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A Community of Characters – the Narrative Self in the Films of Wes Anderson

Abstract

This essay is a reflection upon the work of writer-director Wes Anderson. Anderson's first three films, *Bottle Rocket*, *Rushmore*, and *The Royal Tenenbaums*, contain common themes which I assert provide fertile ground for theological reflection. This discussion will focus on two aspects of the characters that populate Anderson's mythopoetic world(s) – firstly, the construction of the narrative self; and secondly, the vitality of community which fundamentally precedes authentic personhood.

In his 1999 article "If I Can Dream: The Everlasting Boyhoods of Wes Anderson," Mark Olsen dubbed the young filmmaker the beginning of a movement he called "the New Sincerity." Olsen hints at the possible criteria for the New Sincerity when he notes that:

Unlike many writer-directors of his generation, Wes Anderson does not view his characters from some distant Olympus of irony. He stands beside them – or rather, just behind them – cheering them on as they chase their miniaturist renditions of the American Dream. The characters who inhabit Anderson's cinematic universe, a Middle West of the Imagination, embody both sides of William Carlos Williams' famous edict that the pure products of America go crazy, being, for the most part, both purely American and slightly crazy. Though some might label his people losers, or even invoke that generational curse, slackers, they are in fact ambitious.¹

The New Sincerity is an apt phrase, and while it never caught on as a new movement in film, other recent titles come to mind: P. T. Anderson's (no known relation to Wes, by the way) *Punch-Drunk Love*, Todd Luiso's *Love Liza*, Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation*, Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (by screenwriter Charlie Kaufman), Zach Braff's stunning debut *Garden State*, and Jared Hess' *Napoleon Dynamite* – quirky films that have reminded audiences of their own humanity, of the love and pain and confusion and ecstasy that one feels in the most outlandish and the most commonplace of circumstances. No matter how ridiculous their actions, characters in these films are treated not with pity or irony but with respect and admiration. As Olsen points out, Wes Anderson "is immune to the urge to be down,"² and the same could be said for the others

mentioned above, who eschew the kind of dark, Tarantino-derived edge that seems to proliferate amongst many young filmmakers.

I would like to explore the value of Wes Anderson's films for theological reflection by focusing on the characters that populate his mythopoetic worlds in *Bottle Rocket*, *Rushmore* and *The Royal Tenenbaums*. I will attend to two qualities common to the central characters across Anderson's first three films.³ The first of these qualities I call the ability to imaginatively construct, or reconstruct, their own reality. The second might be described as the characters' recognition that authentic being or personhood is found only in communion, which is to say in radical inter-relationship with others through participation in a particular community of character(s). Once we have examined these characteristics of Anderson's films, I will conclude by suggesting why Anderson's unique vision, as embodied by his uncanny characters, might teach us something important about what it means, in the first instance, to be, and what it means to be in communion.

Collaboration – Wes and Owen (or, where two or more are gathered...)

I feel as though I should begin by correcting myself, for it is slightly misleading to describe these three films as "Anderson's." More accurately, they are collaborations between writer-director Anderson and writer-actor Owen Wilson, who has since become widely known for his roles in films such as *Zoolander* and

Armageddon. Anderson and Wilson became acquainted in 1989, where the two then-college-sophomores were enrolled in a lack-lustre playwriting course at the University of Texas at Austin⁴ (where Anderson went on to earn a degree in Philosophy.⁵) Both were compulsive cinephiles and storytellers, and soon a creative partnership formed which led to the screenplay for *Bottle Rocket*. *Bottle Rocket* and its follow-up *Rushmore* were both filmed in their native Texas, and both projects involved many friends and relatives from "back home" as cast and crew, including Owen Wilson's two brothers, Luke and Andrew. In a sense, the community of characters within the films mirrors the external community collaborating to produce the films. In this way Anderson and Wilson have much in common with their characters, finding within this creative community the fulfillment and identification that their characters seek within their own fictional communities.

In his foreword to the screenplay for *Rushmore*, producer James L. Brooks notes that "Wes and Owen are Texans and so their endless fascination with the ol' game of life...is very often concealed behind tight-lipped rhetoric with a distinct sense of the absurd, the joke of it all, which they exhibit whenever there is danger in the air."⁶ The danger is the cutthroat man's-world of Hollywood, and Anderson and Wilson are boys brimming with enthusiasm running headlong into it. They are boys with stories to tell, and the stories are their own. They might be dreamers, like

their slightly-off-kilter but always empathetic protagonists, but as *Bottle Rocket*'s Mr. Henry reminds us, "The world needs dreamers."

Imagination – (Re)constructing Reality

Anderson and Wilson's central characters have in common the preference for an idealized fantasy in contrast to the stark realities of their lives. They find tiny windows – perhaps they are colorful, stained-glass windows⁷ – which provide access to another reality where they become the persons they want and believe they were born to be. If these windows fail to appear on their own, they create them by embarking on epic journeys, by playing out their dramas on the stage or the page, by immersing themselves fully in whatever endeavor or adventure they might find to lend meaning to their lives. These characters all have the startling ability to view their lives according to their own desires, seeing things the way they want to see them, which is not always consistent with reality as observed from the outside. Even Anderson has noted that his characters "inhabit a world about five degrees removed from reality."⁸ This is nowhere better portrayed than by the character of Max Fischer in *Rushmore* (played by then-newcomer Jason Schwartzman).

Rushmore derives its title from the name of the prestigious all-boys prep-school where Max is a student. But Max is not a typical Rushmore student. First of all, he comes from a poor family – his mother died when he was young, leaving

Max's father, an aging barber, to provide for his only-child. As a child, Max wrote a play that won him a scholarship to attend Rushmore, and since that time he has thrown himself completely into the life of a Rushmore Yankee. Well, not completely – Max is also atypical in that he is a terrible student. Dr. Guggenheim, the school's headmaster, even notes that Max is 'one of the worst students we've got.'⁹ Facing expulsion due to consistently failing grades, Max fears he will be banished to the bland wasteland of public schools, a fate worse than death. Despite this, Max continues to invest himself in his passion, which is Rushmore itself – not the academic life the school seeks to impose upon him, but rather the creative and social opportunities the school affords him.

Max is known for founding or heading-up unusual clubs – everything from the Calligraphy Club to the Rushmore Beekeepers – and for writing and staging ridiculously elaborate plays. (It is worth noting that *Rushmore* was filmed at Anderson's alma mater, where a young Wes Anderson staged plays of his own, such as a re-enactment of the battle of the Alamo). Max is a dreamer, as is demonstrated by the film's opening scene, wherein Max dozes off during chapel and dreams of becoming the class hero by solving an impossibly difficult math equation – his classmates sing his praises and parade him around on their shoulders. Max's endearing imagination is further demonstrated as the plot of the film unfolds. Max becomes enamored with Ms. Cross, a young and recently-widowed first grade

teacher at Rushmore. The impossibility of this romance ever coming to fruition does not dissuade Max in the least, and he attempts to woo her by helping feed her fish, by creating a petition to save the school's Latin program (which, to Ms. Cross' dismay, is being phased out to make room for Japanese), and by concocting an insane scheme to build a marine aquarium in her honor on Rushmore's campus. His unlikely partner in this endeavor is Herman Blume, a wealthy local businessman and the father of two of Max's classmates. Mr. Blume (an impeccable performance by Bill Murray) immediately recognizes in Max something special, perhaps the innocent exuberance that Blume himself has lost on his way to wealth and power, a lust for life destroyed by workaholism and a failing family. Max reciprocates Blume's admiration, and further sees in him the financial resources necessary to make his plans a reality and win the affections of Ms. Cross. However, Blume also becomes infatuated with the attractive young teacher, which leads to an absurd rivalry between Max and Blume wherein both suitors lose on love but find friendship.

