

## The Structure of 'On the Other Hand' in Anton Chekhov and David Foster Wallace

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### Abstract:

At the beginning of 'Authority and American Usage,' David Foster Wallace declares himself to be a language fanatic (a "snoot" as he calls it), and that he is a prescriptivist (a "linguistic conservative"); but then the American author distances himself from prescriptivists (or variants of it) on occasion; he even portrays himself, on one occasion, as a descriptivist (a "linguistic liberal"). In this paper, "The Structure of 'On the Other Hand' in Chekhov and Wallace," I read Wallace's usage essay the way another American author, George Saunders, reads Anton Chekhov's short story, 'Gooseberries.' Saunders observes in *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain* that Chekhov's story thinks through a series of "on-the-other-hand" declarations: "Ivan is against happiness; on the other hand, he sure does enjoy swimming." Through this structure, Chekhov is able to convey how petty it is to have a "one-dimensional opinion" about something; or how it is not possible. Similarly, Wallace, or Wallace's persona in the usage essay is that of someone who is not one-dimensional; who does not settle into a single belief regarding English usage; who keeps qualifying his position; and you keep suspending your decision to judge him.

**Keywords:** David Foster Wallace, George Saunders, Anton Chekhov, American Usage, Prescriptivist, Descriptivist, Happiness.

In 'Authority and American Usage,' a 61-page essay on Bryan A. Garner's *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage (ADMAU)*, David Foster Wallace praises the lexicographer for displaying "Democratic Spirit" in the usage dictionary: it is a quality that is a combination of "rigor and humility, i.e., passionate conviction plus a sedulous respect for the convictions of others" (Wallace 72). The democratic spirit is hard to practice, maintain, on certain vexed issues such as "correctness" in contemporary American usage; you have to look at yourself, honestly, and to question yourself, continually, about what motivates you to believe in something, declares Wallace (72). What strategy does Wallace employ to tackle the "highly charged" issue of American usage (72)? In the usage essay—which is "part narrative, part

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argumentative, part meditative, part experiential”—what persona does Wallace project (Garner, *Quack* 78)? At the beginning of the usage essay, Wallace declares himself to be a language fanatic (a “snoot” as he calls it), and that he is a prescriptivist (a “linguistic conservative”); but then the American author distances himself from prescriptivists (or variants of it) on occasion; he even portrays himself, at times, as a descriptivist (a “linguistic liberal”) (Wallace 79). In this paper, I read Wallace’s usage essay the way another American author, George Saunders, reads Anton Chekhov’s short story, ‘Gooseberries.’ Saunders observes in his book, *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain*, that Chekhov’s story thinks through a series of “on the other hand” declarations: “Ivan is against happiness; on the other hand, he sure does enjoy swimming” (Saunders ch. 6). Through this structure, Chekhov is able to convey how petty it is to have a “one dimensional opinion” about something; or how it is not possible (ch. 6). Similarly, Wallace, or Wallace’s persona in the usage essay is that of someone who is not one-dimensional; who does not settle into a single belief regarding English usage; who keeps qualifying his position; and you keep suspending your decision to judge, to judge him.

## I

In the usage essay, Wallace writes about a song he composed as a kid for the people who make a blunder in Standard English; the Wallace family sang this song together on long distance car trips (Wallace 71). A touch of poetic wisdom from Wallace’s grammarian mother, Sally Foster, helped Wallace to smuggle into the lyrics of the song the strangulating tone of W.B Yeats—Wallace added the words “widening gyre” from Yeats’s ‘The Second Coming’ to his song (71). (The song for the English-language-debasers shows the high notes Wallace’s precocity hits, as well as adumbrates a prescriptivist in the making.) Below is the wailful road song:

When idiots in this world appear  
 And fail to be concise or clear  
 And solecisms rend the ear  
 The cry goes up both far and near  
 for Blunderdog  
 Blunderdog

Blunderdog

Blunderdog

Pen of Iron, tongue of fire

Tightening the wid'ning gyre

Blunderdo-O-O-O-O-O-O (71)...

