellectuals about the prohibition of the new technology or warmly accepting it. He explains such an idea from the tongue of the characters as:

‘Oh, and not just Ottawa,’ steeply said. ‘You can see the implications if a technology like Elder's really became available. I know Ottawa informed Turner, Bush, Casey, whoever it was at the time, and everyone at Langley bit their knuckle in horror.’ ‘The CIA chewed a hand?’

'Because surely you can see the implications for any industrialized, market-driven, high-discussion-spend society.’

'But it would be illegalized,' Marathe said, noting to remember the various routines of movements Steeply made for keeping warm.

'Stop with the babe-in-woods charade,' 'There was still the prospect of an underground market exponentially more pernicious than narcotics or LSD. The electrode-and-lever technology looked expensive at the time, but it was easy to foresee enormous widespread demand bringing it down to where electrodes'd be no more exotic than syringes.' (*IJ* 186)

Here, the character of Steeply who is across-dresser (a person who likes to wear clothing usually worn by the opposite sex and has the problem of identity as well) with whom Orin Incandenza becomes obsessed and is busy working for the government Office of Unspecified Services, is fearful about the possible implication of technology in a way that he anticipates it as a horror and disaster. Another character suddenly interrupts him and says that this new kind of technology might be expensive and strange for the time being, but in the near future it will be very easily at hand and not exotic or odd anymore. In this part, Wallace sagaciously expresses some sorts of awareness and familiarity of the new form of technology and acceptance of it in order to both establish the preliminary factors and bases and pave the way for the emergence of the new era, Post Postmodernism.

The situation of anxiety and challenge for accepting the new form of technology in the last and unfinished novel, *The Pale King*, is even more vivid but less because the publication and writing of this novel is nearer to the emergence of Post
Postmodernism. In this regard, David Foster Wallace directly states in a passage: Project is replacing human Examiners with computers the way Lehrl invented Automated Collection Systems—the District Directors don’t want it, because they’re Old School IRS-as-Civics believers, whereas the newschool has a corporate philosophy: maximize revenue while minimizing costs. Big Q is whether IRS is to be essentially a corporate entity or a moral one. Charles Lehrl preparing to computerize Exams the way he computerized Automated Collection System in Collections—the experiments there were in Rome and Philadelphia. Invented the IRP that compares W2s and 1099s to Returns—made Examiners’ jobs otiose.

Reynolds & Sylvanshine (lovers? roomies?) vie for Lehrl’s attention & favor like courtiers or children—it’s how they pass the time in the dullness of IRS intrigue.

Reynolds & Sylvanshine live together—sort of like Rosencrantz & Guildenstern in Hamlet. They have an incredibly nice reproduction of Gerard terBorch’s Parental Admonition (28 x 29 in., Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam) that they hang wherever they live—or else an incredibly good forgery, done by one of the great painter-imitators of the modern US. DW, because of snafu, favors upgrading IRS computer systems—Stecyk wants to preserve human examiners? (PK 298-299)

In this passage, the acceptance of this new form of technology is easy; therefore, there can be less anxiety and less stress. In fact, man seems to have acquired a more stable identity. In spite of the fact that the project is to replace the human working in old schools with the new and computerized form, there are still some sorts of attachments to the past and old way of working because the directors cannot accept it and for this reason they unconsciously feel anxious about it. This is because of the issue that they think the examiners’ jobs will be a waste of time and as Wallace says, it is otiose and useless. This dispute even happens without consideration of the fact that when they are working they spend their time in dullness and uselessness.

In another passage in The Pale King, David Foster Wallace keeps on putting the emphasis on this notion as he writes that: [...] but also the climax of an involved intra-Service battle between advocates and opponents of an increasingly automated, computerized tax system. For complex administrative reasons, the Midwest Regional Examination Center became one of the venues in which this battle’s crucial phase played out. But that’s only part of it. As alluded to in an FN way above, subtending this operational battle over human vs. digital enforcement of the tax code was a deeper conflict over the very mission and raison d’être of the Service, a conflict whose fallout extended from the corridors of power at Treasury and Triple-Six all the way down to the most staid and backwater District office. At the highest levels, the struggle here was between traditional or ‘conservative’ officials who saw tax and its administration as an arena of social justice and civic virtue, on the one hand, and those more progressive, ‘pragmatic’ policymakers who prized the market model, efficiency, and a maximum return on the investment of the Service’s annual budget. Distilled to its essence, the question was whether and to what extent the IRS should be operated like a for-profit business. (PK 48)