Other Anderson characters display this quality as well. In *Bottle Rocket*, Dignan possesses every bit of the dignity that his name belies, despite his constantly half-cocked plans. Dignan, like Max, is a dreamer, a visionary of hyper-active proportions. Through his eyes of hopeful imagination,¹⁰ the positive is heightened and the negative is minimized – mild successes become wild victories, while dismal

failures are accepted as necessary steps toward future triumphs. Best-friend Anthony allows himself to be roped into Dignan's misadventures, beginning with Anthony's "breaking out" of a voluntary mental hospital and the proceeding on to robbing a bookshop, going "on the run from Johnny Law," and their final caper, a doomed-from-the-beginning safe-cracking heist that lands Dignan in prison. Yet, despite all this, Dignan has no hard feelings and retains his boyish hopeful imagination in the face of increasingly bleak circumstances. Even when Anthony and Bob visit him in prison, Dignan half-jokingly, half-seriously contrives his out prison-break, nearly convincing his friends to comply with his scheme. His parting words to Anthony, and the final words of the film are: "Isn't it funny how you used to be in the nuthouse and now I'm in jail?"

Some might criticize these characters' insistence upon existing more within the realm of imagination than reality. But as the poet Wallace Stevens has noted, "The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. This exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly."¹¹ The fictions these characters construct to make sense of their lives become for them what we might think of as true fictions – a phrase Douglas Templeton coins and elucidates when he questions: "Can the poet understand his life, if he does not fictionalize it? Can the theologian theologize, if he cannot play truly, not only among the false, but with it?"¹² These characters

creatively re-write their stories, or even re-stage their dramas as in the case of Max Fischer and Margot Tenenbaum. Their memory of the past and their hope for the future is re-aligned in such a way as to sculpt a narrative self-possessed with the interpretive strategies necessary to press on. Rather than pining after a coming comfort in which all will be made right – as Christians oftentimes long for Heaven, or, as the cliché goes, become so heaven-minded that they're no earthly good – Anderson and Wilson's characters work with an enviable fervor and diligence to construct h(e)avens on earth, here and now, even amidst tragedy and failure. Nietzsche once wrote, "I tell my life to myself,"¹³ and Anderson's characters possess a similar re-narrational ability that I assert is consistent with the constitutive nature of baptism, wherein the believer is liberated from the old self and given new being in Christ, and the Eucharist, which becomes for communicants a window of access to a coming reality, the Kingdom of God, which is both here and not yet here.¹⁴ Similarly, Anderson's characters discover (or are simply gifted with) their own sacramental methodologies whereby they take off the old and put on the new. This fosters the construction of a new, redeemed self, a self that remains constantly open to revision.

Communion – Radical Relationality

Anderson's characters are always inextricably bound to a community from which they glean their true identity. Jewish philosopher Martin Buber points out that

"Individuality neither shares in nor obtains any reality,"¹⁵ and Greek Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas echoes this when he writes, "A human being left to himself cannot be a person."¹⁶ Anderson's films are ensemble pieces, focusing not exclusively on a single protagonist struggling against a single antagonist, but rather on a cast of characters who find the identification and meaning they seek in communion with others. Furthermore, all of Anderson's central characters always seem to experience a major turning point like that which St. Augustine describes when he confesses, "Thou, O Lord ... didst turn me round towards myself."¹⁷ I do not mean to suggest that this turn toward the Self is a sort of reality check that corrects their skewed vision, but rather that by whatever prompting events, Anderson's characters undergo a turn toward the Self in which they realize their interdependence upon other characters – their need for communion – and discover the Self in communion with the Other.

As previously mentioned, Max identifies himself with Rushmore, and before his obsession with Ms. Cross ruins his life, there is seemingly nothing more important to Max than his school. In their second meeting, Mr. Blume says: "What's the secret Max? ... You seem like you've got it all figured out." Max responds: "I just think you've got to find something you love, and then do it for the rest of your life. For me it's going to Rushmore." It is ultimately his pursuit of Ms. Cross' affections that leads to Max's academic failure and his exile to public school. Now

stripped of the identification he finds in being a Rushmore Yankee, Max is forced to recreate the life he had a Rushmore at his new school, although he finds it much more difficult to fit in. By the end of the film, however, Max succeeds in finding his place within his new community, and retains his distinctive identity – his creativity and imagination.

Through their common adolescent love for Ms. Cross, Max and Mr. Blume discover their own need for mutually admiring friendship, which they find in each other across their generation gap. By seeing the Self in the Other, Blume sees in Max the romantic, energetic spirit that he wishes to recover, just as Max sees in Blume both the powerful, well-respected man he hopes to become and the kind of desperate emptiness that he would hope to avoid. In this way, Max helps Blume "bloom" into becoming more the type of person he would like to be, and Blume inspires Max to do everything he does to the "max," to live by the ethos he adopts from a quote by Jacques Cousteau: "When one person, for whatever reason, has a chance to lead an exceptional life, he has no right to keep it to himself."¹⁸ By positive reinforcement as well as by negative example, Blume teaches Max to never give up. Their relationship comes full circle – their friendship blossoms, then their rivalry drives them apart, but ultimately they are brought back together. Ms. Cross is the figure that might represent the "living Centre" that Buber says effectively forms community¹⁹ – she is the force that attracts, briefly repels, and again attracts

them, the "cross" marking the site where they meet in a strange coincidence of opposites, where their differences merge and are crossed-out.²⁰

Dignan also recognizes the need for community and works to create his own when necessary. Working together as a team, Dignan, Anthony and Bob make a go at a life of crime, confirming themselves once and for all as the misfits they feel they are destined to be. Perhaps Dignan realizes more than the others how dependent he is upon his inclusion in such a community for his own identity. His former job as a landscaper for the Lawn Wranglers (a front for thief Mr. Henry's criminal operation) was the best job he ever had, Dignan says: "working my way up, meeting people, listening to stories."²¹ After being fired, Dignan must create his own community, a team of his own, including Bob, their rich-boy friend, and Anthony, who complies simply out of his love for his friend. After uncomfortably witnessing Bob's bullying brother mock Dignan, who confesses, "I'm not always as confident as I look," Anthony knows that the only way to cheer up his friend is to give in to his plan. "I'm in," Anthony tells Dignan, "[on] three conditions: First, you mastermind the plan. Second, Bob's on the team. And third, you've gotta get me one of those [bright-yellow] jumpsuits," which have been the source of some scorn for Dignan. As when Dignan tells him, "You're doing the right thing, Anthony," he replies resignedly, "Yeah, I know I am," this scene well demonstrates Anthony's "being-for" Dignan. Anthony is caught between two competing forces: on one

hand, his family, but on the other hand, he has Dignan himself, who vitally depends on Anthony's companionship for his very well-being. Anthony's family wishes he would grow up and stop hanging out with Dignan, but Dignan needs him. As indicated when Grace says, "I do like Dignan...but he's a liar," Anthony's family fails to understand why he is willing to go to such great lengths for his friend. (Indeed, it may have been the stress of being-for Dignan that sent the "exhausted" Anthony to the voluntary mental hospital in the first place.)