In her grammar book, *Practically Painless English*, Sally declared that an improper pronoun reference drove her “up the wall with confusion” (101), and an incorrect verb tense hurt her teeth (125). At home, during supper, if Wallace or his sister committed a usage gaffe, the grammarian mother began to cough, and kept coughing and pretending to choke, as if from lack of oxygen, until the one who made the error set right the wrong (Wallace 71). As a kid, Wallace’s favorite advertising howler was “Save up to 50% and more,” and it was a sort of an in-joke between the mother and son, and they often laughed about it (Garner, *Quack* 104).

“Grammar Nazis, Usage Nerds, Syntax Snobs, the Grammar Battalion, the Language Police”—these are the terms usually used to describe the usage fanatics; the term that was used, though, in Wallace’s home, is “SNOOT” (Wallace 69). Wallace declares that he is a snoot because of his mother; it runs in the family: Wallace’s snoot acquaintances, too, have at least one parent whose relation with English usage is rabid (71n. 8). Wallace defines snoot in his usage essay:

SNOOT (n) (*highly colloq*) is this reviewer’s [Wallace’s] nuclear family’s nickname à clef for a really extreme usage fanatic, the sort of person whose idea of Sunday fun is to hunt for mistakes in the very prose of [William] Safire’s column. This reviewer’s family is roughly 70 percent SNOOT, which term itself derives from an acronym, with the big historical family joke being that whether S.N.O.O.T. stood for “Sprachgefühl Necessitates Our Ongoing Tendence” or “Syntax Nudniks Of Our Time” depended on whether or not you were one. (Wallace 69n. 5)

The snoots know the meaning of “*dysphemism*,” and let you know that they know it; the snoots know when and how phrasal adjectives are hyphenated, and can recognize a participle dangling; and the snoots know that they know, and they know that not many in their country know or even care about these things—the rules of Standard English—and they judge these people accordingly (70). The snoots “are the Few, the Proud, the More or Less Constantly Appalled at Everyone else”—with everyone else here referring to the non-standard English

users (71). At the beginning of the essay, Wallace wants you to know, through the repeated use of “We” to refer to “snoots,” that he is very much a snoot too (71).

Wallace, though, is “uncomfortable” being a snoot, because his bellicosity (vis-à-vis current English usage) is similar to the bellicosity of religious and political conservatives (vis-à-vis current culture) (70). Wallace, as a professor of English, goes through a pattern every semester: after finding solecisms in the first set of his students’ essays, he immediately veers from the regular Literature syllabus and begins taking an “Emergency Remedial Usage and Grammar Unit” for the next three weeks—because Wallace is “pathologically obsessed” with Standard English (70n. 6). As he realizes that his students do not know how to identify clauses, or do not know how crucial the word “only” is, and how misplacing it can completely change the meaning of a sentence—“I only love you” versus “I love only you” (Garner, *Quack* 103)—Wallace loses his temper; beats his head against the blackboard (Wallace 70n. 6). Wallace writes:

The truth is that I’m not even an especially good or dedicated teacher; I don’t have this kind of fervor in class about anything else, and I know it’s not a very productive fervor, nor a healthy one—it’s got elements of fanaticism and rage to it, plus a snobbishness that I know I’d be mortified to display about anything else. (70n. 6)

The snoots—or the “prescriptivists”—the ones conservative about change in English and its usage, the ones looking to effectively use language in grammatical and rhetorical sense, are endlessly at war with the “descriptivists”—the liberals, the scientific observers of language, the recorders of language as it’s actually used by the native speakers. If the native speaker, for example, confuses—or swaps—the words “infer” and “imply,” the descriptivists do not object; for the descriptivists, it’s all right (Garner, *Modern Preface*).

Wallace, in his usage essay, takes apart the descriptivists, especially the arguments of the editor, Philip Gove, in *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary (W3)* in 1961. W3—which enrages the prescriptivists by endorsing “Ok” and “ain’t” (the words W3 claims are used by educated population across the United States in the 60s)—declares: “A dictionary should have no truck with artificial notions of correctness or superiority. It should be descriptive and not prescriptive” (Wallace 79). The descriptivists, through their scientific method—i.e. through value-neutral principles, and direct and objective observation—build the contents of their dictionaries; this is how, they believe, every English dictionary and the correctness of the language should be determined.

Gove in *W3* lists five proclamations of descriptivism that Wallace quotes in his essay: “1—Language changes constantly; 2—Change is normal; 3—Spoken language is language; 4—Correctness rests upon usage; 5—All usage is relative” (83). Wallace responds to Gove’s edicts, as a sort of spokesperson for the prescriptivists, point by point. 1—If “language changes constantly,” the question is at what rate and in what proportion (83)? 2—What is a normal change? Is flux proposed by Heraclitus as normal as a slow change? How many people have to not abide by the usage conventions, or how many usage conventions need to be flouted, to say that a change in language has occurred (83)? 3—The prescriptivists do not concern themselves much with spoken English; their usage guides concentrate on “Standard Written English” (SWE) (84). 4—Gove does not specify whose usage is correctness based on, Wallace points out (84). What Gove wants are grammar rules corresponding to the way people actually use the language, and not usage based on rigid rules (84). But whose usage—which group of people—are you going to pay attention to? Wallace asks Gove (84). Is it going to be: “Urban Latinos?” “Boston Brahmins?” “Rural Midwesterners?” “Appalachian Neogaelics” (84)? 5—From Gove’s fifth principle, it appears to Wallace that the answer to the question “which group of people?” is “all of them” (84). Gove is proposing to “observe” and “record” every “language behavior” of every native speaker, to include everything in the dictionary, which is of course impossible to do (84). Such a dictionary, even if constructed, Wallace points out, will weigh millions of pounds and require hourly updates (85).

Wallace calls descriptivists’ understanding of what “scientific” means “crude and outdated”; the “scientific lexicography” of the descriptivists—which involves observing every act of every native speakers’ language behavior and including all these observations in the dictionary—requires them to naively believe that their undertaking is scientifically objective (85). That the observers are part of the phenomena they are observing and are indivisible from the analysis has been shown by “quantum mechanics” and other sciences; the descriptivists do not understand this aspect; that there is no such thing as an observation free of bias (85). Wallace considers the descriptivists to be “pollsters”; the descriptivists are really observing and recording “human behaviors” and not certain “scientific phenomena”—human behaviors that are most of the time imbecile (89).

Issues of grammar and usage are related to ethics rather than science, declares Wallace (89). It is because the descriptivists include every last utterance of the native speakers in the English language; it is because the descriptivists equate “regularities,” in the

native speakers' manner of using the English language, with "norms," that they fail to see the language—the conventions of grammar and usage—to be a matter of ethics (and not science) (89).

A "norm" comes into being when a community agrees that something is the most favorable way of doing things (89). A community may discover that certain ways of using language are better than others for specific purposes; and if one of the purposes involves communicating—which food to eat and which to abstain from—then misplacing modifiers, for instance, can be an important, and even costly, violation of norm. A sentence by a tribesman with a misplaced modifier—"People who eat that kind of mushroom often get sick"—could confuse the recipient of the message (90). Does this statement mean: only if you frequently eat that kind of mushroom, you'll fall sick (90)? Or: you have a high probability of falling sick the very first time you eat that kind of mushroom (90)? Thus, a community that grows and consumes mushrooms has to ensure that they are not misplacing modifiers, and that it is expunged from English usage, states Wallace (90). In other words, given what language is used for in the community, the fact that certain numbers of tribesmen misplace modifiers to talk about the safety of the food does not make misplacing modifier a good thing (90). This is why Wallace draws an analogy between ethics and English usage: if, for example, a certain percentage of the population evades paying their taxes, scold and punish their kids, it does not mean that they think these acts are good ideas; the descriptivists, precisely, ride on this fallacious reasoning: if "Everybody Does It" then somehow it's all right; all right to say it (90n. 33). Wallace writes:

The whole point of establishing norms is to help us evaluate our actions (including utterances) according to what we as a community have decided our real interests and purposes are (90).

Wallace understands that it is very difficult for a community to come to an agreement on norms; but when the descriptivists assume all norms regarding usage to be "arbitrary" and easily expendable, you have the above misplaced modifier and mushroom-like confusion (90-1).

Thus, Wallace, in his usage essay, as a snoot prescriptivist, finds flaws in the methodology and arguments of the descriptivists. However, he distances himself from the "pop SNOOTs" (79n. 21): the columnists, the practitioners of "Popular Prescriptivism" (79). Wallace observes that pop prescriptivists are at times humorous, but much of what they write

appears to him to be old men carping about the English language getting sullied (79). Wallace finds, for example, John Simon's arguments in *Paradigms Lost* regarding Standard Black English (SBE) hidebound and offensive and facile. Regarding SBE, Simon writes:

As for 'I be,' 'you be,' 'he be,' etc., which should give us all the heebie-jeebies, these may indeed be comprehensible, but they go against all accepted classical and modern grammars and are the product not of a language with its roots in history but of ignorance of how a language works (79-80).

The above quote from Simon's book evidently carries a tone of plutocracy; the other pop American prescriptivists like Newman and Safire also write in a similar tone when writing about English usage—a tone they borrow from the hardcore British prescriptivists, Eric Partridge and H. W. Fowler, Wallace points out (80). Wallace, therefore, advertises himself as someone who does not write in a plutocratic tone regarding English usage, does not belong to the pop-snoot category.

But, though, he is not in the pop-snoot camp, the camp that despises SBE, Wallace is not "for" the use of the dialect in essays either. After reading the first couple of their essays at the beginning of the semester, Wallace lectures his black students, in a private conference, against using SBE. In the conference, Wallace tells his black students, at the cost of scaring and perplexing and offending them, that what they are here to study in the college is a "foreign dialect," and this dialect is known as "Standard Written English" (SWE); and the dialect the black students are using, in their essays in Wallace's English class, is SBE (108). And there are several differences between SWE and SBE (108). One of the differences is grammatical: double negatives are considered an error in SWE but not so in SBE (108). There is also stylistic difference between SBE and SWE: in SWE, states Wallace, subordinate clauses are usually used in the early parts of sentences, and these subordinates are set off by commas; and writing that doesn't adhere to this SWE comma rule is considered "choppy" (Wallace 108).

In his lecture, Wallace almost empathizes with his black students for being given low grades, by other prescriptivist professors in the college, for failing to comply with the rules of a language that is "foreign" to them—a fact that has been unknown to the black students, until Wallace acquaints them with the thought that they are "foreigners" in SWE (108). But Wallace, at the same time, gives his students injunction against using SBE in their essays (108).

And if the students want to argue in their essays, for instance, that being forced to write in SWE when one is fluent in SBE is “racist” and “unfair,” they still have to construct these arguments in pristine SWE for their prescriptive professors—prescriptivists in general—to pay attention to them (109). James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., and other successful African-Americans, know this, Wallace points out, and that is why their speeches and prose are in perfervid SWE (109).

The lessons about why it is essential to learn SWE, though, are difficult to convey to his black students because it is bluntly “elitist” (107). Wallace writes:

The real truth, of course, is that SWE is the dialect of the American elite. That it was invented, codified, and promulgated by Privileged WASP Males and is perpetuated as “Standard” by same. That it is the shibboleth of the Establishment, and that it is an instrument of political power and class division and racial discrimination and all manner of social inequity (107).

These issues are touchy to bring up in the English class because the one who is lecturing them is Wallace; and Wallace is, precisely, “a Privileged Wasp Male” and an emblem of the “Establishment,” which facts Wallace is inordinately conscious of (107). In his lecture, Wallace tells his black students that the white people have developed SWE, and they—the powerful white people in powerful offices—use SWE now, and, therefore, the dialect might as well be called, “Standard White English” (108-9). Wallace tells his black students that he is giving them the “straight truth” because he respects them; he tells them that if they want to succeed in American culture, they have to learn to use SWE (108-9).

By making the above unfiltered pro-SWE arguments to his black students, Wallace distances himself from what he refers to as the “dogmatic snoots”: the type of prescriptivist professors who fail to, or does not feel the need to give arguments about why students must choose SWE over SBE (or other dialects) whilst writing (107n. 60).

The dogmatic snoots consider SWE to be the only dialect in English; and, for them, any student failing to acknowledge this fact is ignorant and character-wise deficient (105). This is tantamount to a preacher delivering sermons, says Wallace, and for a teacher to hold such a preachy attitude is toxic: the teacher has to put in the hard rhetorical yards to make the audience (students) agree on the usefulness of learning SWE, and not presume this to be self-evident (105-6). And when the traditional prescriptivists—the dogmatic snoots—skip this step, take SWE’s superiority to be intrinsic and self-explanatory, take themselves to be no



less than a “prophet” of this dialect (107), you see “elitism” being practiced, feels Wallace (107n. 60).

Wallace indicates that he does not practice elitism in his English class; to his black students, he makes his pro-SWE arguments comprising elitism, explicitly and overtly and loudly; he tells them why SWE, despite teeming elitism, is a desirable dialect to learn the conventions of: Wallace strives to portray himself in the usage essay, therefore, as belonging to the snoot-but-not-dogmatic-snoot category (107n. 60). But when he is among peers, Wallace crosses into the descriptivist camp. Wallace has two native-English dialects: the SWE of his parents and his peers’ Rural Midwestern (RM) (99). With his peers, Wallace uses the nonstandard English; he uses: “He don’t” instead of “He doesn’t,” and “Where’s it at?” for “Where is it?” (99). He uses these constructions because he does not wish to be a pariah among his peers; and also because he considers these “RMisms” to be better than their SWE equivalents, despite being a snoot (99).

Wallace reckons that some of the traditional prescriptivist rules are “stupid,” and those who endorse them are “contemptible and dangerous” type of snoots (100). The traditional prescriptivists, for instance, give injunction against splitting infinitives (100). This stupidity of the prescriptivists, Wallace points out, is born out of a misreading of Latin—the language from which English borrows heavily (100). Since infinitives are only one word in Latin, you cannot split them; the earliest prescriptivists of English, in their enthusiasm to copy the Latin language, overlook this technical aspect, and decide against splitting English infinitives too (100). And the legacy of stupidity lives on through traditional prescriptivists—the contemptible and dangerous snoots. Again, Wallace attempts to portray himself as someone who does not belong to the dangerous-snoot category; again, Wallace is striving to advertise himself as the owner of opinions that are not one-dimensional.

## II

In the usage essay, Wallace displays a persona not unlike Anton Chekhov in ‘Gooseberries.’ Though Chekhov and Wallace write on disparate subjects, though ‘Gooseberries’ is a short story and Wallace’s text an essay, the structure of their arguments appears kindred: both the structures sidestep one-dimensionality.

In 'Gooseberries,' two friends, Ivan and Burkin, are out hunting on the plains of Russia, when Burkin reminds Ivan that Ivan is supposed to tell him a story (Chekhov 371). It starts to rain the moment Ivan is about to begin the narration (371). For shelter, they go to the farm of their friend, Alyohin; there the three swim in the river; of the three, Ivan appears to have the most fun swimming: he dives, floats, says repeatedly joyously, "By God! Lord, have mercy on me"; he savors the rain drops falling on his face, and is last to leave the water, and that too only when Burkin shouts at him to get out (374). Back in the warmth of the drawing room, Ivan, finally, begins narrating the story about his brother, Nikolay.

Hankering to own a property (with a gooseberry patch) in the countryside, Nikolay lives frugally; he marries a widow for her money and due to his frugality, she dies; after her death, he purchases a plot in the countryside. When Ivan visits Nikolay on his new estate, Ivan sees a man in a fervent state of happiness. On the day of Ivan's visit, the gooseberry bushes bear fruits for the first time; Nikolay looks at the plateful of berries, silently, for a minute with teary eyes (380). Then he pops a berry into his mouth, and glances at Ivan with an expression analogous to a kid who finally gets the toy he has been nagging his parents for a long time (380). Nikolay eats the berries rapaciously and says repeatedly: "How tasty! Ah, how delicious" (380)! The sight of his happy brother sickens Ivan. About his aversion to happiness, to happy ones, Ivan gives a speech to his friends:

Behind the door of every contented, happy man there ought to be someone standing with a little hammer and continually reminding him with a knock that there are unhappy people, that however happy he may be, life will sooner or later show him its claws, and trouble will come to him—illness, poverty, losses, and then no one will see or hear him, just as now he neither sees nor hears others (381).

But the man with the "little hammer" does not exist, complains Ivan; and the happy man—the man with few innocuous worries and much tranquility on his side—eats gooseberries (even sour and unripe ones like Nikolay) with relish, without a care for the unhappy lot (381).

The happy man is able to live happily because the unhappy man lets him; because the unhappy man chooses to carry his load, silently; because statistics, and not the unhappy man, wail, protest. The statistics cry out that X numbers of children are dead due to malnutrition this year; and that X numbers of people have been institutionalized this year; and that X numbers of people have been poisoned to death due to consumption of spurious liquor this year (381). (The numbers on the page as though scream out, like the figure in Edvard

Munch's *Scream*, with hands on its ears, enacting the angst, venting the pent-up unhappiness.) Ivan implores Burkin to work for the benefit of others, the unhappy mute people. Ivan says:

There is no happiness and there should be none, and if life has a meaning and a purpose, that meaning and purpose is not our happiness but something greater and more rational. Do good (382)!

After his speech on "happiness," all three retire for the night. Ivan dozes off the moment he hits the bed, forgetting to throw away the stinky burnt tobacco of his pipe that he keeps on the table; Burkin is unable to sleep though; he tries to figure out the source of the odious smell (384).

In *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain*, Saunders explicates seven Russian nineteenth-century short stories; and 'Gooseberries' is one of them. Apart from Chekhov, the book features stories of Leo Tolstoy, Ivan Turgenev, and Nikolai Gogol. Though the stories might come across as not being concerned with protestations of any sort, as not being politically hued at all, as just being everyday domestic situations, Saunders refers to them as "resistance literature" (Saunders Introduction).

These are obliquely political stories, which are written by "progressive reformers" in the climate of "censorship," written keeping in mind that the "slants" and accents of their words might put them behind bars, or banish them from the country, or line them up in front of the firing brigade (Introduction). These stories' inexplicit resistance, reckons Saunders, not only comes from the "radical idea" of considering every person to be worth paying attention to; but also comes from the equally radical idea that by observing a single person, you are able to find "the origins of every good and evil capability of the universe" (Introduction).

These Russian stories, Saunders observes, are preoccupied with difficult, non-cheery questions such as: How to live here? What do you have to achieve here? What do you have to value? What does truth mean? How can you recognize truth? How do you stay joyful despite knowing that the people you love are inevitably going to die? How can you live peacefully knowing that some people have more than sufficient and others have barely anything (Introduction)? And also Ivan's tacit question in his speech on happiness in *Gooseberries*: Since you know that there are unhappy people in the world, how can you be satisfied with your lot and yourself, how can you be happy?

Ivan feels an immense sadness at the sight of his brother, Nikolay, reveling in eating the gooseberries that have grown in his farm; the plateful of gooseberries doesn't let Nikolay sleep; he keeps taking trips to the plate, over and over, throughout the night, to eat one more berry, one more berry, one more berry (Chekhov 380). And one more berry. What Ivan does not tell his brother, he tells his friends: the happy man must have in his room someone who can keep hitting him with a hammer, to remind the happy man of the existence of unhappy people; and also that no matter how happy he may be now, life's vicissitudes are soon going to knock on his door (381). Ivan's final declaration to his friends, Burkin and Alyohin, is: "There is no happiness and there should be none..." (382).

Burkin and Alyohin find Ivan's story about his gooseberry-obsessed brother (and the accompanying speech on happiness) to be dull: Burkin and Alyohin, sitting in the warm drawing room, drinking tea and having jam, hanker for a more elegantly laced story about people and women, stories about the animate-looking ancestors staring down at them from the gilded frames (Saunders ch. 6). To Saunders, it is obvious why Burkin and Alyohin do not find the story interesting; it is because these two exemplify the kind of people that Ivan is talking about: the well-fed, the immaculately washed, the happy bourgeois who do not like their pleasure-seeking to be interrupted, who are chronically deaf to despairing, mood-altering narratives (ch. 6).

As a reader (unlike Burkin and Alyohin), you might support Ivan's thoughts on happiness at first, and travel with the moralist as if in his bike's sidecar, nodding in agreement with his arguments. But you are bound to reconsider your position vis-à-vis Ivan, the impressions that you form about him, after the second last paragraph of 'Gooseberries,' Saunders points out (ch. 6). The mind-turning paragraph tells you that Burkin is unable to sleep because Ivan—the holder of the view that the happy man must be hammered continually to remind him about the unhappy people, and that there is no such thing as happiness, and that life's objective is not happiness but serving others—because, the anti-happiness evangelist, Ivan's unclean pipe gives off a stink (ch. 6). Ivan is oblivious. Ivan smokes, derives pleasure, and forgets to clean the pipe before going to sleep, forgets about his lecture on doing good, being thoughtful of others (ch. 6).

Does Ivan's careless gesture (with the pipe) subtract from the truth of his lecture (ch. 6)? Is it still true? Suddenly, you are not so sure about Ivan; Ivan indulges in pleasure, happiness, but advises against happiness. Therefore, the question is: to indulge in happiness

or not? Saunders turns the page back to the episode of swimming in a river in the rain to answer this question.