Here, David Wallace (the main character of the novel) is explaining the situation in which there are disputes and battles between the supporters of newly introduced technology and those who are against it in the tax company, in fact they discuss whether to replace the old way of working with the new computer based and automatic system or not. There are also challenges in other places such as Midwest Regional Examination Center as if this dispute has become the current and most important discussion all over the country. Wallace says that it is only a very small part of the battle between the human and the so-called digital implementation but the greater part depends on the duty and the reasons which go beyond even the imagination and the simple departments and offices. Needless to say, this is a challenge between the old costumes and traditions and the new way of thinking which is more effective and highly optimized. In this situation, as it was discussed, because of being unacquainted with the advantages and benefits of new computerized form of technology, man is swimming in the sea of anxiety, fear and uncertainty which can lead him to a kind of weak identity; a situation that was current at the end of Postmodernism which convinced some people and scholars as well to have anti-technological thoughts and pessimistic views on the advancements of technology especially internet based ones, the fruits of which, are social networks and social applications. This fear and the pessimistic view which is full of anxieties, as discussed before, have led man to be a depressed, gloomy, dejected, sad and unhappy.
person as Wallace repeatedly shows in his novels especially in the last one:
The rodential man, whose aura was timid but kind, a sad kind man who lived in a cube of fear, had his hat in his lap. Capacity 24 and full. There was the yeasty smell of wet men. The energy level was low; they were all coming back from something that had consumed a lot of energy. Sylvanshine could almost literally see the small pink man drinking Pepto-Bismol straight out of the bottle and going home to a woman who treated him like an uninteresting stranger. The two men either worked together or knew each other very well; they were talking in tandem without even being quite aware of it. An alpha-beta tandem, which meant either Audit or CID. It occurred to Sylvanshine that the window held a faint oblique reflection of him and that the alpha of the two men was amusing himself slightly by addressing Sylvanshine’s reflection as if it were him, while the hamster affected the facial expression of address but said nothing. (PK 30)
Here, Wallace pictures the identity of a man who is totally ruined and as he calls him rodential, full of fear, living in a box of sadness and strangeness and the only thing he is supposed to do is to work 24 hours a day in spite of having no energy or a very low level of energy like a dying man. In this situation, the only tranquilizer is to drink alcoholic drinks in a way that even not being aware of it. An alpha-beta tandem, which meant either Audit or CID. It occurred to Sylvanshine that the window held a faint oblique reflection of him and that the alpha of the two men was amusing himself slightly by addressing Sylvanshine’s reflection as if it were him, while the hamster affected the facial expression of address but said nothing. (PK 30)

Conclusion:
For almost more than four decades, Modernism and Postmodernism, the subject of identity and the notion of individuality have come to cover a wide range of philosophical, hypothetical as well as political debates in the United States, Europe and the world on the whole. Fundamentally, the notion of identity is to be considered as a very crucial matter in the realm of ideological issues and this notion directly influenced the way people live, behave and think. As told before, this central issue of man’s mentality has been repeatedly placed in the situation of transformation since the past to the present and undoubtedly to the future. When an age comes to its end, primary to its turn, it is the identity of man which is subjected to have a great shift and one can say that it is because of the change of identity that the age can be provided with the basic factors of transformation.

Like all fields of science, literature is not out of this circle, rather it can be considered as the core of this movement through which all the intellectuals and scholars express their philosophies and thoughts in forms of novels, critical books and philosophical manuscripts. As a genius, talented, well-aware critic, novelist and a social healer, David Foster Wallace like other great critics such as Jameson,
Lyotard, Sim and Timmer, properly finds the mainstream of the world and the influential points in the life of human being. They all considered the notion of identity in different ways, some in terms of philosophical writings or critical essays and books and others like Wallace in form of novels. David Foster Wallace (1962-2008) in his trilogy—The Broom of the System (1987), Infinite Jest (1996) and The Pale King (2011)—beautifully showed the chronology of the changes in the world and the shifts in the identity of man in accordance with the transformation of ages from Modernism to Postmodernism and later to Post Postmodernism.

In the first novel, The Broom of the System, the story focuses on the main character named Lenore Stonecipher Beadsman, a mentally conflicted 24-year-old phone administrator who is busy asking and challenging the real identity and reality of her own existence; the issue which is considered as the concurrent issue and contradictory fact in Modernism and Postmodernism. All the problems about the life and the surrounding events around the main character are the philosophical debates in these two eras through explaining which Wallace wants to find a path, a solution to the bright future of Post Postmodernism. The controlling thought encompassing these problems is the utilization of words and images to characterize a woman as the main character in order to represent this thought, also Wallace utilizes distinctive arrangements to construct the story, containing transcriptions from TV (as the terrorizing weapon for controlling people) programs and treatment meetings which are all the milestones at the end of the two first eras of Modernism and Postmodernism.

In the second novel, Infinite Jest, the same condition (with some changes) exists for the main character, Hal is dealing with many problems of a Modern and mostly Postmodern man such as addiction, alienation, solitude, self-exile, retrieval, passing away and unexpected death, family relations, divorce or death of parents, psychological well-being, suicide, unhappiness, entertainment, hypotheses about television and media on the whole, semantics, knowledge, national and individual identity. Hal can be considered as a Postmodern man who is trying to find his way to free himself from the so-called prison and the way to Post Postmodernism in a postmodern and encyclopedic kind of novel which is well-known for its size and great number of features as well as its departure from the main subjects that entail the use of footnotes and endnotes directly implying deeply melancholic mood with which a Postmodern man is involved and because of getting rid of them, he is stepping into the new world which is the era of Post Postmodernism.

In the third novel, The Pale King, the same situation, even worse, exists for the main characters such as David Wallace, Lane Dean Jr., Claude Sylvanshine, David Cusk, and Leonard Stecyk. In spite of the fact the situation is still the same, there is a hope for a better future and that is why the characters are always complaining about the present condition. The significant debating issues in the last novel of David Foster Wallace named The Pale King are isolation, depression, unhappiness and the boredom that is human life’s tormented basis; that is to say, man is living in a deeper type of agony which is always present, surrounding all the spaces around human being and the only thing man can do is to try and try to free himself from this pain. As a kind of motivator and an anticipator, Wallace invites the Postmodern man to plunge himself deep into the inferno of devastating dullness, suggesting the fact that something good may exist beyond this frustration, something which can give him the real identity different than what he has. As a kind of emphasis on this view, one can mention to the lecture of Wallace himself in 2005 at Kenyon College as he directly says to his listener to be “conscious and aware enough to choose what you pay attention to and to choose how you construct meaning from experience” (qtd. in Thompson 3).

References: