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Kontraparadigmatická  
komplementarita, metamodernismus  
románu *Infinite Jest* od Davida Fostera  
Wallace

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

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Contraparadigmatic Complementarity,  
Metamodernism of David Foster  
*Wallace's Infinite Jest*

DIPLOMA THESIS

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## **Abstrakt**

Diplomová práce předkládá výklad úpadku budoucí Americké společnosti v románu *Infinite Jest*. Příčina předvídaného zhoršení lidstva je ztotožněna s duševní potřebou člověka odvrátit se od tlaků vnějšího světa vytvářením množících se úrovní jazykového obsahu v lidské mysli. Tento proces odvrácení v posledku vede k osobnímu solipsismu, společenské neupřímnosti, a kolektivnímu utrpení. Textová analýza, která odhaluje souvislost mezi víceúrovňovostí a vícerovinností, je rozdělena podle své zaměřenosti na subjektivní, intersubjektivní, a objektivní roviny reality uvnitř textu a mimo něj.

*Klíčová slova:* David Foster Wallace, selhání, víceúrovňovost, vícerovinnost, psychologické odvrácení, solipsismus, neupřímnost, utrpení

## **Abstract**

The thesis offers an interpretation of the decline of future American society in the novel *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace. The cause of the envisioned degradation of humanity is identified with the psychological desire to distance one's self from the pressures of the external world by creating proliferating levels of linguistic content in one's mind. This distancing process ultimately leads to personal solipsism, social insincerity, and collective suffering. The textual analysis, which establishes a connection between multileveledness and multiplanarity, is divided by its consideration of the subjective, intersubjective, and objective planes of reality within the text and outside of it.

*Keywords:* David Foster Wallace, failure, multileveledness, multiplanarity, psychological distancing, solipsism, insincerity, suffering

**Prohlášení**

Prohlašuji, že jsem závěrečnou práci vypracoval(a) samostatně. Veškerou literaturu a další zdroje, z nichž jsem při zpracování čerpal(a), uvádím v seznamu použité literatury a zdrojů.

V Olomouci dne .....

.....  
Bc. Michal Tarhovský

### **Poděkování**

Rád bych poděkal vedoucímu této práce Prof. PhDr. Michalu Peprníkovi, Dr. za jeho zpětnou vazbu a podnětné rady.

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## Introduction

One of the great American novels, *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace, has been venerated for its technical ingenuity, psychological perspicacity, and sheer scope. First published in 1996 to critical acclaim, the novel envisaged a USA of the future, whose citizens seem to have lost the capacity to feel anything but dead inside. Bringing together overloaded students of a tennis academy, recovering addicts of a halfway house and wheelchair-bound members of an insurgent terrorist cell, was baffling enough to suggest it could just be a product of a genius. To many, reading the book was challenging, unsettling, and spiritually profound.

Wallace wrote the novel as a way out of the fog of the then-popular overly self-conscious storytelling he viewed as destructive. Incorporating the formal properties and literary strategies of the postmodern texts he wanted to comment on, however, made the text exceptionally complex and, as a consequence, unfriendly to those oblivious of this context. In my estimation, much of the way *Infinite Jest* has been read ever since, has been influenced by the reductive tendency to overly focus on the contents of its story, as opposed to its ambition to renegotiate the boundaries of storytelling itself.

For this reason, the present thesis seeks to redefine the perception of the novel by treating it as a distinctly post-postmodern text. The central argument identifies the main goal of the novel as a simultaneous representation of contradictory paradigms among different realities. The extreme interconnectedness of the paradigms and realities is what conveys their complementarity. It is the coexistence of logically incompatible, but ontologically inseparable planes/layers of reality that I call contraparadigmatic complementarity.

Additionally, the analysis examines two processes that characterize the behavior of the novel's personae. The 'distancing process' refers to the human propensity to retreat from the objective reality to the subjective reality by means of proliferating levels of language. Conversely, the 'aligning process' applies to the human need to confront the objective reality by suspending the relevance of language and recognizing extra-linguistic phenomena.

The first part, entitled 'Subjective Reality,' concerns the mental, linguistic, and conceptual features of the novel. The second part, called 'Intersubjective Reality,' deals with relations between individuals. The third part, named 'Objective Reality,' explores the physical and emotional aspects of being. The fourth and last part, labeled 'Multiplanar Humanity,' uncovers the moral dimension of the text.

## Theoretical Background

The field of Wallace studies has grown immensely over the past few decades, with the germination accelerating over time. The community of scholars, who have been dedicated to the field, produced a superb body of work that continues to attract new devotees each coming year. From the rigorous research carried out in academic articles and journals, to the riveting speculations of various online communities, the enchanting quality of *Infinite Jest* keeps its readers enthralled in the way that movies where stuff blows up does not. The present thesis owes a great debt to those, whose intellectual labor helped shape our understanding of Wallace's writing ever since his first publications. It simultaneously builds on the more recent scholarship that is informed by the efforts of the initial pioneers.

The first edition of *Reader's Guide* by Stephen J. Burn, *Reader's Companion* by William C. Dowling and Robert H. Bell, and Greg Carlisle's *Elegant Complexity* have laid the groundwork for the ensuing analyses of *Infinite Jest* and the value of each is inestimable. As a supporter of the concept of 'authorial intent' I have made use of D. T. Max's autobiography and two collections of interviews with Wallace. Many penetrating insights and observations come from the several collections of essays that feature criticism that is highly specific and rigorous. Creating larger analytical frameworks in order to interpret Wallace's texts represents a more demanding enterprise. This is why Clare Hayes-Brady's *Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*, Marshall Boswell's *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, Jon Baskin's *Ordinary Unhappiness*, and Jamie Redgate's *Wallace and I* provide a distinct type of understanding. While some secondary sources are not quoted directly, they still complemented my understanding of who Wallace was, how he thought about fiction, and the effect that he and his work had on other writers of his generation.

Although the thesis employs original terminology to describe the fundamental aspects of the main argument, the inception of the theory behind it was inspired by the work of Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker; specifically in the way that they characterize the post-postmodern sensibility of art in *Metamodernism*. I have conceptualized the analytical framework for Wallace's novel, having already been influenced by their notion of a paradoxical union between two aspects, which coexist in spite of their logical incompatibility. While the examined text undeniably enacts the fundamental competition between the heartfelt earnestness of liberal humanist literature and the aloof detachment of experimental postmodernism, there are many pairs of competing paradigms, embedded within the original one, that can be said to represent the same dynamic.



## 1.0 Subjective Reality

### 1.1 The Auteur's films always involved some sort of technical hook, Metafictional Tension

Apart from being a novel, *Infinite Jest* is a novel about novels. The fictional story is in constant tension with various metafictional elements. Due to its self-reflexive quality, the narrative is fundamentally conflicted between its ambition to faithfully represent a world and a simultaneous inclination to dispute the very idea of representation itself. These two impulses — to tell a story and to doubt storytelling — match the two central paradigms, whose opposing forces animate the workings of the examined text. The paradigm of affirmation accommodates all the literary devices that uphold the reality of the fictional world, while the paradigm of negation seeks to undermine its foundations. The central purpose of this thesis is to show that the logical coherence of each paradigm within itself, gives way to logical contradiction that results from their coexistence, and that this contra-paradigmatic nature of the text is in fact not antagonistic, but complementary.

The novel's self-consciousness, already manifesting on the first page, is heralded by the words uttered by one of its leading characters, Harold Incandenza. The eighteen years old tennis and academic prodigy is being considered for University of Arizona by a few of its deans, when among the lines of his internal monologue there appears: "I am in here."<sup>1</sup> (3) This short clause sets a precedent for Hal's proclivity for introspection. He later tells his older brother Orin:

I'm a student at a tennis academy that sees itself as a prophylactic. I eat, sleep, evacuate, highlight things with yellow markers, and hit balls. I lift things and swing things and run in huge outdoor circles. I am just about as apolitical as someone can be. I am out of all loops but one, by design. (1016)

At another point, he wonders "whether the fact that he's capable of wondering whether he's a snob attenuates the possibility that he's really a snob" (335). Continually directing his attention inward, Hal will go on to signify a case of excessive self-awareness. Another major character named Donald Gately, a recovering drug addict in his late twenties, is lying in a hospital bed after a gunshot wound, when the narrator tells us that "He's both in a bag and holding a bag" (934). This is essentially the predicament of the novel as a whole. Heather Houser writes that "The complaint that houses all of the problems that plague the contemporary U.S. in Wallace's fiction is that people and the cultural artifacts that they

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all quotes are from: David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, Abacus, 2011. Kindle.

produce are too self-referential.”<sup>2</sup> Preoccupied with their self-image, the characters spend more time in their heads than they do engaging with the outside world. This tendency of distancing one’s self from the external reality and retreating into one’s mind is psychologically isolating and despair-inducing.

Since one’s subjective reality is fundamentally linguistic, the novel comments on itself as a textual object by bringing attention to the faculty of language. Hal Incandenza has a savant-like ability to recall the contents of entire dictionaries; a property he puts to use by mulling over the meaning of specific words. His thought process may be exemplified in the following passage:

The condensed O.E.D., in a rare bit of florid imprecision, defined *blizzard* as ‘A furious blast of frost-wind and blinding snow in which man and beast frequently perish,’ claiming the word was either a neologism or a corruption of the French *blesser*, coined in English by a reporter for Iowa’s *Northern Vindicator* in B.S. 1864. (899)

The narrator tells us that Johnny Gentle was the “First U.S. President ever to use *boss* as an adjective” (383). Speaking of Gately, the narrator reports that “*Cruel* is spelled with a *u*, he remembered” (980). Joelle van Dyne, a young woman with ties to both the Enfield Tennis Academy (E.T.A) and Ennet recovery house, corrects her speech: “Who you’d want to have come. Whom.” (857). Her ex-boyfriend Orin Incandenza adjusts his words as well during his interview for a magazine article. He says “I’m not talking about The Stork’s death or the Moms’s stability in a thing where they’ll read about it and have to read some authoritative report on my take on it instead of coming to their own terms about it. With it, rather. Terms with, terms about. No, terms with it.” (1040) At a meeting of the president Gentle’s administration, which is portrayed in an amateur movie of Incandenza’s middle child Mario, Rodney Tine says “We’ve been moving forward full-bore on anticipating various highly involved relocation scenarios. Scenaria? Is it scenarios or scenaria?” to which the Secretary of Transportation responds “We foresee a whole lot of people moving south really really fast. We foresee cars, light trucks, heavier trucks, buses, Winnebagos — Winnebago?” (403) Wallace used to tell his students “I’m a grammar Nazi.”<sup>3</sup> He described the majority of his family as ‘usage fanatics.’<sup>4</sup> This fascination with words and their use has found its way into the novel

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<sup>2</sup> Heather Houser, “Infinite Jest’s Environmental Case for Disgust,” in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, ed. Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou, 120.

<sup>3</sup> D. T. Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, 142.

<sup>4</sup> Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 2.

and serves to remind the reader that the act of reading is made possible by the medium of language.

The focus on the power of words is at times tied to memory. A recurring theme in the text has to do with characters remembering or forgetting particular terms and their attempts to grasp the world through verbalization. When Hal ponders why he feels such satisfaction from hiding his marijuana smoking, “He always gets the feeling there’s some clue to it on the tip of his tongue, some mute and inaccessible part of the cortex, and then he always feels vaguely sick, scanning for it” (114). Reckoning with his fellow athlete Schacht’s decision to not pursue a professional career in tennis, he mentions “an air of something other than failure about Schacht’s not caring enough, something you can’t quite define, the way you can’t quite remember a word that you know you know, inside” (269). Sometimes, the right word comes, such as when Hal cannot call to mind the name of an actor from one of his father’s movies. He “tries whacking himself just over the right eye several times, to dislodge the name,” (688) and then twenty-six pages later: “Out of nowhere Hal remembers: Smothergill” (714). Other times, language fails, as when Hal, in first person narration, tries to recall what his brother Orin once told him and is forced to admit “The memory hung somewhere just out of conscious reach, and its tip-of-the-tongue inaccessibility felt too much like the preface to another attack. I accepted it: I could not remember” (952). Finding the right word acts as an analogy for one’s capacity to capture reality mentally and its indefinite, fickle essence by extension undermines the stability of the textual reality.

What additionally heightens the reader’s awareness of the lexical dimension of the text is the utilization of phrasal repetition. Ryan David Mullins speaks of ‘recursive structures.’ Emil Minty, one of the many characters who struggle with substance abuse, uses the phrase ‘and everything like that’ twenty-six times in one unbroken piece of narration (128-135). In a similar vein, An Alcoholics Anonymous speaker Mickey employs the clause ‘you know what I’m saying?’ fourteen times in a single speech (958). Gately’s partner in crime and drug addict, Gene Fackelmann, makes use of his favorite line ‘That’s a goddamned lie!’ ten times (918). Even the narrator is prone to repetition. Speaking from the perspective of Joelle, we read that “Avril put everyone at ease,” and then on the next page “Mrs. Incandenza put everyone at ease” (744-745). Speaking for Gately at the hospital wing, the narrator informs us that “The ceiling was breathing. It bulged and receded” (808). The phrase is duplicated twice on the following page “The ceiling bulged and receded,” (809) and several more times in other contexts. The reiteration of specific phrases not only accentuates the role that words play in the construction of the fictional world, but it also points to the cyclical nature of

language; how words lead to other words. Making the connection to the novel's name, Mullins states: "The recursive nature of the title is just the start of the endless jest of infinities!"<sup>5</sup>

Matthew Gilbert once wrote a marvelous characterization of Wallace that also paints a picture of the type of literary work he was producing:

There is The Thing, plunked down in the coliseum of our consciousness. There is The Viewer of this Thing, sitting in the stands, hand on chin. And there is The Viewer of The Viewer of The Thing—the postmodernist metaphysician hovering in the helicopter above, discussing the way people watch. And then, somewhere out in the cosmos, watching the watcher watch himself watching, talking about talking about talking, there is David Foster Wallace, novelist, essayist, recovering ironist, and wizard of giddy self-consciousness.<sup>6</sup>

The metafictional dimension is woven into the body of the text through particular 'multileveled' expressions and images that illustrate the self-reflexive motive. Representing the self-awareness that accompanies the act of representation by means of linguistic and symbolic elements elevates the perspective of the reader to the metanarrative level. Michael Pemulis, Hal's best friend at Enfield Tennis Academy, has this answering message: "This is Mike Pemulis's answering machine's answering machine; Mike Pemulis's answering machine regrets being unavailable to take a first-order message for Mike Pemulis, but if you'll leave a second-order message at the sound of the clapping hand, Mike Pemulis's answering machine will..." (854). One of the recovering addicts at the Ennet House, Tiny Ewell, knows of a "a Biker whose triceps' tattoo of a huge disembodied female breast [is] being painfully squeezed by a disembodied hand which is *itself* tattooed with a disembodied breast and hand" (207). Reporting on the thought process of Gately when he meets the ghost of Hal's father James Incandenza in what might have been a dream, the narrator says "he considered that this was the only dream he could recall where even in the dream he knew that it was a dream, much less lay there considering the fact that he was considering the up-front dream quality of the dream he was dreaming" (830). These examples put distance between the reader and their immersion in the story by pointing out that the reality depicted on the page has been, without question, deliberately constructed by the writer; the writing being heavily pre-meditated and

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<sup>5</sup> Ryan David Mullins, "Theories of Everything and More: Infinity is Not the End," in *Gesturing Toward Reality: David Foster Wallace and Philosophy*, ed. Robert K. Bolger and Scott Korb, 351-352.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew Gilbert, "The 'Infinite Story' Cult Hero behind the 1,079-Page Novel Rides the Hype He Skewered," in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn, 76.

therefore necessarily influenced by the awareness of the process itself. The multileveledness of the expressions and symbols constantly invokes the metafictional aspect of the text.

It is important to note here, that Wallace built his novel around a specific kind of shape called Sierpinski Triangle. Ryan David Mullins describes the structure as “an elementary, pyramidal fractal. Its construction involves, first, drawing a triangle; then, within the triangle one draws three triangles and within those three triangles another three triangles, and so on ad infinitum. The fractal nature of the triangle consists in its self-similar repetition.”<sup>7</sup> The concept of recursion is related to the linguistic, textual reality, which metafiction seeks to draw attention to. Speaking of the academy’s headmaster and Hal’s maternal uncle Charles Tavis, the narrator points out “the way he thinks out loud about thinking out loud” (519) Hal, at one point, wonders why Hamlet “never once doubts the reality of the ghost,” and “never questions whether his own madness might not in fact be unfeigned,” only to pose the question “whether Hamlet might be only *feigning feigning*” (900). The field operative for Unspecified Services, Hugh Steeply, thinks about his father’s obsession and mentions “the secrecy about the secrecy” (641). The ‘male 16s’ group at the tennis academy has “in-jokes inside in-jokes” (1070). Pemulis even refers to “triangles inside triangles” (1063) in one of his conversations with Hal. This cyclical reduplication with its mirroring quality, is utilized to highlight the ontological dimension of the subjective reality, which bolsters the negation paradigm that undermines veracity of the fictional world and makes the reader cognizant of the possibility of the text being mediated.

The narrative of *Infinite Jest* is accompanied by three hundred eighty-eight endnotes that visually and conceptually rupture its textual integrity. Wallace wanted the recipient of the text to “go literally physically ‘back and forth’ in a way that perhaps cutely mimics some of the story’s thematic concerns.”<sup>8</sup> Apart from the majority of them commenting on the story itself, a note on page 1062 refers the reader to yet another note. Moreover, note number 189 actually expands on the contents of a different note and notes 110 and 324 have their own sets of endnotes. These second order comments only intensify the self-consciousness of the work as a whole. Wallace’s editor, Michael Pietsch talked about how the author felt about endnotes: “I invited a lot of them to leave. Of course to David they were not secondary. They were

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<sup>7</sup> Mullins, “Theories of Everything and More,” in *Gesturing Toward Reality*, 362.

<sup>8</sup> D. T. Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, 265.

further evidence of the many separate levels of life and thought we're all carrying on at all times.”<sup>9</sup>

A very common way of incorporating self-consciousness into a literary text is to make artists or art a part of the story. James Incandenza, often referred to by his monicker ‘Himself,’ was a filmmaker and the many opinions within the text that assess his cinematographic work are to be recognized as metafictional. That being said, the subject matter of many of James’s movies actually is metafiction. In ‘The Joke’ for example, “two Ikegami EC-35 video cameras in theater record the ‘film’ ’s audience and project the resultant raster onto screen — the theater audience watching itself watch itself get the obvious ‘joke’ and become increasingly self-conscious and uncomfortable and hostile” (988). Similarly, “*Accomplice!*’s essential project remains abstract and self-reflexive; we end up feeling and thinking not about the characters but about the cartridge itself” (946). Regarding his choice of actors, James “had apparently thought the stilted, wooden quality of nonprofessionals helped to strip away the pernicious illusion of realism and to remind the audience that they were in reality watching actors acting and not people behaving” (944). We are told that “the Auteur’s films always involved some sort of technical hook” (788). This technical, or formal element of his work, as it is portrayed in the reality of the fictional world, corresponds with the metafictional devices utilized in the text of the novel and which are described in this chapter of the thesis. Lee Konstantinou makes the case that “Above all, Wallace wanted to discover or invent a viable postironic ethos for U.S. literature and culture at the End of History, that is, for an America in the thrall of full-blown postmodernism.”<sup>10</sup> As a part of the critical commentary of James Incandenza’s films in the novel, one fictional academic poses “the question why so much aesthetically ambitious film was so boring and why so much shitty reductive commercial entertainment was so much fun” (947). This is one of Wallace’s central concerns. Detailing his father’s career, Hal reports that: “Conceptual and technical ingenuity didn’t much interest entertainment-film audiences though, and one way of looking at Himself’s abandonment of anticonfluentism is that in his last several projects he’d been so desperate to make something that ordinary U.S. audiences might find entertaining and diverting and conducive to self-forgetting that he had had professionals and amateurs alike emoting wildly all over the place” (944). In other words, the auteur ultimately renounces the ‘anticonfluent’ (non-

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Pietsch and Rick Moody, “On Editing David Foster Wallace: An Interview,” in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, 213.

<sup>10</sup> Lee Konstantinou, “No Bull: David Foster Wallace and Postironic Belief,” in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, 84-85.

linear) aspect of his work in order to at least guarantee having some kind of an impact on his audiences. It is important to note that, during the editing process, Wallace made an attempt to subtitle the novel 'A Failed Entertainment'<sup>11</sup>; the original title of the novel.<sup>12</sup> Even though one of his editors eventually changed his mind, his intention reveals a crucial piece of evidence that points to how to adequately interpret the text as a whole. *Infinite Jest*, the book and object of this thesis, is not equivalent to James's last film in the novel, also titled 'Infinite Jest'. While the movie 'Infinite Jest' is a failed entertainment, Wallace's novel reflects on that failure and seeks to embody a solution. A way out of the infinite regress of the negation paradigm is to represent its counterpart, paradigm of affirmation, as complementary; to accompany the relativistic, metafictional apparatus with a share of the absolute in the form of a narrative that is believable. Marshall Boswell characterizes this phenomenon, when he writes how "Since *Infinite Jest*, a whole new group of emerging young writers has copied the elusive Wallace "tone," that paradoxical blending of cynicism and naivete, as well as Wallace's use of self-reflexivity for the purposes of moving beyond irony and parody."<sup>13</sup>

One way the novel creates tension between the act of telling a story and the techniques that challenge the possibility of doing so, is through inclusion of various distinctly textual documents among its contents. In the course of reading the novel, the reader will come across: an email (138), Hal's school essay (140), alphabetical tally of terrorist organizations (144), chronological list of the novel's names for different years (223), Helen Steeply's curriculum vitae (226), an excerpt from an academy exam (307), newspaper headings (391), transcripts of conversations at Ennet House (563), a letter (1006), and a fragment of an interview (1026). All of these segments heighten the sense that the novel itself is merely another document beset with the same problems and difficulties as any text.

A major source of self-reflexivity can be located in the novel's intertextuality. Being embedded in and indebted to the world of books, the text is filled with other texts. Aside from the mentions of authors: William Blake (379), Emily Dickinson (1005), or Swinburne (1047), we may point out the presence of literary titles: *Make Way for Ducklings* (623), *Feeling Good* (752), or *Howl* (905). The novel even quotes other books; an actual text penned by William James (1037) and a completely fictional one entitled *The Chill of Inspiration: Spontaneous Reminiscences by Seventeen Pioneers of DT-Cycle Lithiumized Annular Fusion* (1044). There

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<sup>11</sup> Mary K. Holland, "Infinite Jest," in *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*, ed. Ralph Clare, 137.

<sup>12</sup> David Lipsky, "The Lost Years and Last Days of David Foster Wallace," in *Conversations*, 172.

<sup>13</sup> Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 11.

are also references to television series: ‘Hawaii Five-0’ (141), ‘M\*A\*S\*H’ (638), and ‘Cheers’ (834). Nevertheless, it is necessary to note that the primary intertext for *Infinite Jest* is, without a doubt, *Hamlet*. At one point, Hal actually has the physical copy of Shakespeare’s tale with him (171). He is later addressed as “Good prince Hal” (875) by one of the janitors. His psychological disposition is, especially toward the end, fundamentally in question and he struggles with existential issues throughout the length of the novel. Furthermore, Hal’s dead father returns as a ghost, his uncle has a potentially intimate relationship with his mother and there is also a pivotal graveyard scene that involves exhumation. James Incandenza’s production company is called ‘Poor Yorick Entertainment’ and the novel’s title ‘Infinite Jest’ comes directly from Hamlet’s monologue. Taken together, it is hard to view Wallace’s text as not being framed by the Bard’s masterpiece. Having said that, there also identifiable thematic and ideological affinities with *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoevsky; principally the questions of spirituality, responsibility, repudiation of nihilism and the familial dynamic of the Incandenzas.

The literary and philosophical heritage of David Foster Wallace has been investigated by a number of scholars. Marshall Boswell confirms the lineage of John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, and William Gaddis.<sup>14</sup> David Streitfeld has written that “Wallace regarded Don DeLillo as a hero.”<sup>15</sup> While Thomas Tracey traced the origins of the writer’s thinking to American Pragmatism and Existentialist philosophy, Randy Ramal considered the underlying influence of Ludwig Wittgenstein.<sup>16</sup> Wallace’s autobiographer chronicled his fascination with Jacques Derrida and admiration for Raymond Carver.<sup>17</sup> Jamie Redgate analyzed the effect of Vladimir Nabokov and Sylvia Plath.<sup>18</sup> Wallace was good friends with Jonathan Franzen. He defined himself in opposition to Bret Easton Ellis<sup>19</sup> and Updike.<sup>20</sup> We may also include Donald Barthelme, James Joyce, Flannery O’Connor and an astounding amount of other writers and thinkers who shaped the novelist’s literary output. The merely illustrative and undoubtedly incomplete enumeration of Wallace’s predecessors is here to simply provide a section of the literary corpus that his novel must have been shaped by. Nested within a large literary matrix, *Infinite Jest* contains formal and thematic elements from the past that highlight

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<sup>14</sup> Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 13.

<sup>15</sup> David Streitfeld, “The Wasted Land,” in *David Foster Wallace: The Last Interview Expanded with New Introduction*, ed. David Foster Wallace and David Streitfeld, 30.

<sup>16</sup> Randy Ramal, “Beyond Philosophy: David Foster Wallace on Literature, Wittgenstein, and the Dangers of Theorizing,” in *Gesturing Toward Reality*, 249, 279.

<sup>17</sup> D. T. Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, 123, 240.

<sup>18</sup> Jamie Redgate, *Wallace and I*, 92-98.

<sup>19</sup> Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 46-47.

<sup>20</sup> D. T. Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, 250.



it's textual nature. Whether it be the literary greats, the postmodern masters, post-structural theorists, or his contemporaries, Wallace's novel was informed by a vast pool of textual sources; all of which are fundamentally and inextricably tied to its meaning. Because the novel 'reaches' out to other novels and texts, it continually reminds the reader of its status and in so doing impedes the narrative immersion.

Having gone over the many metafictional devices, which compose the negation paradigm that erodes the legitimacy of the story by emphasizing the linguistic essence of the characters and settings depicted on the pages of the novel, it is now time to contend with what I purport to be the single most pivotal concept of Wallace's project. I believe this to be his treatment of what we may call 'layers of reality.'<sup>21</sup> There is, quite evidently, something wrong with the fictional universe of *Infinite Jest*. The reader is exposed to an overabundance of dysfunction, alienation, and dissatisfaction; the world in a state of disarray. Hal has a recurring dream where he stands at a "a gargantuan tennis court." He tells us that "The lines that bound and define play are on this court as complex and convolved as a sculpture of string" and that "The whole thing is almost too involved to try to take in all at once. It's simply huge. And it's public." He concludes: "We sort of play. But it's all hypothetical, somehow. Even the 'we' is theory: I never get quite to see the distant opponent, for all the apparatus of the game." (67-68) It could be said that the lines that delimit the game are the words that govern the mental, conceptual domain of the subjective and intersubjective realities, and in Hal's dream, they are so imposing, he cannot even see his opponent. Language can eclipse one's experience to the point that the world itself is no longer visible.

