

Interview with **Adam Ehrlich Sachs**, by *What's Therapy?*

*In your interview/conversation with Michael Hofmann in the Los Angeles Review of Books, you mention how after your experience in the sciences, your interest in fiction came from a realization of the value of 'more delusion, not less' which resonated for me as I was reading *The Organs of Sense*. It makes me think of Leibniz if he had actually learned a lesson from this experience with the astronomer, since the astronomer with his broken telescope and illusions still perceives the magical phenomena of the universe better than Leibniz with his 'sanguine rationalism.' Do you think most people stand to gain from building an understanding of the limits of rationality, and the purposes of illusion? And how do you manage to stay in the sweet spot of enough delusion but not too much?*

Delusion's probably more useful in some pursuits than others. I would rather my doctor not be deluded at all, for example. And there are probably plenty of people whose problem is not believing in reason enough, rather than believing in it too much. In both cases what's usually needed is some humility about what we think we know, rather than more delusion. Making art seems like a special case where delusion is important for outrunning your critical faculty's impulse to throw away whatever you're working on. Even though usually the critical faculty is correct and it actually should be thrown away (and in my case the critic usually wins, and I do throw it away.) So delusion without the counterpart of self-hatred, while a pleasant way to live, is not usually a recipe for my favorite art. That way lie the Beats and Surrealists. Whereas, like, Beckett had to struggle -- logically, critically, rationally -- for his delusions, which as a result have weight to them. I guess what I really admire is the painstakingly manufactured delusions of rigorous, reasonable people.

In an interview with Andrew Martin for FSG you mention having had personal experiences with solipsism, it sounded like in times of high stress, during Freshmen year of high school as well as before your general exams during your Ph.D. I'm wondering what helped you get out of that state, whether it's objectively better to be out of that state, and what it's like exploring this in fiction after having had what sounds like an unpleasant or disturbing experience with this mind state first hand.

The frightening thing about those states of mind was that it was clear to me while I was in them that there was no way to "think" my way out of them. A solipsistic view of the world is perfectly coherent and self-consistent, even if it's perfectly insane. It

can't be touched by any sort of counterargument. Even Wittgenstein's private language argument, insofar as I understand it, which is probably not at all, bounces right off it, especially if you happen to be in it. (I hate that "solipsism" is so often used as a pejorative, like it's just an extreme case of selfishness which a person could choose to snap out of if they were just a little more empathetic or something. That has nothing to do with solipsism.) Anyway, it's definitely better not to be in that state of mind, but I'm not sure how I got out of it; I think maybe the outside stress went away, I took the test or whatever, and probably started socializing again, and it just gradually lost its grip on me. This is the "Hume subduing his philosophical terrors by going to play backgammon with his friends" technique, and it's the only one I know of. As for writing about it . . . Well, for one thing, it's fraudulent at every moment, since it's hard to imagine anyone who is truly solipsistic bothering to write down a word. What would be the point? You're always at some distance from whatever mood you're trying to write about, but if you're writing about solipsism you're sealed off from it completely. Probably the most you can do is describe what it looks like from the outside, and that lends itself to comedy, because from the perspective of another person it is clear, by definition, that the thing the first person is so fervently convinced of is simply not true. A person in a solipsistic condition, while very sad, is also very funny. (Though possibly not to a therapist?)

The solipsism of Heinrich and the astronomer are explicitly quite similar, as the astronomer comes to the same conclusion about sameness. And while the solipsism Heinrich and the astronomer experience has fatal consequences for them, it also seems quite similar to the solipsism Leibniz experiences when he's asking himself over and over, 'How can I get in this head? How can I get in this head?' Do you see their respective experiences of solipsism as similar, on a spectrum, or different in some significant way? Why is such insanity fleeting for Leibniz but not for Heinrich and the astronomer? Is it because his head naturally bobs up to the surface?

I'm not sure why, but yeah, probably a natural disposition. So the going-off-to-play-backgammon method might only work for those who are already disposed to snap out of it at some point. (Like, Hume, when not stricken by doubts, seems to have been a pretty cheerful, sociable person.) I'm not sure if I was intentionally arranging these characters along a spectrum of solipsistic tendencies, but that make sense to me in retrospect. Because I remember the worst fear of the solipsistic state of mind being: What if I never snap out of this? If not for that it might've been an interesting experience. I don't do hallucinogens, but I can imagine it's the same thing there -- if you know it'll wear off, you can enjoy the weird feeling, but if you think it might last

forever there's probably nothing more terrifying. And probably the last person you want to meet if you're wondering when your bad trip will end is someone whose bad trip has lasted for fifty years.

I understand you've enjoyed Kafka's work and I'd love to hear whether you read his lengthy letter to his father, given your experience writing about father-son relationships. Would you say his letter to his father showed where he directed his own 'Judaic looking-compulsion'? (I'm Jewish and don't mean this offensively of course.) Have you found his letter inspiring in your own exploration of the subject?

Yes, though the last time I read the letter was probably five or six years ago, so I'm flying slightly blind here. But I remember coming out of that last reading of it sort of strangely sympathetic to Hermann and not so sympathetic to Franz. They just seem like two very different creatures, and it seems unfair to berate the brusque, business-like creature for not appreciating the virtues of the sniveling, sensitive, neurotic creature. And I say this as a sniveling, sensitive, neurotic creature. In Kafka's greatest father-son stuff (e.g., *The Metamorphosis*) he gets some comic distance from not only the father character but the son character also. Whereas in the letter (perhaps because it was apparently genuinely intended as a letter?), he gets hardly any distance from himself. Which makes it still funny, actually, but in a different and less intentional way. And which gives it the drama of the unreliable narrator: Is Hermann genuinely frighteningly powerful, or is Franz so oversensitive that no father figure, no matter what he's like, would stand a chance? Hermann may well have been a brute but you can't help but feel for this inarticulate dry-goods merchant living with this alien son constantly scribbling about him in the other room. Anyway, it's been a while since I read it and this is all probably unfair. I'm sure both of them would have been impossible to live with.

Who would you say is the most reasonable person in the book? Who's the most sane? Are these the same? Is it Leibniz? Is it Gottfried? The Court Chamberlain? The Benedictine monk who says, 'Think, my child, of eternity' when the astronomer's cursing them out?

I'm not sure I think of the characters as separate people. They're probably not deep enough for that. I want a book as a whole to be as deep as a human head, but its constituent parts -- like the constituent parts of the human head -- are not heads themselves, just tissue and gunk.