For the Tenenbaum family – even for neighbor kid Eli Cash (played again by Owen Wilson) – identity is sought in simply being a member of this family of mildly celebrated, if self-proclaimed, geniuses. Adopted daughter Margot (Gwyneth Paltrow), despite winning playwriting awards as a child, endlessly struggles to overcome the second-class citizenship of not being blood-related. Richie (Luke Wilson) is a former professional tennis player whose failed career could be blamed on his unrequited love for his adopted sister Margot. Chas (Ben Stiller) has grown increasingly neurotic following the tragic death of his wife, and risks becoming the same failure of a father that he had. And like an exaggerated Mr. Blume, Royal Tenenbaum (Gene Hackman) has blown it in every way possible: with his wife, his kids, and his career as a lawyer. When he hears that his still-wife Etheline might wish to marry someone else after decades of separation, it is first jealousy but later sincerity that drives him to win back the affection of his family.

In a poignant scene near the end of the film, Richie enlists his father, Royal, to help him stage an intervention for his childhood friend Eli, who as grown up (but not really) to be a successful but drug-addled novelist. Eli confesses to his friend, "I always wanted to be a Tenenbaum, you know?" Richie nods. Eli looks to Royal (the patriarch). Royal nods and says quietly: "Me, too. Me, too."²²

This relationality, while implicit in Anderson's films, should be explicit in the Christian community wherein the Eucharist functions as a central and constitutive action of authentic human relatedness. In *Being as Communion*, John Zizioulas constructs an ontology in which individuality is overcome and authentic personhood is consummated only in communion with the communal, triune God through the community called the Church, which participates in the life of the Trinity as the body of the Son, Jesus Christ. Thus considered, it is noteworthy that the relational dramas of Anderson's first two films, *Bottle Rocket* and *Rushmore*, centre on a trinity of characters who discover meaning and being in communion. According to Zizioulas, "the being of God could only be known through personal relationships and personal love. Being means life, and life means communion,"²³ and furthermore, "Being depends on love."²⁴ It is his love for Dignan that drives Anthony to participate in such ridiculous criminal schemes. It is love and learning to discern true love from false that enables Max and Mr. Blume to truly see their Self in the Other. And it is love in its many forms – romantic, platonic, familial –

that eventually reunites the Tenenbaum family around their patriarch's gravesite, which imaginatively reads: Royal O'Reilly Tenenbaum – died tragically rescuing his family from the wreckage of a destroyed sinking battleship.²⁵ It is apparent that, to quote Zizioulas, "outside the communion of love the person loses its uniqueness and becomes...a "thing" without absolute "identity" and "name," without a face."²⁶ Or in Buber's words: "I become through my relation to the Thou...[for] All real living is meeting."²⁷ In this way, being is actually becoming, for it is a participatory process of discovering the Self in the Other and the One in the Many that leads out of isolated individuality and into personhood.

Conclusion – the gospel according to Wes Anderson

And this is the lesson about what it means to truly be, and what it means to be in communion, that we might learn from Anderson's wacky characters. In the first chapter of *A Community of Character*, Christian ethicist Stanley Hauerwas writes these words:

Adventure requires courage to keep us faithful to the struggle, since by its very nature adventure means that the future is always in doubt. And just to the extent that the future is in doubt, hope is required, as there can be no adventure if we despair of our goal. Such hope does not necessarily take the form of excessive confidence; rather it involves the simple willingness to take the next step.²⁸

According to Hauerwas, these are qualities of character – character-istics – that define, or should define, the faith community: a sense of adventure, the desire to

live a life less ordinary, faith for today and tomorrow, courage that overcomes despair – not bravado, but simply putting one foot in front of the next, pressing on toward the prize, which is never material but is simply being itself... belonging... belonging to something bigger, something beyond ourselves. These are the qualities that Anderson and Wilson's characters possess that endear them to us, and that qualify them as heroes – they are "faithful to the struggle" and worthy of the sincere respect and admiration they receive from their director and writers.

¹ Mark Olsen. "If I Can Dream: The Everlasting Boyhoods of Wes Anderson." *Film Comment*, 35/1 (January/February 1999).

² Ibid.

³ For present purposes, I have not considered Wes Anderson's most recent film, *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*, the theatrical release of which occurred between the writing and submission of this essay (USA release: December 2004). Although the themes of personhood and community discussed herein do surface, *The Life Aquatic* is Anderson's first screenplay which is not a collaboration with Owen Wilson (although he does appear as a major character in the film) and as such represents a departure in Anderson's oeuvre. For now, I have chosen to leave Anderson's fourth film to be considered in another essay

⁴ Pamela Colloff. "The New Kids: Wes Anderson and Owen Wilson." *Texas Monthly*, 26/5. May, 1998.

⁵ Interview with Wes Anderson (Online source). See <http://www.angelfire.com/ga/dogday/anderson.html>

⁶ Wes Anderson and Owen Wilson. *Rushmore* (Foreword by James L. Brooks) . London: Faber and Faber, 1999. p. vii.

⁷ The stained-glass window metaphor is apt here, for while the lives (and in many cases psyches) of Anderson and Wilson's characters appear fragmentary and even shattered from one perspective, from the proper vantage point (which the characters themselves always seem to find), the shards of glass compose a beautiful image through which the light of naïveté and innocence shines. It is the sort of brokenness that, in liturgical language, proceeds after the sacramental host has been taken

and blessed – then broken that it might be given (See Dom Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*. London: Dacre Press/Adam & Charles Black, 1945).

⁸ Marina Isola. “Interview with Wes Anderson and Owen Wilson.” 1996 (Online Source). See http://www.indexmagazine.com/interviews/wes_owen_anderson.shtml

⁹ Anderson and Wilson, *Rushmore*. p. 8.

¹⁰ I wish to acknowledge that I have borrowed *hopeful imagination* from Walter Brueggemann’s work which bears this phrase as its title. This aside, I have not drawn on his work for the purposes of this essay.

¹¹ Wallace Stevens. *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*. Quoted in Mark C. Taylor, *Hiding*. Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 1997. p. 31.

¹² Douglas Templeton. *The New Testament as True Fiction*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999. p. 209. Elsewhere Templeton writes: “Fiction, while it does not state, nevertheless embodies truth....Fiction, the term “fiction”, is wider than fact, because it can include fact” (p. 29). Further, “Literature differs from history as fiction differs from fact....History and literature are equally modes of dealing with, of finding language for, *reality*” (p. 305).

¹³ Friedrich Nietzsche. *Ecce Homo*. See Walter Kaufman’s *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche*. New York: Modern Library, 2000. p. 677.

¹⁴ See William H. Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas. *Lord, Teach Us*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1996. p. 57.

¹⁵ Martin Buber. *I and Thou*. New York: Scribner, 1958. p. 64.

¹⁶ John D. Zizioulas. *Being as Communion*. Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985. p. 107.

¹⁷ Augustine. *Confessions* (translated by R. S. Pine-Coffin). Middlesex: Penguin, 1961. § 8.7. p. 169.

¹⁸ Anderson and Wilson. *Rushmore*. p. 12.

¹⁹ Buber, op. cit. p. 45.

²⁰ The coincidence of opposites or coincidentia oppositorum, where “all contradictions meet,” is attributed to Nicholas of Cusa from his work *De Docta Ignorantia*. See E. A. Livingstone, ed., *Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Oxford and New York: Oxford, 1996. p. 358.

²¹ Wes Anderson and Owen Wilson. *Bottle Rocket*. (To date this script remains unpublished, but is available on-line at www.littlebanana.com.)

²² es Anderson and Owen Wilson. *The Royal Tenenbaums*. London: Faber and Faber, 2001. p. 128.

²³ izioulas, op. cit. p. 16.

²⁴ Ibid. p. 97.

²⁵ Anderson and Wilson. *The Royal Tenenbaums*. p. 150.

²⁶ Zizioulas, op cit. p. 49.

²⁷ Buber, op. cit. p. 11.

²⁸ Stanley Hauerwas. *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic*. Notre Dame and London: Notre Dame UP, 1981. p. 13.