When the Quebecois insurgent, Rémy Marathe, visits the Ennet House for recovering addicts, a man opens a conversation by asking him "You real?" After determining Marathe to be real, the man, speaking of the other residents of the house, says "most of them ain't real. So watch your six. Most of these fuckers are —: metal people." He continues "Walking around, make you think they're alive," and adds "But that's just the layer." He expands on the idea "There's a micro-thin layer of skin. But underneath, it's metal. Heads full of parts. Under a organic layer that's micro-thin." Eventually, the man spells out his theory: "We're all in one room. The real ones. One room all the time. Everything's pro — jected. They can do it with machines. They pro — ject. To fool us. The pictures on the walls change so's we think we're going places. Here and there, this and that. That's just they change the pro — jections" (733-735). In the man's delusion, that which is authentic is being turned into something false. The

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<sup>21</sup> Greg Carlisle identified a comparable theme of 'boundaries,' tracing them all throughout the novel in his monograph *Elegant Complexity*.

real is being replaced by mere projections. This is the danger that Wallace saw in the future of America; a counterfeit world with no one real enough to fix it.

At Enfield Tennis Academy, the adolescents play an intricate game called Eschaton, in which various objects on tennis courts represent the map of the world and aid in producing a simulation of geopolitical conflicts, with different players throwing tennis balls to mimic thermonuclear warheads dropping at different locations. At one point during a match, instead of hitting the ground of the tennis court, a player hits another player, creating a “theater-boundary-puncturing [threat] to the map’s integrity.” As “far and away the greatest Eschaton player in E.T.A. history,” Pemulis explains the severity of the problem:

Players themselves can’t be valid targets. Players aren’t inside the goddamn game. Players are part of the *apparatus* of the game. They’re part of the map. It’s snowing on the players but not on the territory. They’re part of the *map*, not the clusterfucking *territory*. You can only launch against the *territory*. Not against the *map*. It’s like the one ground-rule boundary that keeps Eschaton from degenerating into chaos. Eschaton gentlemen is about logic and axiom and mathematical probity and discipline and verity and *order*. You do not get points for hitting anybody real. Only the gear that *maps* what’s real. (388)

The catastrophe, which occurs in the game, is that the reality of the map and the reality of the territory merge into one, homogenized layer of existence. Pemulis knows that the game only works as long as the two layers are kept separate. Kiki Benzon elucidates this very dynamic: “Through its chaotic constitution—manifest on the levels of both form and content—Infinite Jest affirms that the perpetual, fundamental tension between order and disorder is precisely where “the real” resides.”<sup>22</sup>

In the stylized language of the text, the characters who die are said to be ‘demapped.’ The absence of a map equals death. Self-consciousness may hamper our engagement with the outside world, but it is also what makes us human.

After one AA meeting, a biker named Robert F. tells Gately a joke: “This wise old whiskery fish swims up to three young fish and goes, ‘Morning, boys, how’s the water?’ and swims away; and the three young fish watch him swim away and look at each other and go, ‘What the fuck is water?’” (445) To not recognize the reality of one’s immediate surroundings is to reach the point of absolute solipsism; a complete submission to one’s subjective delusions and the final stage of distancing one’s self from anything objective. Ryan David

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<sup>22</sup> Kiki Benzon, “Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders: Chaos and Realism in Infinite Jest,” in *Consider David Foster Wallace*, ed. David Hering, 101.

Mullins states that “the joke illuminates the fact that human conceptual calisthenics has infiltrated and permeated reality to such an extent that the “real intellectual adventure” consists in demarcating where precisely, or even approximately, reality begins and conceptual thought ends.”<sup>23</sup> He presents a particularly pertinent idea: “Wallace’s metaphysical pluralism indirectly positions itself against any and all metaphysical positions that seek to reduce the complexity and multi-layered reality to one particular world.”<sup>24</sup> This is, once again, related to the merging of the subjective and objective layers of reality into one; a possibility which looms as menacing black hole over the novel.

*Infinite Jest* is not a sole delineation of a problem. It has both a diagnostic and a corrective function. The correction lies in all the ways in which the text establishes the relationship of complementarity between logically incompatible paradigms. The contra-paradigmatic sensibility can be observed in the speeches of Gerhardt Schtitt, the German tennis instructor at E.T.A. He makes the distinction between what the thesis calls objective and subjective reality when he tells the players “Cold and wind is the world. Outside, yes? On the tennis court the you the player: this is not where there is cold wind. I am saying. Different world *inside*.” Speaking of the second world, which he locates “inside the lines,” he specifies that “In that world is joy because there is shelter of *something else*, of purpose past sluggardly self and complaints about uncomfot.” Schtitt tells the boys “You have a chance to *occur*, playing,” and clarifies that “there is in this world you, and in the hand a tool, there is a ball, there is opponent with his tool, and always only two of you, you and this other, inside the lines, with always a purpose to keep this world alive” (459) His advice, aimed at the young athletes, represents his endorsement of the affirmation paradigm in that it upholds the borders that delineate and buttress the linguistic, conceptual reality that enables a story to be told and believed. The world can be kept alive if we protect the boundaries inside of our minds. At another point, the same character, however, expresses an outlook which goes very much against this. We are informed that Schtitt “knew real tennis was really about not the blend of statistical order and expansive potential that the game’s technicians revered, but in fact the opposite — *not-order*, *limit*, the places where things broke down, fragmented into beauty.” His knowledge is said to include the fact that “locating beauty and art and magic and improvement and keys to excellence and victory in the prolix flux of match play is not a fractal matter of reducing chaos to pattern,” and that “it was a matter not of reduction at all,

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<sup>23</sup> Mullins, “Theories of Everything and More,” in *Gesturing Toward Reality*, 367.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 359.

but — perversely — of expansion, the aleatory flutter of uncontrolled, metastatic growth” Schtitt is embracing order at one point and chaos at another; insisting on staying inside the lines and then going beyond them. The unifying, complementary sensibility is finally made concrete in this ultimate passage: “this diagnate infinity of infinities of choice and execution, mathematically uncontrolled but humanly *contained*, bounded by the talent and imagination of self and opponent, bent in on itself by the containing boundaries of skill and imagination that brought one player finally down, that kept both from winning, that made it, finally, a game” (81-82). The logically incompatible, but ontologically inseverable duality of the subjective and objective realities is made manifest. Marshall Boswell writes “Wallace will in fact enter the prison house of postmodern self-reflexivity and experience all the cruelty that such enclosure might involve, but he will also keep safe the world of the real, the world outside the text, that is, the text’s transcendent referent.”<sup>25</sup> The map must not become the territory. The only way to truly exist, is *within* the apparatus of the game.

## **1.2 Tenuate’s the trade name of diethylpropion hydrochloride, Textual Inflation**

*Infinite Jest* evinces features associated with the literary genre of an ‘encyclopedic novel,’<sup>26</sup> which seeks to capture the whole of reality with utmost care for detail and accuracy. Fundamentally predicated on the assumption that the human faculty of reason and language can in fact achieve such a comprehensive portrayal, this type of text falls in the category of the affirmation paradigm that champions each attempt to describe the world with one’s words. The encyclopedic aspect is to be recognized as intrinsically expansive; the world being so vast and complex that the its description must be matched by being almost ‘bursting at the seams’ at all times. The central conceit behind this ‘textual inflation’ is the idea that the narration is based on borderline all-knowing consciousness that is capable of discriminating between the most obscure of nuances. Jonathan Franzen said that Wallace “had the most commanding and exciting and inventive rhetorical virtuosity of any writer alive” and praised his “effortless and pitch-perfect shifting among ten different levels of high, low, middle, technical, hipster, nerdy, philosophical, vernacular, vaudevillian, hortatory, tough-guy, broken-hearted, lyrical diction.”<sup>27</sup> Clare Hayes-Brady, likewise, acknowledges Wallace’s “swooping, digressive

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<sup>25</sup> Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 65-66.

<sup>26</sup> The concept is expounded in and associated with the work of Edward Mendelson.

<sup>27</sup> Jonathan Franzen, “Informal Remarks from the David Foster Wallace Memorial Service in New York on October 23, 2008,” in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, 178.

prose” with its “delicate balance of the colloquial and the impossibly erudite.”<sup>28</sup> This stylistic richness is part and parcel of the encyclopedic narrative and its ambition to encompass the entirety of existence. Wallace’s autobiographer writes about Wallace: “As a writer, he was a folder-in and includer, a maximalist, someone who wanted to capture the *everything* of America.”<sup>29</sup> Encompassed within this bold endeavor is, however, also a recognition of the fact that people use language to distance themselves from the world by proliferating levels of linguistic content; a retreat to one’s subjective reality being the very flaw that Wallace wanted to warn society against.

A student of the Enfield Academy, Hal Incandenza, gifted both intellectually and athletically, is able to mentally retrieve a definition of any word from multiple dictionaries at will. When his father James asks him whether he knows the meaning of the word ‘implore,’ Hal starts rattling off:

*Implore’s* a regular verb, transitive: to call upon, or for, in supplication; to pray to, or for, earnestly; to beseech; to entreat. Weak synonym: urge. Strong synonym: beg. Etymology unmixed: from Latin *implorare*, *im* meaning in, *plorare* meaning in this context to cry aloud. O.E.D. Condensed Volume Six page 1387 column twelve and a little bit of thirteen. (28)

His ability can be extrapolated to the scope of the novel as a whole with its aim to provide the reader with a ‘definitive’ rendering of the reality being depicted.

The tendency to expand is simultaneously exposed as ultimately futile due to its endlessness. James Incandenza, as an innovatory scientist, develops “a type of fusion that can produce waste that’s fuel for a process whose waste is fuel for the fusion” (572). This technology causes an environmental ‘overgrowth’ of such magnitude that it prompts the exploitative political decisions of the American government. Analogically, the desire to generate a conclusive description of the world through language is conceived as eventually leading to disastrous excess. Marshall Boswell talks of “information overload”<sup>30</sup> and “manic density”<sup>31</sup>, while Matthew Gilbert remarks upon the “obsessive specificity.”<sup>32</sup>

The physical proportions of the novel in question are an obvious indicator of the textual tumefaction. Lee Konstantinou mentions “its girth, its heft, its alleged bloat.”<sup>33</sup> Laura

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<sup>28</sup> Clare Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*, 169.

<sup>29</sup> D. T. Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, 87.

<sup>30</sup> Marshall Boswell, *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing"*, ed. Marshall Boswell, Preface.

<sup>31</sup> Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 93.

<sup>32</sup> Gilbert, “The “Infinite Story” Cult Hero,” in *Conversations*, 78.

<sup>33</sup> Konstantinou, “No Bull,” in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, 101.

Miller speaks of Wallace's "mammoth second novel,"<sup>34</sup> while Valerie Stivers refers to it as a "bludgeon-sized book."<sup>35</sup> Clare Hayes-Brady called it "Wallace's very magnum opus"<sup>36</sup> and the man himself said in an interview that "it doubles as an aerobic step tool."<sup>37</sup> It is important to note that the length of the novel, coupled with its other anti-narrative properties, has led many to the conclusion that it has not been properly edited before being published. The text has actually been subjected to a long, thorough editing process before its publication. Wallace unequivocally stated: "If it looks chaotic, good, but everything that's in there is in there on purpose. I'm in a good emotional position to take shit for the length because the length strikes people as gratuitous, then the book just fails. It's not gratuitous because I didn't feel like working on it or making the cuts."<sup>38</sup> Essentially, the 1079 pages have been very much a product of the author's intention, not to be confused with unsupervised carelessness. The sheer length of the text is, therefore, to be taken as a statement about its artistic purpose. It evokes a sense of an exhaustive treatment of a thing, which by its very nature coincides with the paradigm of affirmation in that it is rooted in the belief that diligent observation and careful representation can convincingly 'take hold' of reality and confine it to the page. We may also include "Wallace's signature involuted, marathon sentences"<sup>39</sup> that constitute the text as an extension of the same effort.

The onslaught of information also contains text which is practically redundant. David Letzler dubbed this phenomenon "cruft"<sup>40</sup> after a computer programming term for unnecessary code. Andrew Hoberek characterizes it as text which is "purposely excessive."<sup>41</sup> Let us focus on note 28 that supposedly elucidates what the acronym MAOI stand for: "Monoamine-oxidase inhibitors, a venerable class of antidepressants/anxiolytics, of which Parnate — SmithKline Beecham's product-name for tranlycypromine sulfate — is a member. Zoloft is sertraline hydrochloride, a serotonin-reuptake-inhibitor (SRI) not all that dissimilar to Prozac, manufactured by Pfizer-Roerig" (994). This information in no way adds to the reader's understanding of the text. What it does do, is illustrate how words alone do not translate to insight. When we read that Incandenza's second son Mario had received a camera for Christmas, we might expect that the note that accompanies its model name, Bolex H64

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<sup>34</sup> Laura Miller, "Something Real American," in *David Foster Wallace: The Last Interview*, 47.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>36</sup> Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*, Preface.

<sup>37</sup> Streitfeld, "The Wasted Land," in *David Foster Wallace: The Last Interview*, 27.

<sup>38</sup> Laura Miller, "The Salon Interview: David Foster Wallace," in *Conversations*, 64.

<sup>39</sup> Houser, "Environmental Case for Disgust," in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, 122.

<sup>40</sup> David Letzler, "Encyclopedic Novels and the Cruft of Fiction: Infinite Jest's Endnotes," in *"The Long Thing"*, 131.

<sup>41</sup> Andrew Hoberek, "Wallace and American Literature," in *The Cambridge Companion*, 43.

Rex 5, will tell us that it is “Pretty much the BMW of 16mm. digital-cartridge recorders,” but the fact that it also tells us that the cameras were “brought out in limited numbers by Paillard Cinématique of Sherbrooke, Québec, CAN, just weeks before its manufacturing facilities were annularly hyperfloriated and the company went belly-up” (1022) is completely superfluous. Letzler writes that “cruft seems often to achieve a state of near-objective pointlessness, combining both excess and emptiness, redundancy with wild innovation. Sometimes it presents long, one-off catalogs of information that have no informational use; sometimes it presents scenes that appear irrelevant to any traditional fictional elements like plot or character; sometimes it is endlessly repetitive and clichéd; and sometimes it is simply impossible to read at all.”<sup>42</sup> Trusting language too much is shown to be a fruitless endeavor.

The textual expansiveness of the novel, which reflects the encyclopedic desire to affirm the symbolic reality of language as it exists in one’s subjective reality, is epitomized in the narrator’s gigantic vocabulary. The ability to represent the whole of what is happening at any moment, is easily associated with the astounding breath of knowledge that the narrating consciousness seems to possess. It also mirrors the human tendency to distance one’s self from the immediate experience by inventing verbose stories and intricate descriptions. The discipline of philosophy, undoubtedly, informs the text, seeing as it depicts “Hobbesian sewers” (44), “the very grim ethics of Kant” (188), a “Heideggerian perspective” (232), “that Nietzschean supercharged aura of a wired individual” (605), and “abstraction-capable post-Hegelian adults” (787). A background in the field of mathematics and physics can be inferred from the mentions of “a Cantorian continuum of infinities of possible move and response” (82), “Heisenbergian dimension of rate-change and time-passage” (831), or from the recovering addict Erdedy “staring Copernicanly up [Joelle’s] flapping robe” (615). The influence of psychoanalysis is to be found in the “catexic newcomers” (707) and “being anaclitic” (1048). Vast knowledge of the medical profession must have been the source of “teratogenic” (93) clouds, “carminative capsules” (630), or the “eustacian-crumpling” sound-track (308). Nothing short of encyclopedic erudition could have produced the text that contains the biology words like “protozoan” (373), “phylogenic” (622), or “parturient” (789). The narrator is also cultured enough to remark upon a “neo-Georgian home” (56), “chiarascuro lamping” (65), “cubist” reflection (101), “*Liebestod* myth” (791). He knows about “Vermeer” (312), “matteing” (877), “Kabuki” (712), and that a theme-music can be “very heavy and ironic on the descants” (702). The inclusion of Greek mythology in

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<sup>42</sup> Letzler, “Encyclopedic Novels and the Cruft of Fiction,” in *The Long Thing*, 132.

references to Actaeon (793), “Cerberus-horned dilemma” (441), “Promethean brow” (705), and “Icarian” advertising agency (415) sits side-by-side with tennis terminology: “slice serves, shank serves, and back-snapping American Twist serves” (454), service motion in the “McEnroe-Esconja tradition” or “groundstrokes” (680).

One may only wonder at the specialized expertise in the world of pharmaceutical drugs that could allow one to explicate that “Tenuate’s the trade name of diethylpropion hydrochloride, Marion Merrell Dow Pharmaceuticals, technically a prescription antiobesity agent, favored by some athletes for its mildly euphoric and resources-rallying properties w/o the tooth-grinding and hideous post-blood-spike crash that the hairier-chested ’drines like Fastin and Cylert inflict, though with a discomfiting tendency to cause post-spike ocular nystagmus” (1079). Equally as noteworthy is the thorough knowledge of information technology that permits the narrator to inform the reader that ‘Pink,’ apart from “being Microsoft Inc.’s first post-Windows DOS,” is “kind of a dinosaur, but it’s still the only DOS that’ll run a Mathpak\EndStat tree without having to stop and recompile every few seconds” (1003).

Any narrator who has words such as: “nacreous” (455), “mysticetously” (476), “propinquous” (479), “mastication” (627), or “perambulation” (723) at their disposal is ipso facto the embodiment of an all-knowing awareness. The reader is constantly reminded that reality is something that can be articulated and grasped verbally. A major component of narrator’s authority is his familiarity with slang terms. As evidence, we may point to the fact that the narrator clearly knows what it means “to crew” (132), “to eat cheese” (819) or what “boosting” (133), or “sporting lint” (202) is. Note 230 tells us that ‘mitts’ is “Charlestown/Southie street term for meters” (1037) and number 255 makes clear that an ‘Item’ is “NNE street argot for any kind of handgun” (1045). Terms which are distinctly North American such as “snit” (400), “chintzy” (703), or “Hellacious” (708) litter the text. The presence of profanities in the text adds to the sense of unfiltered, non-selective account of genuine human speech patterns. Combing street vernacular, specialized language, and expletives produces the effect of a comprehensive depiction of diverse environments which accounts for the extensive diversity of the social reality. Linguistically competent at different levels of usage, the narrator signifies the idealization of the force that seeks to capture the world cognitively.

Having the objective of making sense of human existence through the act of storytelling, the affirmation paradigm is dependent on the unceasing multiplication of words. This process can, however, prove to be hollow, when the total number of words which aim to



signify particular meaning reaches a certain threshold, which renders them potentially meaningless. The grounds of E.T.A. are replete with young students/athletes and many of them have nicknames. There is Graham ('Yard-guard') Rader (96), Todd ('Postal-Weight') Possalthwaite (98), "Petropolis Kahn, a.k.a. 'W.M.' for 'Woolly Mammoth' because he's so hairy" (456), and many others. A nickname is another name for the same individual and as such it represents one cycle of the process of trying to account for the world through language. If we turn our attention to Harold Incandenza, we find that he is, over the course of the novel, referred to as Hal (4), The Incster, Halster, Halorama, Halation (97), Hallie (243), Inc (1022) Inculator (1023) Incblob (1064) and Incpuddle (1066). Donald Gately is called Don G (442), Bimmy, Bim (448), Sir Osis of Thuliver (834) G-Man (894) The Bimulator (901) Doshka, Don, Donny (912) or D.G. (280). Joelle van Dyne becomes Madame Psychosis (182), "P.G.O.A.T., for the Prettiest Girl Of All Time" (289), and Pokie (737), even though her actual name is Lucille Duquette (795). All of these monikers and plethora of others in the novel represent the possibly delusive nature of storytelling, in that trying to find the linguistic expressions to account for what is going on at any moment, may ultimately lead one only deeper into the hopeless labyrinth of signification.

One characteristic that suggests there is no limit to what the narrator is capable of describing is the profusion of neologism that are sprinkled throughout the text. Buildings are "spherocubular" (51), a surplus of sound is "auracopia" (298), and one can hear "Eurotrochaic" (542) ambulance sirens; not to mention "kertwanging" (569). The world may be incredibly complex, but the narrator seems to be well equipped to call things as they are.

In the pursuit of an exhaustive portrayal of the fictional reality, words can be bent and reshaped, at will, to fit the complexity of whatever is being reported on. Unlikely nouns often become adjectives, so that Jim Troeltsch's hair can look "toupeeish" (700), a dog at Ennet House can be "retrieverish" (608), Tine's hand signal can be "Ixnayish" (442), one can "invent a Higher-Powerish God from scratch" (443), and Petropolis Kahn with Eliot Kornspan can "eat with such horrible P.O.W.ish gusto that nobody else will sit with them" (628). It is through these morphological transformations that the reader is being convinced of the narrator's unparalleled command of language. Adjectives such as "blackmailable" (547), "bullshittable" (820), or "call-uppable" (966), along with superlatives like "remarkablest" (118) "Swinishest" (158), or "grandiosest" (352) create the sense of language being stretched to the limit. Likewise, when it comes to adverbs, the fact that Gately can read a paper which was Scotch-taped "fuckedupedly" (447), or that Mario can lay in a sleeping bag "sarcophagally" ends up leaving the same impression. In relation to verbs, it comes as no

surprise when the yoga practitioner, Lyle, is described as “delotusing” (432), or when we learn that government employees have been “day-and-nighting” (404) on certain strategies. Similarly, reading that Mario’s head was “uncamera’d” (265), or that everybody “Please-and-Thank-You’d” (745) at Incandenza’s Thanksgiving only strengthens the reader’s notion of witnessing reality being recorded with astounding precision and dedication.

A unique aspect of the narration is its, at times, border-line obsessive attention to detail. The narrator seems to be fixed on providing the reader with an account of events and experiences in unabridged detail. The text includes a whole host of references to highly specific entities such as “Right Honorable Edmund F. Heany Facility for Demonstrably Incurable Girls down in Brockton” (786) or “Brown University’s entire Dworkinite Female Objectification Prevention And Protest Phalanx” (929). It is likely that the reader will draw the conclusion that these extraordinarily particular descriptions must have originated in an all-knowing consciousness. When they read that “Incandenza’s output itself comprises industrial, documentary, conceptual, advertorial, technical, parodic, dramatic noncommercial, nondramatic (‘anti-confluent’) noncommercial, nondramatic commercial, and dramatic commercial works” (985), they probably get the sense that the narration as a whole is to be understood as being absolutely exhaustive. The following passage, which gives the name of an amateur film, illustrates this ‘narrative zealotry’:

TENNIS AND THE FERAL PRODIGY, NARRATED BY HAL INCANDENZA, AN 11.5-MINUTE DIGITAL ENTERTAINMENT CARTRIDGE DIRECTED, RECORDED, EDITED, AND — ACCORDING TO THE ENTRY FORM — WRITTEN BY MARIO INCANDENZA, IN RECEIPT OF NEW-NEW-ENGLAND REGIONAL HONORABLE MENTION IN INTERLACE TELENTERTAINMENT’S ANNUAL ‘NEW EYES, NEW VOICES’ YOUNG FILMMAKERS’ CONTEST, APRIL IN THE YEAR OF THE YUSHITYU2007 MIMETIC-RESOLUTION-CARTRIDGE-VIEW-MOTHERBOARD-EASY-TO-INSTALL UPGRADE FOR INFERNATRON/INTERLACE TP SYSTEMS FOR HOME, OFFICE OR MOBILE (SIC), ALMOST EXACTLY THREE YEARS AFTER DR. JAMES O. INCANDENZA PASSED FROM THIS LIFE. (172)

The implicit intention, here, is to leave nothing beyond the scope of the narration; to record every triviality. Doing so asserts the fidelity of language and the trustworthiness of the narrative voice. It also imitates how human beings cling to the supposed safety of their subjective reality by generating extensive descriptions of the external world in order to distance themselves from it.

The obsessive desire to account for the littlest aspect can also be associated with the narrator's clarifications. Many of the novel's sentences are closed with an addendum that makes clear what the sentence refers to. Amidst the descriptions of Gately's stay at the hospital, we are told that "It's like his shoulder's grown its own testicles and every time his heart beats some very small guy kicked him in them, the testicles" (920). At E.T.A. we learn that "The match was more like maybe an exhibition, and by the second set, as people got done with the weight room and showers, it was attended like one. The match. (651-652). The same clarification can be found in the passage: "Avril and C. T. know nothing about Hal's penchants for high-resin Bob Hope and underground absorption, which fact Hal obviously likes a lot, on some level, though he's never given much thought to why. To why he likes it so much" (51). Constantly at pains to make sure the reader knows what the particular sentence refers to, the narrator insists on the idea that an accurate linguistic record of the events will grant the reader total understanding. When Hal watches his father's film entitled 'Blood Sister: One Tough Nun,' the narration reaches a point of particularly fervent intensity of spelling out the appropriate references:

The order's Mother Superior had figured that it was only a matter of time before the girl's conversion and salvation reached the sort of spiritual pitch where her guarded silence broke and she told Blood Sister the seamy truth about the nun she (Blood Sister) thought had saved her (Blood Sister). So she (the Mother Superior) had eliminated the girl's map — ostensibly, she (the Mother Superior) told her lieutenant, the Vice-Mother Superior, to save her (the Vice-Mother Superior) from exposure and excommunication and maybe worse, if the girl weren't silenced. (712)

This relentless disambiguation enforces the idea that careful reading brings about reliable knowledge that the reader can count on.

Wallace was aware of his proclivity for "Hyphens to form compound nouns."<sup>43</sup> This particular facet of the text signifies the same obsessive desire to provide an exhaustive specification of what is being depicted. The novel describes: "I'm-eating-something-that-makes-me-really-appreciate-the-presence-of-whatever-I'm-drinking-along-with-it look" (6), "brainwash-and-exploit-me-if-that's-what-it-takes-type desperation" (348), "by-this-time-as-far-as-he-was-concerned-pretty-much-out-there father" (999), "the classic tell-your- troubles-to-the-trauma-patient-that-can't-interrupt-or-getaway position" (835), and at its most extreme a characterization of Johnny Gentle, the US president as:

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<sup>43</sup>D. T. Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, 283.

the either-wear-a-surgical-microfiltration-mask - or - make - the - people - around -  
you - wear - surgical - caps - and - masks - and -touch - doorknobs - only - with - a -  
boiled - hankie - and - take - fourteen - showers - a -day - only - they're - not - exactly  
- showers - they're - with - this - Dermalatix - brand -shower - sized - Hypospectral -  
Flash - Booth - that - actually - like - burns - your -outermost - layer - of - skin - off -  
in - a - dazzling - flash - and - leaves - you - baby's -butt - new - and - sterile - once -  
you - wipe - off - the - coating - of - fine - epidermal -ash-with-a-boiled-hankie kind.  
(381)

These hyper-hyphenated expressions offer a glimpse into the daunting complexity of human reality and showcase the unadulterated power of words to define it.

The expansive force of textual inflation drives the affirmation paradigm, which is based on the assumption that an immense lexicon coupled with linguistic proficiency will yield an adequate and reliable map of the world. Wallace validates this psychological impulse by implanting the text with the excessive, maximalist sensibility that became its signature trait. He is, however, very much aware of how language eventually turns on itself when viewed as having a definitive, absolute claim to truth. The only way to reach a faithful account of reality is to accept the expansion of language brought about by self-consciousness, as a complement to its compression caused by phenomena that escape representation.

### **1.3 C is not Denied, Textual Compression**

A crucial component of *Infinite Jest* is its revolt against the primacy or self-sufficiency of the mental, conceptual, linguistic reality. It advances the negation paradigm by exposing the ways in which the whole of lived reality cannot be confined to a sequence of lexical items. This effort is fundamentally anti-encyclopedic; it attempts to show how language does not possess the capacity to fully explain what is going on in the world or in one's mind. Stephen J. Burn talks about "a tension between an excess of information and unexplainable selfhood." He makes the case that "no matter how expansive your vocabulary or how careful your description, a list of words is not enough to make a self."<sup>44</sup> Robert L. McLaughlin states that "the narrative style is overly abundant, extravagant, expansive, trying impossibly as it rushes through time to lasso, capture, and represent a complex reality more and more exactly and always failing."<sup>45</sup> Clare Hayes-Brady shares the same sentiment: "The characters in Wallace's

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<sup>44</sup> Stephen J. Burn, *David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest: A Reader's Guide*, 46-47.

<sup>45</sup> Robert L. McLaughlin, "Wallace's Aesthetic," in *The Cambridge Companion*, 169.

narratives are often hidebound by language and their relationship to linguistic mediation, unable to bend words to their purpose.”<sup>46</sup> The following pages will shed light on the different techniques of text condensation that Wallace used to depict the conflict between the human need to turn experience into words and the impossibility of doing so adequately. By staging this conflict on the pages of the novel, the reader is provided with a metaphorical signpost that facilitates the process of aligning their worldview with the objective reality.

The most apparent form of compressing the text is to be found in the many abbreviations of certain words and phrases employed throughout the novel. Instead of presenting the information in its totality, as one would have expected from a work that aims to chronicle everything, we come upon Bldg. (51) in place of ‘building’, Dept. (186) rather than ‘department’, or “apt.” (892) for ‘apartment’. A ‘square’ becomes “Sq.” (690), ‘meeting’ turns to “mtg.” (546), and ‘boulevard’ is “Blvd.” (701). Making use of the slash symbol, phrases such as ‘with,’ ‘without,’ and ‘with reference to’ are transformed into “w/” (82), “w/o” (261), and “w/r/t” (476). There is also “f/x” (788) for ‘special effects’ and “b/w” (1070) for ‘black and white’. The text also utilizes Latin abbreviations: “Q.v.” (1031), “N.b.” (1033), “cf.” (1033), “Viz.” (1036), “Ibid.” (1037), “E.g.” (1033), “i.e.” (509). Condensing the text in this fashion indicates that ‘something’ must have been left out, that ‘everything’ must have been circumscribed by language.

A highly recognizable property of the novel is its use of various acronyms. The reader is forced to parse out the meaning of cipher-like structures such as “O.N.A.N.C.A.A.” (3) for ‘Organization of North American Nations College Athletics Association’, “I.B.P.W.D.W.” (300) for International Brotherhood of Pier, Wharf, and Dock Workers, “E.M.P.H.H.” (603) for Enfield Marine Public Health Hospital. Just after telling the reader about the ‘Tough Shit But You Still Can’t Drink’ recovery group, its name is immediately transformed into “TSBYSCD” (443). There are many such examples and they all reinforce the sense that space in the text must have been conserved to make room for that which has been deemed worthy of exposition. If we consider the ‘Eschaton sequence,’ where the academy students play a make-believe game that involves scoring points by hitting tennis balls at certain parts of the courts that represent different nation states, we can detect the number of acronyms reaching a critical threshold:

From the duration of the little Sierra Leone summit and the studious blankness on everybody’s face it’s pretty clear that SOVWAR and AMNAT are going to come to

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<sup>46</sup> Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*, 100.

terms, and the terms are likely to involve SOVWAR agreeing not to go SACPOP against AMNAT in return for AMNAT letting SOVWAR go SACPOP against Ingersoll's IRLIBSYR, because if SOVWAR goes SACPOP against an IRLIBSYR that can't have many warheads left in the old bucket by now (Ingersoll knows they know) then SOVWAR'll get to rack up a lot of INDDIR without much SUFDDIR, while inflicting such SUFDDIR on IRLIBSYR that IRLIBSYR'll be effectively eliminated as a threat to AMNAT's commanding lead in points, which is what has the most utility in the old game-theoretic matrix right now. (335)

The compounding effect of this type of narration is to expose how language at its most compressed ends up being insufficient at communicating meaning, due to it having to refer outside of its present manifestation. In other words, to represent the world without acronyms would be too convoluted and language must therefore be made merely indexical.

Language breaks down when, on his hospital bed, the recovering addict, Gately, tries to write 'YO!' on a notebook only for the narrator to provide the reader with a scrawl of what his message actually ends up looking like (884). Words become secondary when the word 'number' gets substituted for the hashtag symbol (43), the word 'dollar' for the dollar symbol (131), or "four fifths" appears as the fraction symbol (609). The novel also contains a diagram (502) and an equation (329). Moreover, the text hints at the world beyond language when the direction of eyebrows is depicted with two opposite slash symbols (62), when the recovering addict, Emil Minty, says about a friend he calls 'C' that "C is not 2Bdenied." (131), or when at the tennis academy, Michael Pemulis tells his younger schoolmates to "follllllowwwwwww" a card (117). These playful elements dispute the primacy of language and its ability to account for the complexity of modern reality.

A poignant way of revealing the inadequacy of language, which compels it to compress, is by wordplay. The text contains several puns that, by their very nature, emphasize the formal component of language and show how cryptic it can be. The 'Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed' provides support to those who wish to openly hide their appearance from others by wearing a veil. Its often-used acronym 'U.H.I.D.' can also be read as 'You hid.' The name that Wallace gives to America in the novel, 'Organization of North American Nations,' or 'O.N.A.N.' is a reference to onanism, which corresponds with the self-gratification tendencies of the future America. The political party in office, which is responsible for exploitation of other countries and fueling the debasement of American populace, is called 'Clean United States Party,' or 'C.U.S.P.' We might read its acronym as a warning that United States is on the edge of crossing a crucial threshold; one that will lead to

a complete spiritual bankruptcy. Furthermore, it is by no means a coincidence that the ‘Wounded, Hurting, Inadequately Nurtured but Ever-Recovering Survivors’ group spells out ‘whiners.’ Examples such as these continually remind the reader that there are levels of meaning and understanding that are not readily available, that language might only hint at what it seeks to convey.

Another prominent feature of the novel, one that Wallace referred to as “capitalized common nouns and verb-phrases,”<sup>47</sup> signifies an additional deviation from the norm. Having to use alternative textual conventions makes palpable how the common usage of language falls short of capturing reality sufficiently. Note 132 tells us that “The word *Group* in *AA Group* is always capitalized because Boston AA places enormous emphasis on joining a Group and identifying yourself as a member of this larger thing, the Group. Likewise caps in like *Commitment*, *Giving It Away*, and c.” (1025) The idea of capitalizing a word in this way involves adding meaning to it that does not have in different scenarios. When Gately’s AA sponsor, Ferocious Francis, tells him that “It’s a myth no one misses it. Their particular Substance. Shit, you wouldn’t need help if you didn’t miss it. You just have to Ask For Help and like Turn It Over, the loss and pain, to Keep Coming.” (273), it is clear that what has been communicated depends heavily on one’s understanding of the particularized linguistic context of Alcoholics Anonymous; the recoveryspeak. As the traditional conventions fail to represent the real, language is modified to do so, in this case through a slight adjustment of the regular form.

Even the convention of italics, in its ordinary style, punctures the notion of language being proportional to reality. We may point to the following sentence: “Trevor Axford, fist to his chin, asks Hal if he’s ever just simply fucking *hated* somebody without having any idea why” (340) as mimicking the stress normally heard in spoken conversation. Again, the words on the page must be adapted to fit an experience that resists representation. Being exposed to, at times, large blocks of text without the emphasis of italics, the reader is visibly invited to ascertain the difference in the narrative when they read the words of Katherine Gompert, a marijuana addict prone to clinical depression:

I can’t believe I’m *drinking*. There’s all these people in the House they’re always worried they’re going to *drink*. I’m in there for *drugs*. I’ve never had more than a beer *ever* in my *life*. I only came in here to throw up from getting *mugged*. Some street guy

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<sup>47</sup> D. T. Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*. 283.

was offering to be a witness and he would *not* leave me alone. I didn't even have any *money*. I came in here to *vomit*. (774)

The need to indicate stress further challenges the all-enveloping, definitive ambition of language in the affirmation paradigm.

Wallace also decided to simulate real speech with “multiple conjunctions at the start of independent clauses.”<sup>48</sup> According to D. T. Max, these “held the same promise of authenticity as the primitive musical arrangement and bad amping of Seattle garage bands.”<sup>49</sup> A narrator begins a sentence with two conjunctions: “But so a normal meet between two junior teams... (258). Speaking for Orin Incandenza, he uses four: “And so but since the old CBC documentary's thesis was turning out... (47) and the self-described alcoholic and addict, Mikey, puts to use all of six conjunctions: But and so and but so I'm driving back home... (959). This technique of reproducing the jagged, faulty nature of speech allows the reader to reconnect, or align themselves with the objective reality.

To prove that language fails to account for everything there is, many characters use the wrong words to describe what they have in mind. The heroin addict, Emil Minty, seamlessly incorporates such words and phrases as “conversession,” “trancemission” (129), or “tryng to smile cusually” (133) into his discourse. Randy Lenz, a cocaine addict, manages to employ “gone rye,” “bonerfied,” and “tattlemount” (543-547) in place of ‘gone awry’, ‘bona fide’, and ‘tantamount’, while his fellow Ennet House resident, Calvin Thrust, uses “secloistered”, “embryoglio”, and “prosfeces” (821-823) instead of ‘sequestered’, ‘imbroglio’, and ‘prostheses’. Gately thinks that Kate Gompert is reading “Sylvia Plate” (593), rather than Sylvia Plath and he recalls never having finished reading “*Ethan From*” (883), instead of *Ethan Frome*. In his mind, the humerus and scapula bones become “Humorous ball and Scalpula socket,” (814) while ‘orgasm’ becomes “orchasm” (863). The act of misspelling personifies how easy it is to misapply language and it positions the novel in its entirety as a possibly flawed enterprise.

Whether it is shortening words, simulating real speech, adjusting textual conventions, working in various symbols, or including paronomasia, the force of compression that bears on the text demonstrates that the world is too large for language to define it. Compressing the text is determinately anti-encyclopedic as it validates the extra-textual phenomena by illuminating the very limits of linguistic description. In essence, Wallace sets up the fictional

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<sup>48</sup> D. T. Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, 283.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 296-297.



reality on the border of what can be represented, in order to direct the reader's attention to what lies beyond.

#### 1.4 Orin lied with a really pathological intensity, Narrative Ambiguity

The narrative mode of *Infinite Jest* is multiplicituous and contradictory. The text, along with those who tell its story, is charged with both doubt and clarity. Whereas some sections erode the veracity of the narration, others passionately endorse it. This chapter will consider the parts which are ambivalent and which tend to arouse a sense distrust toward texts in general. This aspect of the work belongs to the negation paradigm that subverts the order of an unambiguous narration. Instilling the novel with self-consciousness through interpretive inconclusiveness is hallmark of metafictional literature. In the act of presenting the reader with disparate possible readings, the author is reproducing the relativity of subjective reality that accounts for a substantial share of what makes up human existence. It is, however, necessary to keep in mind that this relative layer of being, is to be validated equally as much, as the one which is absolute.

Molly Schwartzburg states that Wallace “had an enduring interest in the idea of mediation.”<sup>50</sup> Being responsible for mediating the story, the identity of the main narrator who recounts the bulk of the novel is never revealed. It seems likely that he would be male and I will refer to him as such. That being said, there is next to no information that could help determine who he is and in what relation he might stand to the different characters and settings. Toon Staes refers to him at one point as a “a seemingly omniscient third-person narrator.”<sup>51</sup> His narration is, however, determinately ambiguous. We may point to the use of adverbs of probability and hedge expressions as indicating that the narrator is clearly uncertain about certain aspects of his version of the events. We are told that “the Meeting is under way, *apparently*,”<sup>52</sup> (799) that the word ‘Verstiegenheit’ is “Low-Bavarian for something like ‘wandering alone in blasted disorienting territory beyond all charted limits and orienting markers,’ *supposedly*” (994). When Madame Psychosis stops doing her radio show, the narrator reflects on her absence: “A different silence altogether from the radio-silence-type silence that used to take up over half her nightly show. Silence of presence v. silence of absence, *maybe*” (625). Being unsure, the narrator says “the Methuen–Andover border’s

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<sup>50</sup> Molly Schwartzburg, “Conclusion: Observations on the Archive at the Harry Ransom Center,” in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, 242.

<sup>51</sup> Toon Staes, “Wallace and Empathy: A Narrative Approach,” in *The Long Thing*, 32.

<sup>52</sup> Italics added for clarity in the following examples.

mammoth effectuators force northern MA's combined oxides north against some sort of upper-air resistance, *it looks like*" (456). We learn that "*It was not impossible* that the young persons carrying the torches were dancing" (489) and that "Poutrincourt's shrug *could have meant too many things to note*" (681). At its most explicit, the narrator's speculative account includes him admitting he is "Not 100% clear on this" (996), or even having "No clue" (1036).

Apart from not being completely reliable due to uncertainty, the narration is also openly altered. Reporting on the psychological troubles of an E.T.A. student named LaMont Chu, we find out, in the middle of the description, that "A lot of these are his own terms" (388), which is an admission of altering the student's words. When the 'skinny hard-faced Advanced Basics girl' gives a speech at an AA meeting, a note informs the reader that "The speaker doesn't actually use the terms *thereon*, *most assuredly*, or *operant limbic system*, though she really had, before, said *chordate phylum*" (1026). Likewise, when covering a conversation between Gately and the manager of Ennet House, Pat Montesian, we are made aware that at one point "She didn't literally say *shitstorm*" (1033).

The narrator, at times, exhibits biased, evaluative, or corrective attitudes that would be commonly associated with a more personal type of narration; not one that borders on being omniscient and objective. The unnamed narrator, for example, ends note 243 with "If that makes sense" (1044). Addressing the sexual abuse that Matty Pemulis's father perpetrated on his son, the narrator wonders "Where was *Mrs.* Pemulis all this time ... is what I'd want to know" (1052). Speaking of the E.T.A. tennis coach Schtitt, the narrator inserts his judgement in brackets: "Like most Germans outside popular entertainment, he gets quieter when he wants to impress or menace. (There are very few shrill Germans, actually.)" (460) When the text mentions 'Dr. Incandenza's May–December marriage,' the attached note revises the information: "More like July–October, actually." (993) One of the notes just says "Don't ask" (1080).

This manner of reporting makes apparent that the narrator is not impartial, that he augments the words on the page in much the same way that one alters one's conduct in accordance with their necessarily biased, individual disposition. Imbuing the text with doubt, through the narrator's persona, accentuates its mediated nature. Clare Hayes-Brady makes the following case: "by recognizing that narrative frames are insufficient we [...] recognize the external, unreachable reality of the narrative object."<sup>53</sup> The narrator's uncertainty and

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<sup>53</sup> Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*, 28.

partiality, which inform the novel's textual ambivalence, elucidate how all linguistic accounts of the world are ultimately prejudiced and merely hint at the objective reality. Nevertheless, this intrinsic ambiguity is to be conceptualized along with its unambiguous counterpart. Hayes-Brady talks about "one of the primary paradoxes of [Wallace's] work" as "the tension between a belief in meaningful narrative potential and a consciousness of the contingency of language and communication."<sup>54</sup> The contraparametric union of the relative act of narration and the unequivocal facts of the 'narrative object,' is at the heart of Wallace's project to portray how ontologically elaborate lived experience really is.

The narrator sometimes engages the reader directly. When mentioning Bridgeport CT, he issues a warning: "be advised, if you've never been through there" (984). At another point, he prompts the reader to remain cognizant of the realities of the fictional world: "Maine having been lost altogether, recall" (1063). Talking about art production and reception, the narrator invites the reader to actively respond: "for kids and younger people, to be hip and cool is the same as to be admired and accepted and included and so Unalone. Forget so-called peer-pressure. It's more like peer-hunger. No?" (694) Asking for a confirmation of his reasoning, the narrator is exposed as being reliant, or even influenced by the reader's views. All of these instances of the narration becoming explicitly addressed to someone generate a sense that the narrator clearly has more of a 'personhood' than a disembodied, all-knowing, detached narrator might have. By the virtue of being immersed in the communicative exchange with the reader, the narrator seems more susceptible to the distortion of the narrative itself.

Having a story come from a singular consciousness is a traditional way of preserving its integrity. *Infinite Jest* problematizes this formula by integrating multiple narrators. Even though the majority of the book is told by the unnamed narrator from a third person perspective, we are also offered a number of sections with first person viewpoint. While Hal Incandenza, his father James Incandenza, and the best friend Michael Pemulis provide personal accounts of the environment of Enfield Tennis Academy, the African-American English speaker Clenette along with the drug addict Emil Minty, who refers to himself as 'yrstruly,' paint a picture of the world outside the academy. Including diverse ways of interpreting reality has the effect of casting the world as something fundamentally ambiguous and endlessly refracted through different lenses of individual subjectivity.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 46.

In addition to the numerous narrators, there are also, among the large cast of characters, many special voices, whose individually distinct verbal expression underlines the narrative ambiguity as well. Geoffrey Day stands out with his academic credentials as a resident of the Ennet recovery house, which is mostly occupied by the uneducated. When asked about the time, he tells Lenz:

We've been over this, friend. Amigo. Sport. You do this all the time with me. Again I'll say it — I don't have a digital watch. This is a fine old antique watch. It points. A memento of far better days. It's not a digital watch. It's not a cesium-based atomic clock. It points, with hands. See, Spiro Agnew here has two little arms: they point, they suggest. It's not a sodding stopwatch for life. Lenz, get a watch. Am I right? Why don't you just get a watch, Lenz. (280)

At an AA meeting, a speaker described as “a green-card Irishman” delivers a very unique speech:

'd been a confarmed bowl-splatterer for yars b'yond contin'. 'd been barred from t'facilities at o't' troock stops twixt hair'n Nork for yars. T'wallpaper in de loo a t'ome hoong in t'ese carled sheets froom t'wall, ay till yo. But now woon dey... ay'll remaember't'always. T'were a wake to t'day ofter ay stewed oop for me ninety-dey chip. Ay were tray moents sobber. Ay were thar on t'throne a't'ome, yo new. (351)

With his roots in Germany, the head coach at E.T.A., Gerhardt Schtitt, chastises the students in a particular way:

Am seeing sluggish drilling, by sluggards. Not meaning insults. This is the fact. Motions are gone through. Barely minimal efforts. Cold, yes? The cold hands and nose with mucus? Thoughts on getting through, going in, hot showers, water very hot. A meal. The thoughts are drifting toward the comfort of ending. Too cold to demand the total, yes? (458)

Even though these three examples cannot do justice to the stylistic multifariousness of the novel, they illustrate the principal idea of reflecting how varied each idiolectic account of the world truly is.

Robert L. McLaughlin points out how “The form and style of the novel provide a constant awareness of the languages through which we experience the characters and plot and in this sense mirrors the characters' experiences of their world through layers and layers of

language.”<sup>55</sup> The discrepancy between the various voices calls attention to the dissimilarity of everyone’s subjective experiences and as such bolsters the narrative ambiguity of the text.

In a similar vein, the novel features and makes use of many different languages. Adopting Russian, the fatal Entertainment movie is referred to as ‘Samizdat’ (1010). The narrator employs the word ‘kismet’ (56), which has its origins in Arabic, and speaks of ‘yutzes’ (434), taken from Yiddish. He also uses Latin expressions, such as ‘ad valorem’ (33), or ‘ex officio’ (1005). In one conversation, Steeply calls Marathe a ‘paisano’, borrowing from Spanish, while Marathe says ‘L’état protecteur’ in French (319). Two Brazilians are described as “speaking high-volume street-Portuguese” (683). There are Chinese women said to be “conversing in their anxious and high-pitched monkey-language” (716). Whitey Sorkin “utters a bit of Gaelic” (930) and Pamela Hoffman-Jeep bids Gately and Fackelmann ‘Ciao Bello’ (935) in Italian. Invoking diverse linguistic systems emphasizes how varied the ways of understanding the world are; further accentuating the sense of the narration being fundamentally ambivalent.

What also puts the status of what is being narrated at risk is the possibility that some characters may lie. Apart from certain statements from Randy Lenz, or the testimony of Molly Notkin, the principal liar of the novel is the oldest brother, Orin Incandenza. Hal tells Mario that “Orin lied with a really pathological intensity, growing up, is what I’ve been remembering” (771). Orin’s friend from childhood, Marlon Bain, relates how “you have to take what Orin says in a fairly high-sodium way. I am not sure I would stand and point at Orin as an example of a classic pathological liar, but you have only to watch him in certain kinds of action to see that there can be such a thing as *sincerity with a motive*.” He goes on to say “It is not that Orin Incandenza is a liar, but that I think he has come to regard the truth as *constructed* instead of *reported*.” (1048) Not knowing whether to trust any of the narration that surrounds Orin introduces another element of textual instability. His duplicity is comparable to that of the writer, who may be prone to similar self-serving tendencies and tailor the text to present themselves in a particular way. Wallace’s incorporation of the mendacious impulse into the novel adds to the narrative ambiguity.

Very much aware of the extent to which financial matters shape social reality, Wallace makes the commercialization of art into a thematic concern. The fictional world of the novel is saturated with brand names, a sizeable portion of human experience already co-opted by monetary interests. Hal is “eating an AminoPal® energy-bar” (171), Poor Tony smells “Old

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<sup>55</sup> McLaughlin, “Wallace’s Aesthetic,” in *The Cambridge Companion*, 169.

Spice Stick Deodorant, Classic Original Scent” (305) and the ‘addicted man’, who speaks to Marathe at Ennet House, wears “Blue Jeans of Levi #501” (733). Wallace said: “The world that I live in consists of two hundred and fifty advertisements a day and any number of unbelievably entertaining options, most of which are subsidized by corporations that want to sell me things.” He then put forward his rationale: “I use a fair amount of pop stuff in my fiction, but what I mean by it is nothing different than what other people mean in writing about trees and parks and having to walk to the river to get water a 100 years ago. It’s just the texture of the world I live in.”<sup>56</sup> Seeing the ubiquitous upsell, Wallace outlines the future ‘wholesale’ America as an idealization of the cold-blooded, disingenuous desire to maximize profits. In the fictional reality of the novel, Statue of Liberty is converted into a gigantic advertisement, holding a different product every year. The names of calendar years are sold to the highest bidder. As Clare Hayes-Brady makes clear, the “Subsidized Time represents an iteration of neoliberal economic politics, incorporating a society’s sense of time itself into a corporatized, self-referential system.”<sup>57</sup> Wallace was intrigued by the idea that “to live in America was to live in a world of confusion, where meaning was refracted and distorted, especially by the media that engulf and reconfigure every gesture.”<sup>58</sup> The crux of the issue has been articulated by Adam Kelly: “In the age of advertising, it becomes impossible to separate in an absolute manner those communications genuinely directed toward the benefit of the receiver from those that serve primarily to draw attention to the sender.”<sup>59</sup> The need to sell magnifies the conniving aspect of human psyche and exposes certain parts of one’s social existence as polluted with deception. Due to the fact that novels are products as well, Wallace’s commentary of the debased society in the text, is to be taken as an attempt to move beyond art that excessively accommodates the views and sentiments of the audience, at the expense of losing its moral foundations. Through the representation of the economic forces that shape the modern world and the text itself, Wallace is making the narrative more equivocal.

Although the main narrator never appears as a character and seems to possess a certain degree of omniscience, his voice is frequently affected by the minds of the characters; not really talking about them, but through them. This old literary technique, which Brian

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<sup>56</sup> Miller, “Something Real American,” in *David Foster Wallace: The Last Interview*, 51.

<sup>57</sup> Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*, 131.

<sup>58</sup> Max, D. T. Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, 49.

<sup>59</sup> Adam Kelly, “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction,” in *Consider David Foster Wallace*, 131.

Richardson calls ‘permeable narration’<sup>60</sup>, is commonly referred to as ‘free indirect discourse.’ Rémy Marathe, the wheelchair assassin and member of A.F.R. is not fully proficient in English and the passages that feature him are colored by this attribute to a considerable degree. The narrator refers to the Ennet halfway house as ‘demi-maison,’ a literal translation that Marathe would use. His way of thinking infiltrates the narration in the following sentence as well: “Marathe felt suddenly the excitement of himself — M. Hugh Steeply’s wording for this had been *from somewhere blue*” (750). A different sentence at another section begins with Marathe’s fumbling of ‘out of the blue’: “It sometimes from somewhere blue occurred to Marathe that he did not dislike this Steeply” (642). When Marathe’s associates from A.F.R. raid the Antiois brothers’ shop, the narration is distorted by their consciousness as well. We are told that all the movie cartridges end up being put into “huge metal *coffre d’amas*” (721), instead of ‘dumpsters’ and that the leader Fortier ordered “surveillance on the hated F.L.Q.’s *bureau centrale*” (726), in place of ‘central office’. Having English as a second language, these characters substitute certain words with their French equivalents and the narrator follows suit; effectively proving that the events reported from third person are not as unbiased as one would expect.

Turning attention to a different character, it is easy to concur with Greg Carlisle that “The narrator for Gately spells as Gately spells.”<sup>61</sup> When we consider that for specific sections of the novel, it is Joelle van Dyne, who focalizes the events of the third person narration, when the supposedly same narrator later calls her “This Joelle girl” (364) or “the weirdly-familiar-but-Southernish-sounding girl Joelle van D.” (475), it becomes apparent the narrator is speaking ‘on behalf’ of Gately. This phenomenon of one consciousness bleeding into another is made explicit, when Gately meets the ghost of James Incandenza, who is referred to as ‘wraith’ in the text. We learn that “a wraith had no out-loud voice of its own, and had to use somebody’s like internal brain-voice if it wanted to try to communicate something, which was why thoughts and insights that were coming from some wraith always just sound like your own thoughts, from inside your own head, if a wraith’s trying to interface with you” (831). When the wraith infiltrates Gately’s mind, he starts augmenting Gately’s vocabulary in a way that Gately terms ‘lexical rape.’ He “hasn’t got clue one about where ghostwords like SINISTRAL or LIEBESTOD mean or come from, much less OMMATOPHORIC” (883). The word ‘SINISTRAL’ later goes from being rendered in upper case letters to being italicized in: “The nurse means *sinistral*” (883), ultimately becoming

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<sup>60</sup> Staes, “Wallace and Empathy,” in *The Long Thing*, 33.

<sup>61</sup> Greg Carlisle, *Elegant Complexity*, 340.

completely unemphasized in its last instance: “Gately was trying with maddening sinistral care to ...” (885). We can take this gradual deemphasis of the word to be a reflection of the human tendency to eventually forget that one is being continuously influenced by the ideas of others; a process not unlike the one that free indirect discourse aims to reenact. Swayed by the thoughts and views of the characters, the narrator’s sense of the world ends up being as ambiguous as theirs.

The negation paradigm houses all the efforts to invalidate the truth of a story. By withholding information from the reader, the author makes the text inconclusive. Greg Carlisle has borrowed the term ‘chaotic stasis’ from the novel and argued that Wallace tends to “[conclude] a narrative sequence in ... a moment of maximum tension.” He identifies the “quality of creating tension that remains open-ended or achieves chaotic stasis” as a “signature feature of Wallace’s work.”<sup>62</sup> Clare Hayes-Brady linked Wallace’s literature with the philosophy of Richard Rorty. In her analysis, the common thread that runs through the work of both men is the idea that “the purpose of writing ... is not to *find* closure, but to resist it, to frame the possibilities of meaning, not to achieve, and so to close them.”<sup>63</sup> She often speaks of ‘radical anti-teleology’ and ‘insistence on plurality’ when discussing Wallace’s texts. Both Carlisle and Hayes-Brady masterfully characterize what I here call the ‘narrative ambiguity.’ The element of anti-closure becomes evident in the section entitled ‘Selected transcripts of the resident-interface-drop-in-hours of Ms. Patricia Montesian,’ which features various complaints, confessions, and remarks of over a dozen of Ennet halfway house tenants. The long passage ends with the last resident saying “First just let me say one thing” (181). Similar interruption of the narrative can be observed during a phone conversation, where Orin’s last words to Hal are “if you remember, when she raised this samizdat -word in connec—” (1022). Here, since Orin is not getting the hint that Hal needs to leave with Pemulis, Hal actually hangs up on him. A comparable sentiment is expressed, at the beginning of the novel, in the conversation between Hal and his father James, during which the reader cannot decide whether Hal is able to speak to his father or not. The father says: “Praying for just one conversation, amateur or no, that does not end in terror? That does not end like all the others: you staring, me swallowing?” He keeps addressing Hal, but without an answer: “... Son? ... *Son?*” (31) Unable or unwilling to respond, Hal’s silence is rendered by ellipsis; leaving the reader without resolution. The three examples challenge the idea of finality by epitomizing incompleteness. They interrupt the momentum of the narrative by leaving some

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<sup>62</sup> Carlisle, *Elegant Complexity*, 24-25.