Ivan comes out of the bathing-cabin and throws himself into the river; the wild strokes of his arms on water create waves and disturb the lilies afloat; he swims to the mid-point of the river and plunges with an aim to touch bottom; he does this repeatedly; he plunges and touches bottom; Ivan even swims across to casually talk with the peasants; and then he dives back in and floats on water so that the rain caresses his face (Chekhov 373-4). Only when Burkin shouts—“You’ve had enough!”—only then does Ivan emerge from the water (374).

Is Ivan for or against happiness? Saunders reckons that despite his anti-happiness lecture later in the story, Ivan still yearns for happiness; in fact, Ivan appears to yearn for it way more than Burkin and Alyohin in the swimming-in-a-river-in-the-rain situation (Saunders ch. 6). Does this reading of Ivan, in a state of euphoria, prove that he is for happiness? Does this mean that the previous reading, of Ivan being against happiness, now stands cancelled? Saunders provides the answer:

No. The two readings coexist, making a truth bigger than either would have alone. The story just got enlarged. It is, yes, still about the possible decadence of happiness, but it’s also now about how trivial it is to hold a one-dimensional opinion. Or how impossible it is (ch. 6).

Ivan despises happiness; when he looks at a joyful man, an element of feverish despair grips him; but he, simultaneously, finds happiness to be indispensable in the river (ch. 6). Ivan sidesteps one-dimensionality, in other words; the stinky pipe in the second-last paragraph changes your understanding of him, makes Ivan ambiguous: if the speech on happiness sounds, on first instance, to be an angry protest on behalf of the mute, the downtrodden (Saunders ch. 6)—“Look at life: the insolence and idleness of the strong” (Chekhov 381)—it now sounds merely an ill-tempered outburst (Saunders ch. 6). Ivan is not fond of the bourgeois (the strong) and their ways of living, but he is not fond of the oppressed (the weak) too (ch. 6): “The ignorance and the brutishness of the weak” (Chekhov 381).

Chekhov’s story, obviously, proceeds through a method of self-contradiction: a paragraph or two highlights certain aspects of a concept (for example, happiness), while another paragraph counters these aspects. Chekhov’s story, states Saunders, does not teach you “what to think” about the concept of happiness; rather it facilitates in thinking about the concept; the structure helps you to think (ch. 6). And how does this story’s structure think?

The structure thinks, says Saunders, in terms of “on the other hand” declarations: Ivan loathes happiness, happy people; on the other hand, he is rapturous while swimming in a river in the rain; Ivan’s gestures in the water are self-centered; on the other hand, Burkin’s constant tendencies to rein in Ivan (“You’ve had enough!”) are also irritating; Alyohin is living a frugal life in his farm; on the other hand, Alyohin blackens the water due to his excessive neglect of personal hygiene; it may be petty to spend a disproportionate amount of time obsessing over owning a gooseberry-filled farm like Nikolay; on the other hand, Nikolay is at least passionate about something, even if it is a fruit of a particular type; on the other, other hand Alyohin is not responsible for someone’s death (like Nikolay is) for practicing frugality (ch. 6).

### III

The structure of Wallace’s usage essay, similarly, thinks in terms of a series of “on the other hand” statements. Wallace creates a persona in the essay who keeps qualifying himself, and, thus, strives to sidestep one-dimensionality: Wallace declares himself to be a prescriptivist—a snoot (Wallace 71n. 8); on the other hand, he is not a dogmatic snoot (the kind who finds no need to explain to the students about why SWE is a desirable dialect to master) (105-6); Wallace criticizes the descriptivists for thinking of themselves as “scientists,” for thinking they are observing “scientific phenomena,” when they are merely observing “moronic” behaviors of human beings and tabulating it (89); on the other hand, he finds a number of traditional prescriptive rules to be “stupid,” like splitting infinitives, and those endorsing it “contemptible and dangerous” type of snoots (100); Wallace lashes out at Gove’s proclamations of language changing constantly and change being quite a normal thing (83); on the other hand, he acknowledges that conventions of usage and English itself change from time to time, and if it didn’t, you’d all still be communicating like Chaucer (75); Wallace sort of laments that students are being taught to write descriptively in school, to write abandoning “systematic grammar, usage, semantics, rhetoric, etymology” (81); on the other hand, he is not an admirer of the prescriptive columnists or pop snoots (who grumble about English language blunderers) (79); Wallace finds certain dismissals of SBE, facile and disturbing, like Simon’s comments in *Paradigms Lost* (79); on the other hand, he gives injunction to his students of color that they cannot use their native dialect—SBE—in their

essays (108); on the other, other hand Wallace uses nonstandard English of Rural Midwestern with his peers, not just to be accepted in the group, but also because he finds some of the “RMisms” to be superior than their SWE equivalents (99).

