



Alone in my room, congested and exhausted, I forgot my obsession with self-advancement. I wanted to lose myself. I wanted to read. Instead of filling in the blanks, I wanted to be a blank and be filled in.

The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction (Alan Jacobs)

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The fall holidays, a fortnight, have come and gone. Free, malleable, wide-open days have swooped past me with no regard for how much I might need them or not, how much I would like them to tarry a while longer, to stretch indefinitely into a life-long vacation. [Fall, fall, fall and fall again, the season of endings keeps coming like masses of arctic air.]

One of those two weeks was spent under the penumbra of a diagnosis I remain wary of: asthma. Ergo I shifted my favorite existential activity, running, from the freshly bracing plein-air to the maniacally circular, depressingly static treadmill, the dreadmill. As a street-runner it is impossible not to realize how brutally solipsistic the treadmill is: every motion is repeated in the same place, the steps end on the very same small little loop on which they begin, achieving nothing in the way of progression, of forward motion, of even just refreshing air-current production, not-to-even-dream-of vistas,

encountering fellow runners, reconsidering one's route and all the myriad contingencies that make a run come ALIVE. The run on the treadmill is executed, literally, by a living person but the activity itself has been so very much stripped to its barest of bones [putting one foot in front of the other, I'm certain there is no bona-fide forwards propulsion] that it is a zombie-run, necromanced by the great voodoo master „Willtorun“.



As a person used to recreational, up-tempo, two-foot-off-the-ground bi-pedalism this new „way of being in the world“ needs some getting used to. My initial symptoms of transition-distress were: a sense/anxiety of falling asleep mid-run, powerful bursts of vertigo in which my proprioception came temporarily unhinged and I had the subjective impression of running on the mill at an approximately 45 degree angle or that, somehow, I was not running in a „straight line“ [which one is indeed not, one is truly running in a single, self-identical spot, a runner's singularity], plus the always lovely fear of being flung of the high-r.p.m blacktop-simulacra like a pesky, humanoid bug and being splattered, fully splayed, against the red wall in back. Think: highway, windshield, mosquito, SPLAT.

Then there was also that brief phantasm when the rest of the gym suddenly stretched out almost cosmically and the differential dance of the seemingly hundreds of parallax arms of the staggered elliptical trainers became the levers of a gigantic,

unknowable machine; which allowed me a vivid moment of empathy, immediate empathy, with my sister's swooning fits at large-scale [weight-workout] gyms, which in her paraphrased words are something like „simply too much“ --- the unending arrays of complexly articulated, rubber-corded steel and their appendices of dark, mute weight, pulling all vertebrate subjects ever earthwards; the unconscionable animosity of organic beings and inanimate steel.

Yet then so
nevertheless, after six
or seven times on
infinity's little
sisyphean whorl, after
getting used to
running absolutely
nowhere at the
double & triple, after



getting comfortable with the motions of pietinage extra-ordinaire, I have come to see that it is not all bad. Stasis can be good in places. How so? It reduces the activity to its barest essentials, so that despite the still present motion of the legs it becomes a more or less purely mental exercise. The lungs are in- and deflating evidently but, at least in my case, it is the mind that is racing away, in a way. This is not necessarily pleasant but it has made me more acutely appreciate the subjective viscosity of time, the ebb and flow of thoughts as one „runs“ and the minutiae of my stride [mid-foot or hind, long or staccato], as I was not distracted by the demands/beauty of the road.

And naturally, it makes you really, really, really re-appreciate the freedom of the boundless alfresco, its infinitely ramifying routes that somehow always terminate at your own doorstep. What the hell am I trying to bloody signify? Thread-mill running is bare bones running, is existential running, is running stripped of all its frills and trumpets, Beckettian exercise of the first order, running reduced to the purity of sheer upright mas-loco-motion. Exhausted and unredeemed you wind up winded in the very place you begun, having covered no ground at all other than a so-many-times-rotated 2x2x1m belt of PVC/monofilament.





A sort of pre-big-bangian calm comes over me.

If you suspect that this is not the topic I was going to write about, running, again, goodness, you are absolutely on point. I was going to consider if there is any kind of sensible balance that can be struck between [what I understand to be] supra-realism/existentialism/whatnot [sort of] and [my pitiful take on] mindfulness/happiness. And the reason I've been chewing this one is simple and straight-forward and damn-nigh trivial in a way that is going to let down those who like to dial up their mental artillery all the way when they read the word „this-or-that-ism“ and the like.

The work of art, Rilke said, says to us always: You must change your life. It demands of us that we too see things as ends, not as means—that we too know them and love them for their own sake. This change is beyond us, perhaps, during the active, greedy, and powerful hours of our lives; but during the contemplative and sympathetic hours of our reading, our listening, our looking, it is surely within our power...

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Here goes: as much
and as undyingly as I
love Wallace's writing
[and, perhaps more
pertinently, early
Auster of NYTril and
certain skeletal
snippets of Beckett], I
can't get around the

idea that relevant writers, willingly or not, must communicate a few lasting things about what it means to them to be human and to make it through life in a meaningful way. And that in the case of Wallace, despite all literary balls-out genius, one of the resounding messages seems to be that one can/should try to overcome the self-referential trap of boredom/fun/drugs in favor of an adult approach to life, this approach consisting in doing something for the long-haul and attentively and responsibly, just a no-bullshit, lusterless, everyday, grind-it-out heroism, which is not even recognized [by significant others, to boot] as heroism. Other than this there can only be crippling self-consciousness, suicidal depression or solipsistic narcissism, all of which, not being adult, fail to make life meaningful.