<sup>63</sup> Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*, 2.



of relevant events out. This ‘empty space’ compels the reader to make sense of the text in their particular way, simultaneously reflecting on the fundamentally relativistic nature of the process.

The text’s narrative ambiguity can be associated with the fact that many of the story’s plot threads remain unresolved. The middle period in the filmography of James Incandenza termed ‘Digital Parallelism’ and ‘Cinema of Chaotic Stasis’ is defined by “a stubborn and possibly intentionally irritating refusal of different narrative lines to merge into any kind of meaningful confluence” (996) We may only hypothesize what lead to Hal’s speechlessness at the admission interview, who is Mario’s real father, or what extramarital affairs did Avril Incandenza had. Marathe’s allegiance, Joelle’s disfigurement, location of the Master Cartridge, or the physical and mental state of Gately at the end of the novel, are all debatable. Mary K. Holland characterizes this open-endedness: “Failing to satisfy, resolve, or lie still, requiring our intervention and commitment, offering in the end ambiguity, ambivalence, and multiple contradictory readings, *Infinite Jest* fails to deliver the passive, packaged pleasure of stupefaction – that, we can all agree on.”<sup>64</sup> Marshall Boswell makes the case that “the conclusion of *Infinite Jest*’s does not “untie,” that is resolve, its tensions but rather leaves them tangled, densely unresolved. In fact the first section of the novel constitutes the conclusion, or at least the latest occurrence, which means the novel is circular, beginning with its ending and ending with its beginning. Between that final sequence and the opening scenes, however, there is a significant gap, a void, into which all of the novel’s unanswered questions fall endlessly, like coins down a well with no bottom.”<sup>65</sup>

A standard, ‘commonsensical’ way to tell a story is in a chronological fashion. A popular metafictional practice will ‘scramble’ this consecutive ordering and present events in diverse time schemes, hurtling through time to disrupt the reader’s sequential expectations. A trademark of *Infinite Jest*, the non-linear narrative intensifies the sense of textual ambivalence by undermining the traditional composition of a story. Though Wallace indicated where the text breaks into chapters and subchapters, the rationale behind the arrangement of the book remains elusive. The narrator is permanently on the move between different points in time and space, alternating between different settings and characters. Sometimes a mere blank line will divide a complete shift in narration (97, 475, 596). Greg Carlisle observed how “The frequent and often brief shifts (weaves) in narrative are analogous to filmic quick-cuts and intensify the action, creating a bulge of narrative tensions and the illusion that the plots are converging

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<sup>64</sup> Holland, “Infinite Jest,” in *The Cambridge Companion*, 137-138.

<sup>65</sup> Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 97.

toward a unified climax.”<sup>66</sup> Matt Tresco wrote about the novel’s “fragmentary and a-chronological structure, a structure which is rich in detail and suspicious of neat, comforting resolutions.”<sup>67</sup> Michael Pietsch spoke of Wallace’s “insistence that standard notions of plot missed the point” and “that so much more was going on in life at every moment that there was never a single resolution to anything.”<sup>68</sup> In Wallace’s own words: “A lot of it really does come back to trying to do something that feels real to me. And—I don’t really know what the interior of anybody else is like—I often feel very fragmented, and as if I have a symphony of different voices, and voice-overs, and factoids, going on all the time and digressions on digressions on digressions.”<sup>69</sup> In his interview with Mark Caro, the author said: “The image in my mind—and I actually had dreams about it all the time—was that this book was really a very pretty pane of glass that had been dropped off the twentieth story of a building.”<sup>70</sup> The seemingly demolished-and-glued-back-together text presents the reader with a task to put together a meaningful narrative and in doing so highlights the potentially infinite nature of such a process, one that is brought into being through textual ambiguity.

There is a special way that the narration implements the sense of incompleteness in the text, which may be called ‘interspersed narration.’ The goal of this technique is to portray the events of two different narrative frames at the same time, giving the impression of simultaneity. It can be observed, when Madame Psychosis on her radio show, begins listing various physical abnormalities as they appear in the booklet for the Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed, a support group for the “aesthetically challenged” (187), only for the third person narration to shift to the grounds of Enfield Tennis Academy and start describing the thoughts and experiences of Mario Incandenza, who is listening to the broadcast. What transpires on the following pages is an alternating representation of both the radio show and Mario’s surroundings. The words of Madame Psychosis are inserted into the E.T.A. narration and the interlaced text then serves as a signpost, leading the reader to an understanding that, at any moment, there are possibly countless scenarios, which escape narration on behalf of the scene that is currently selected. The very same interspersed type of narration is used again during the Jim Troeltsch’s ‘sports portion’ of the radio broadcast coming from an intercom speaker at one of the E.T.A. classrooms (309). Troeltsch’s reports

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<sup>66</sup> Carlisle, *Elegant Complexity*, 316.

<sup>67</sup> Matt Tresco, “Impervious To U.S. Parsing: Encyclopedism, Autism, and Infinite Jest,” in *Consider David Foster Wallace*, 113.

<sup>68</sup> Pietsch and Moody, “On Editing David Foster Wallace,” in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, 214.

<sup>69</sup> Steve Paulson, “Some kind of terrible burden,” in *David Foster Wallace: The Last Interview*, 166-167.

<sup>70</sup> Mark Caro, “The Next Big Thing: Can a Downstate Author Withstand the Sensation over His 1,079-Page Novel?” in *Conversations*, 57.

on the victories and losses of different tennis matches is embedded in the third person narration that continues. Lastly, when Mario Incandenza presents his amateur film at the Continental Interdependence Day celebration, it contains a blend of real and fake newspaper and magazine headings to provide historical context for the audience. These headings will go on to ‘pierce’ the narrative in a similar way that the previous examples did.

Additionally, the narration takes on a ‘swooping’ perspective, starting with: “At just this moment, @1200 meters east and downhill and one level below ground, Ennet House live-in Staff Don Gately lay deeply asleep in his Lone-Rangerish sleeping mask, his snores rattling the deinsulated pipes along his little room’s ceiling” (654). The text then chronicles the whereabouts of several characters, each section corresponding to one paragraph. Forty-six pages later, the same type of rundown appears, beginning: “The vaporizer chugs and seethes and makes the room’s windows weep as Jim Troeltsch inserts a pro-wrestling cartridge in the little TP’s viewer and dons his tackiest sportcoat” (700) This kind of narration intentionally enlarges its scope through the multiplication of narrative frames, to make the reader aware of the reality which is not being reported on at other times. This method achieves the same result of generating a text which is intrinsically ambiguous.

The narrative ambiguity unsettles the security of meaning to be found in the novel. It employs diverse ways of problematizing the validity of the various accounts of reality for the sake of counterbalancing the affirmation paradigm and its world-building capacity. Constantly laying out competing interpretations of the text, the textual ambivalence undermines any single claim to truth. Wallace arranged the book in its uniquely incongruous fashion in pursuance of an imitation of the logically contradictory extra-textual reality. The logically irreconcilable paradigms are, however, supposed to meet.

### **1.5. Except Orin used to end up telling the truth even when he didn’t think he was, Narrative Unambiguity**

At the heart of *Infinite Jest* is a truth that resists the relativity of interpretation; a singularity of meaning that is wholly unambiguous. It empowers the affirmation paradigm in its aim to foster conviction in the reality of the story by portraying certain elements of the fictional world as utterly indisputable. This frank effort to endorse and defend storytelling is manifest in the way the narration, at times, veers toward depiction which is credible and unbiased. The reader, who is constantly reminded of the mediated nature of the text, is invited to contemplate what may lie beyond the layers of subjective deception or intersubjective

falsehoods. The ability to validate the legitimacy of the events described in the novel and become engrossed in the fictional story is analogous to one's capacity to believe in the reality of one's own life and engage with the real world. Affirming the validity of the text allows the reader to align themselves with the objective reality.

However uncertain or partial the main narrator may occasionally be, he is, unquestionably, capable of accessing the innermost thoughts and feelings of the characters. Speaking about Pemulis, we learn that "A loose music played in his head" (551), while Marathe is at one point "rehearsing his prepared lines within his head" (733). Then from Gately's perspective: "**SHOT IN SOBRIETY** in bold headline caps goes across his mind's eye like a slow train" (613). Only a supreme consciousness could report what is happening inside the heads of others. Moreover, the narrator actually knows more than those about whom he speaks. Being aware of what characters are not aware of, the narrator possesses superior knowledge that he is letting the reader in on. We can turn to a passage where the narrator articulates what Hal does not realize: "the point is that Tavis is an odd and delicate specimen, both ineffectual and in certain ways fearsome as a Headmaster, and being a relative guarantees no special predictive insight or quarter, unless certain maternal connections are exploited, the thought of doing which literally does not occur to Hal" (517). Similarly, when the narration mentions some injured players at E.T.A, an endnote informs us that these "[include] K. McKenna, who claims to have a bruised skull but does not in fact have a bruised skull" (1052). Only an unrestricted access to character's interior experience could allow the narrator to share that "though he'd never admit it," Pemulis is "already clearly nauseated with worry" (511).

The oldest Incandenza brother, Orin, has been shown to be an unreliable source of information due to his propensity to misrepresent the truth. It would, however, be incorrect to merely flag him as a liar and disregard his voice, as such a conclusion is too reductive. The novel, centrally, pits essentialism against non-essentialism in an attempt to establish an integrative relationship between the two. Even though Orin's input is denounced on multiple occasions, Mario who "doesn't lie" (249) says that "Orin used to end up telling the truth even when he didn't think he was" (773). This incongruous portrayal of an individual as a coalescence of both truth and untruth is analogic to the nature of the literary text as well.

Certain portions of the novel are fundamentally and deliberately infallible. As the narration becomes unambiguous, the fictional reality starts to take on the same definitude of the outside world. One Advanced Basics speaker shares a story about how his alcohol addiction brought down his professional life, ending with the audience bursting into laughter

because of the ludicrous denouement, the narrator then informs us that “the story wasn’t meant to be one bit funny: it was just the truth” (368). After another speaker relates a harrowing experience of her stillbirth, we read that “Gately tries not to think. Here is no Cause or Excuse. It is simply what happened” (378). The E.T.A. guru Lyle gives advice to the young player named LaMont Chu: “You burn with hunger for food that does not exist” to which Chu asks “This is good news?” and Lyle responds “It is the truth” (389).

Correspondingly, when a different player, Todd Possalthwaite, discloses his desperation to his peers, saying “Nothing’s fair because nothing’s true,” Pemulis tells him “Buck up” and explains: “Because if that’s your burr then rest in my assurance, Postalcode: certain things are rock-solid, high-grade true” (1068). According to the novel, there may be plenty of ways that one’s view of the world may become skewed, but none of the subjective distortions nullify the truth that is objective.

Specific passages of the text are entirely defined by the narrator’s certainty. The narrator reports: “It is now, beyond any argument or equivocation, snowing. The sky is off-white” (341). When Gately shares at an AA meeting, we learn that: “He’s both pissed off and ashamed to be talking about this instead of how just completely good it is to just be getting through the day without ingesting a Substance, but there it is. This is what’s going on” (444). Likewise, “when Ferocious Francis G. and the White Flaggers presented him, on the September Sunday that marked his first year sober, with a faultlessly baked and heavily frosted one-candle cake, Don Gately had cried in front of nonrelatives for the first time in his life. He now denies that he actually did cry, saying something about candle-fumes in his eye. But he did” (468). Presenting parts of the text as completely reliable upholds the stability of the fictional reality and instills a belief in the possibility of linguistic meaning being definitive.

The unequivocal nature of the text becomes apparent whenever the narration involves facts. During Gately and Fackelmann’s drug binge, they receive a telephone call: “When the phone rang it was just a fact. The ringing was like an environment, not a signal. The fact of its ringing got more and more abstract. Whatever a ringing phone might signify was like totally overwhelmed by the overwhelming fact of its ringing” (936). Describing Joelle’s experience at Molly Notkin’s party, the narrator states:

Her glass of juice is on the back of the toilet, half-empty. The back of the toilet is lightly sheened with condensation of unknown origin. These are facts. This room in this apartment is the sum of very many specific facts and ideas. There is nothing more to it than that. Deliberately setting about to make her heart explode has assumed the

status of just one of these facts. It was an idea but now is about to become a fact. The closer it comes to becoming concrete the more abstract it seems. Things get very abstract. The concrete room was the sum of abstract facts. Are facts abstract, or are they just abstract representations of concrete things? (239)

This passage illustrates a shift from the factual toward the merely theoretical, the move from objectivity to subjectivity. Questioning the ontological foundations of reality is what the novel does in both form and content. The balance found in the declarative mood of the beginning and the interrogative mood at the end of the passage epitomizes the union of resolution and irresolution that defines the intellectual odyssey of *Infinite Jest*. While certain literary techniques affirm the validity of the story, metafictional devices negate it. The human tendency to distance one's self from the world is to be acknowledged equally as much as our need to align ourselves with it. The contraparadigmatic nature of our existence, as it is refracted in metamodern literature, is an appeal for complementarity among logical discrepancy.