In the above list of contradictory “on the other hand” statements, does a latter reading (“Wallace actually, sometimes, has descriptivist inclinations”) override the earlier one at the beginning of Wallace’s essay (“Wallace is a prescriptivist, a snoot”)? The answer, following Saunders, is no. Both the “readings coexist, making a truth bigger than either would have alone”; the essay’s canvas just gets bigger (Saunders ch. 6). The essay is, of course, still about a language fanatic (a snoot, a prescriptivist), but it’s also now about how petty it is to have a one-dimensional attitude/opinion. Or how it is not possible.

Wallace declares in the essay that it is always tempting to slide into the “established dogmatic camp,” and to let your stance solidify around the stance of the camp and “become inflexible,” and to start thinking of the other camp as devilish or mad, and to begin expending disproportionate amount of energy/time trying to out-shout them (Wallace 72). Wallace submits that it is way easier to be on the side of the dogmatic than the democratic camp (72). By making his arguments on usage through the structure of “on the other hand” statements—which structural play might not be noticeable on first read because Wallace does not lay out the above self-contradictory parts, explicitly, one after the other—Wallace presents a flexible persona; a persona that makes you reconsider, again and again, your previous judgment on him.

‘Gooseberries,’ likewise, is structured with the aid of self-contradictory “on the other hand” declarations, reckons Saunders, because it wants you to refrain from reading on automatic pilot, and to stay attentive that the concept of happiness is not treated simplistically, and that the concept does not harden at any point and develop falsity (Saunders ch. 6). Chekhov’s story, therefore, keeps clarifying the concept, and, in the process, keeps defeating your attempts, over and over, to “judge” it (ch. 6). You want to decide, once and for all, whether the story is “for” or “against” the concept of happiness, so that you too can be for or against it; but the story thwarts your instinctive move of gaining a firm foothold; the story desires to defer judgment, endlessly (ch. 6). Saunders writes:

It’s hard to be alive. The anxiety of living makes us want to judge, be sure, have a stance, definitively decide. Having a fixed, rigid system of belief can be a great relief (ch. 6).

You can decide not to swim in the rain in the river, or not to swim at all and to sell off your swimming trunks/suits; you can choose to shrug your shoulders and look away in the presence of beauty; you can aim to live as a fervent advocate of “anti-happiness,” and drive away the constant uncertainty (ch. 6). Or you can, on the contrary, live as a fervent advocate of “pro-happiness,” deciding that every step of yours must be in the service of some form of enjoyment, celebration, unabashed merrymaking, and, thus, extricate yourself from the constant confusion (ch. 6).

Every viewpoint, reckons Saunders, is problematic; if you fanatically believe in it, the point of view turns erroneous (ch. 6). Saunders is not trying to dissuade readers from taking a stance regarding something; rather he is trying to convey that no stance is tenable for too long (ch. 6). Saunders writes:

We’re perpetually slipping out of absolute virtue and failing to notice, blinded by our desire to *settle in*—to finally stop fretting about things and relax forever and just be correct; to find an agenda and stick with it (ch. 6).

Saunders mentions that he likes reading Chekhov because the author appears to be totally sans “agenda”; the Russian author is curious about everything, but he is not zealously attached to any belief system (ch. 6). In Wallace’s essay, to begin with, you find a persona zealously attached to a particular belief system of English usage; he is a prescriptivist, a snoot, Wallace openly declares; but then he turns a traitor.

In this essay I have shown how reading Wallace’s usage essay through the structure of “on the other hand” that Chekhov employs in ‘Gooseberries,’ one discovers a persona who sidesteps one-dimensionality, and who does not let his position solidify regarding contemporary American usage, and in the process prevents it from becoming false or dogmatic.



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