"He paused again and smiled in a way that was not one bit self-mocking. 'True heroism is you, alone, in a designated workspace. True heroism is mutes, hours, weeks, year upon year of the quiet, precise, judicious exercise of probity and care – with no one there to see or cheer. This is the world. Just you and the job, at your desk.'" – The Pale King, p.230

I am not claiming that Wallace is/was horribly mistaken but I do find the prospect depressing that the best one could hope for in life is to be this sedate, august adult, dutifully occupying one's station in life. Let alone the [to me] outlandish notion that the biggest obstacle we have to overcome this side of eternity is boredom, which in my eyes pales besides plain old suffering and a panoply of injustices.

So then the main argument I have with his stance is that it is simply short-sighted, it misses the extended HD 360degree vista. Why? My hypothesis is that boredom, narcissism, depression, etc. all boil down to Wallace's underlying assumption of CHS: congenital human shittiness.

We all have our little solipsistic delusions, ghastly intuitions of utter singularity: that we are the only one in the house who ever fills the ice-cube tray, who unloads the clean dishwasher, who occasionally pees in the shower, whose eyelid twitches on first dates; that only we take casualness terribly seriously; that only we fashion supplication into courtesy; that only we hear the whiny pathos in a dog's yawn, the timeless sigh in the opening of the hermetically-sealed jar, the splattered laughter in the frying egg, the minor-D lament in the vacuum's scream; that only we feel the panic at sunset the rookie kindergartner feels at his mother's retreat. That only we love the only-we. That only we need the only-we. Solipsism binds us together. That we feel lonely in a crowd; stop not to dwell on what's brought the crowd into being." –Westward the course of empire takes its way, p. 308

And so what is missing from the said vista illustrated above? Something so so straightforward, so evident and yet so unamenable to intellectual highfaluting that [up until now?] I usually only accorded it the equivalent of a friendly smile and a pat on the shoulders: the actual possibility of happiness. Not pleasure, not euphoria, not the absence of suffering, not a denial of the many evils in this world but a deep insight into how things are, an understanding of the nature of suffering and then, by way of

years of exercise/meditation, a profound, cultivated serenity: happiness. You could be happy, I could be happy, beyond materiality, not as a result of what one achieves out there but of what one accomplishes within one's inner being. Do I hear the sound of jaw muscles extending to maximum capacity and deep inhalation?



“As influential as external conditions may be, suffering, like well-being, is essentially an interior state. Understanding that is the key prerequisite to a life worth living. The search for happiness is not about looking at life through rose-colored glasses or blinding oneself to the pain and imperfections of the world. Nor is happiness a state of exaltation to be perpetuated at all costs; it is the purging of mental toxins... that literally poison the mind.” – The art of happiness, p.23

One, I in particular, is not so comfortable with the idea that what one should do with what this type of language signifies is anything other than rapidly pigeon-hole it in the drawer „Buddhist babble“. I've been long disinclined to reconsider but I sense that perhaps, maybe, after all this time, something might conceivably change: I, my view of things. In the end, I don't think Wallace thought that he could escape his demons, that he could become somebody truly else, run from CHS and so neither could

anybody else. He remained quite hopeful despite his terrible affliction but the traces of this depressed view to me are there.

And in Beckett things are harsh, minimal, brutal, fractured. But despite everything, despite all resistances and the utter lack of prospect, they carry on, from one extended moment to the next. The human animal manifests itself at the moment of making a choice and the choice is precisely to go on, to hold out, to wait for G. I could be quite wrong about this but that is how I understand it. *But then to what end?* the question is vocalized, carried in from the gelid autumn streets outside; at least I can hear it. No particular end, *nothing special* a hermit might murmur, just so as to go on. Pressed further, the interlocutee might have enumerated a vague horror of suicide or a nameless necessity to persevere in the face of impossible odds, a principled defense of the humanoid life-form but the arguments come off, as I see it, as flimsy, unconvincing, undercut by something ulterior.

“Where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on” – S.B.

And what would that be? Simply the most minuscule scintilla of hope. And then the hope for what if freedom is already realized at each moment of choosing to go on? Again happiness, supra the self, streaming outwards. The fact that I've been unable to achieve it thus far, that I've been unwilling to even begin to take any initial steps in its direction does not discount the possibility of its actual attainability. The fact is that, as critical and sharp-eyed as I've always considered myself to be, I too have fallen prey to a simple, unprovable ideology, a cherished mental toxin that I have never seriously questioned: that the world is ultimately a sad, unjust location and that human civilization, considered as a whole, trends at least 51% towards evil.

It is just another version of Wallace's and Beckett's CHS and what does it achieve for me? Precisely nothing. Yet I've held onto it as if it is the one true tenet that must be upheld to remain a principled, realistic, critical subject. It gives me no pleasure [!] nor does it help me understand other people or events any better. Indeed if there are rose-tinted then these are the grey-tinted glasses. I am tired of them, I want to get rid of them, there must surely be a more productive way of being in the world than thinking that human beings perennially fuck up. Because of course the corollary, which one/I never quite takes into account, is that I fuck up too mostly, that I also quintessentially trend towards evil. Which is not at all what I want, if I take a moment to think about the matter clearly. All of this is in urgent need of more consideration.

"In a way, ignorance is very intelligent, but it is an intelligence that works exclusively in one direction. That is, we react exclusively to our own projections instead of simply seeing what is there.

We look for happiness outside ourselves when it is basically an inner state of being. If it were an exterior condition, it would be forever beyond our reach. Our desire are boundless and our control over the world is limited, temporary, and, more often than not, illusory." - The art of happiness, p. 33

Hmmmm.