## 2.0 Intersubjective Reality

### 2.1 Looking at his eyes rather than into them, The Ubiquity of Disconnection

*Infinite Jest* can be classified as speculative fiction. It contemplates a future by posing the question: what if Americans were to fail in their humanity? Dysfunctional relationships dominate the fictional world; each character disconnected from the social reality which is to be shared. The intersubjective experience of being recognized as a human being is an integral part of healthy psychology, and seeing it impaired by lack of empathy or understanding in the envisioned future prompts the reader to reflect on the state of society in their present. The shared reality is manifest in personal interactions, but it also defines the lives of individuals in the form of larger social forces. Whether it is one person or the entire collective that impose an influence on the subject, Wallace's prospective America is a spiritually bankrupt nation where what binds people together is rarely genuine compassion. Although this hostile environment is meant to show the possible consequences of social indifference, there is also a more hopeful vision of interpersonal relations being successfully fulfilled. In other words, the text evinces a dialectic oscillation between the necessity of social engagement and justifiability of social detachment.

The members of Incandenza family stand as a stark example of a profound need for mutual understanding that goes unsatisfied. We are told that "for somebody who not only lives on the same institutional grounds as his family but also has his training and education and pretty much his whole overall *raison-d'être* directly overseen by relatives, Hal devotes an unusually small part of his brain and time ever thinking about people in his family qua family-members" (515-516). Hal may share a room with Mario, talk on the phone with Orin and see his mother Avril regularly, but none of them really know about his struggles with addiction and athletic burnout. Constantly surrounded by various people, he remains fundamentally unseen. He remarks "I'd neither carried nor squeezed my ball for several days. No one seemed to have noticed" (853). Concluding a conversation about God with his brother, he says "'Mario, you and I are mysterious to each other. We countenance each other from either side of some unbridgeable difference on this issue" (41). In the world of the novel, this 'unbridgeable difference' takes on a universal characteristic of human relations. A growing sense of disconnect between the siblings becomes obvious when we find out about Mario that "He can't tell if Hal is sad. He is having a harder and harder time reading Hal's states of mind

or whether he's in good spirits." The inability to ascertain the experience of the other is indicative of personal detachment.

The oldest brother Orin refers to his intimate partners as Subjects. Robert L. McLaughlin speaks of 'fin-de-siècle relationships' that "are built around what one party can get from the other – attention, amusement, pleasure, sex. To so use another person, to turn her into an object for our own gratification, is to dehumanize her and thus to increase her loneliness and our own."<sup>71</sup> This very much applies to Orin's treatment of his sexual partners. We learn that he would see "if he could take a girl out somewhere public and then meet and have covert sex with a whole different girl while still out with the first girl" (634). This and many other tactics exemplify his tendency to distance himself from the women he meets. This detachment can be, however, traced back to the dynamics of his family. The narrator observes: "Orin had no idea what his father thought or felt about anything" (737). Right before his eventual demise, his last romantic companion is watching Orin with complete abandon: "the Subject was looking at his eyes rather than into them" (972). This is the dehumanizing aspect of humanity that undergirds the story, signifying the dangerous possibility of absolute detachment.

The problem of estrangement runs through the generations of Incandenzas. Jim confesses to Joelle that "he simply didn't know how to speak with either of his undamaged sons without their mother's presence and mediation" (743). He, in the form of a ghost, also tells Gately about his own growing up: "Just imagine the horror of spending your whole itinerant lonely Southwest and West Coast boyhood trying unsuccessfully to convince your father that you even existed" (838). Jim's father actually verbalizes a similar sentiment when he tells him "I'm so scared, Jim. I'm so scared of dying without ever being really seen" (168). Familial bonds, here, are clearly associated with unfulfilled needs.

A salient example of what consequences social disconnection can have is to be found in Mrs. Waite, the socially withdrawn, older woman Gately remembers from his childhood. Seen by the community as too eccentric, when she hand-delivers a cake she baked to a birthday party in the neighborhood as a gesture of goodwill, she is not invited inside and the cake is thrown away. She is later found dead in her house. Human beings, who try to reach out to others, wither away in the absence of social recognition.

Clare Hayes-Brady provides a very accurate description of the mode of relating present in the novel when she speaks of "human interaction that simultaneously repudiated and

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<sup>71</sup> McLaughlin, "Wallace's Aesthetic," in *The Cambridge Companion*, 162.



reinforced the necessity of the bounded self, at once loathing and depending on the separation of competing subjectivities.”<sup>72</sup> In *Ennet House*, “Day is scanning the room for somebody else to engage and piss off so he can prove to himself he doesn’t fit in here and stay separated off isolated inside himself and maybe get them so pissed off there’s a beef and he gets bounced out, Day, and it won’t be his fault” (274). Others are considered only in relation to the interests of the self, as means to an end. Orin tells Hal about a pedestrian he saw fall on the pavement. The scene portrays this selfish attitude: “He’s still lying there, I see out the window. He’s not moving anymore. Everyone’s avoiding him, going around him. He looks too hot to touch. A little Hispanic kid made off with his hat” (136). Hal at one point affirms this reality when he says “That you will become way less concerned with what other people think of you when you realize how seldom they do” (203). Wallace was aware of the human propensity to detach from one another and of the simultaneous desire to be understood. In his interview with David Streitfeld, he says “I want to be with someone, but I can’t be with someone.”<sup>73</sup>

The prevailing sense of a social disconnect is clearly emphasized by cases where interpersonal communication breaks down. Hal remembers his mother telling his father “she’d long-since abandoned any reasonable hope that he could hear what she was telling him” (951). Hal himself ends up unable to produce comprehensible speech. Moreover, the central issue of his relationship with his father throughout their lives is that Jim cannot hear his son. Bedridden at St. Elizabeth’s Hospital, “It occurs to Gately that right now’s just like when he was a toddler and his Mom and her companion were both passed out or worse: no matter how frightened or scared he might become he now again cannot get anybody to come or to hear or even know about it” (923). The characters of the story are often separated by a metaphorical chasm. Incapable of successfully exchanging information, they remain misunderstood. Even when they do speak to each other, their conversations are riddled with miscommunication. When Joelle tells Gately about her membership in U.H.I.D. and specifies that “The veil is a sort of fellowship caparison,” he replies “What’s it compared to?” (533) Here, Gately mistakes the name for a headgear for the word ‘comparison.’ Speaking of Wallace’s first novel, Clare Hayes-Brady states that his realism is “founded on the search for human truth and linguistic honesty, guided by the principle of communication and aware of its

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<sup>72</sup> Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*, 18.

<sup>73</sup> Streitfeld, “The Wasted Land,” in *David Foster Wallace: The Last Interview*, 32-33.

own necessary fallibility.”<sup>74</sup> By showing the failure of the information exchange process, the alienated state of the individual subject becomes apparent.

One of the results of there being a division between the self and the other is the widespread loneliness. The speakers at the Narcotics Anonymous agree that part of their “hideous psychic fallout” brought about by dependency on marijuana is “social isolation” (503). Marathe at his worst declares “I see no point and do no work and belong to nothing; I am alone. I think of death” (777). What it feels like to be an E.T.A. student is probably best described by Ingersoll when he says: “We’re all on each other’s food chain. All of us. It’s an individual sport. Welcome to the meaning of individual. We’re each deeply alone here. It’s what we all have in common, this aloneness” (112). During a conversation with the wraith, Gately ponders how he would feel if he were a ghost himself. He envisions being able to “quantum off anyplace instantly and stand on ceilings and probably burgle like no burglar’d ever dreamed of, but not able to really affect anything or interface with anybody, having nobody know you’re there” and concludes that “It’d be real free-seeming, but incredibly lonely, he imagines” (833). This is the paradoxical dialectic of wanting to connect, but also resisting the potential dangers of attempting to do so. Thomas Tracey called loneliness Wallace’s perhaps “most preoccupying theme.”<sup>75</sup> Wallace himself believed that “there is this existential loneliness in the real world. I don’t know what you’re thinking or what it’s like inside you and you don’t know what it’s like inside me. In fiction I think we can leap over that wall itself in a certain way.”<sup>76</sup> The text presents the reader with individual characters who are ever searching for connection, but who are also, at the same time, striving to prevent themselves from being harmed by others. Both of these behavioral patterns fall within the domain of the intersubjective reality. A significant part of the human experience must be at times negotiated with altogether different consciousness and that is why this social dimension plays such a critical role in the novel and this analysis.

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<sup>74</sup> Clare Hayes-Brady, “The Book, the Broom and the Ladder: Philosophical Groundings in the Work of David Foster Wallace,” in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, 24.

<sup>75</sup> Thomas Tracey, “The Formative Years: David Foster Wallace’s Philosophical Influences and The Broom of the System,” in *Gesturing Toward Reality*, 269.

<sup>76</sup> Miller, “The Salon Interview,” in *Conversations*, 62.

## 2.2 Looking not just at the speaker's face but into it, The Necessity of Connection

The world of *Infinite Jest* offers its inhabitants the possibility to connect to one another in each of its various environments. Though the interpersonal aspect of their individual lives may be marked by stress and conflict, they are not to give into despair. If the distancing process separates one from the intersubjective reality of what is communicated and negotiated socially, then the process of aligning one's self with the objective reality allows every individual to enter this space, contribute to it, and have their existence reified by others who do the same. Kathleen Fitzpatrick writes that "enabling a more authentic human connection, or at least creating its imaginative possibility, was a significant component of Wallace's sense of the role of the novel in contemporary culture."<sup>77</sup> The novel is fully aware of the fact that the intersubjective dimension can be both a benefit or hindrance to a person's psychological well-being, but what it seeks to highlight are the ways of contending with the very existence of this aspect of human experience. In other words, it illustrates the individual attempts to come to terms with one's need to engage with others, even in the face of possible distress.

That characters want to connect can be gleaned from the seemingly unusual relationship between Mario and Gerhardt Schtitt, the Head Coach and Athletic Director at E.T.A. The narrator informs us that "It's possibly odd that the leptosomatic Mario I., so damaged he can't even grip a stick, much less flail at a moving ball with one, is the one kid at E.T.A. whose company Schtitt seeks out, is in fact pretty much the one person with whom Schtitt speaks candidly, lets his pedagogical hair down" (79). Hal's need to participate socially is found in his academy responsibility of teaching the younger players. He "on the whole rather likes being a Big B. He likes being there to come to, and likes delivering little unpretentious minilectures on tennis theory and E.T.A. pedagogy and tradition, and getting to be kind in a way that costs him nothing" (99). Pemulis betrays his image of self-interested swindler when he at one point confesses "Hal, you are my friend, and I've been friends to you in ways you don't even have a clue" (1064-1065). Joelle's perspective on the Incandenza family reveal a certain familial tenderness: "Jim opened himself only to the mother. They all did, he said. She was there for them all, psychically. She was the family's light and pulse and the center that held tight" (737). Avril's own feelings are rendered as such: "It's like she feels

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<sup>77</sup> Kathleen Fitzpatrick, "Infinite Summer: Reading, Empathy, and the Social Network," in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, 183.

these two sons are the people in her life with whom so little important needs to be said that she loves it” (760). Even the scheming Orin, whose slew of intimate partners lock him in a cycle of superficial relationships, indicates his longing for a deeper connection when he tells Hal of the *Moment* magazine soft-profile-writer: “Helen’s a different sort of Subject. I’ve discovered levels and dimensions to Helen that have nothing to do with profiles” (1012). The father in the family, James, is so concerned with the act of relating socially that one of his movies features two convicts — one blind, the other deaf-mute — together in a solitary confinement, as they “attempt to devise ways of communicating with each other” (987). During his conversation with Gately, James as the wraith makes clear that “any conversation or interchange is better than none at all” and that “the worst kind of gut-wrenching intergenerational interface is better than withdrawal or hiddenness on either side” (839).

Connection takes on a communal quality at E.T.A. In the course of the Viewing Room discussion, the boys chat about the complaining at the academy. Hal claims that “The point is it’s ritualistic. The bitching and moaning. Even assuming they feel the way they say when they get together, the point is notice we were all sitting there all feeling the same way *together*.” Hal continues “the suffering unites us. They want to let us sit around and bitch. Together. After a bad P.M. set we all, however briefly, get to feel we have a common enemy. This is their gift to us. Their medicine. Nothing brings you together like a common enemy” (111-113). D. T. Max’s observation is pertinent here: “that human connections can heal would become the centerpiece of Wallace’s mature credo.”<sup>78</sup> E.T.A students are so hungry for the recognition of their problems that they regularly solicit the guidance of the spandex-wearing guru Lyle. “Sometimes Lyle will listen and shrug and smile and say ‘The world is very old’ or some such general Remark and decline to say much else. But it’s the way he listens, somehow, that keeps the saunas full.” (387)

“Empathy, in Boston AA, is called Identification.” (345) Alcoholics Anonymous is very much aware of the impact that interpersonal connection, or lack thereof, has on those trying to reclaim their humanity. When one session erupts into “rampant, indiscriminate hugging” it provides a convincing example of the aforementioned duality of connecting with others that “Kate Gompert had her usual lipless expression of morose distaste, but even she gave and got some hugs” (505). Certain AA speeches have a profoundly rejuvenating effect on the audience. The speaker depicted as “A round pink girl with no eyelashes at all” gives a speech about the dramatic loss of her child and hearing her is described as “so good that even

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<sup>78</sup> D. T. Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, 72.

Tiny Ewell and Kate Gompert and the rest of the worst of them all sat still and listened without blinking, looking not just at the speaker's face but into it" (379). It is understood, in the Ennet House, that people are so fundamentally dependent on social recognition that "Gately has to have each newer resident in to the office for at least a couple minutes to like touch base and see how they're doing and make it clear they're regarded as existing so they can't just melt into the living room's decor and disappear" (595).

Gately, after having been shot and hospitalized, finds himself wishing for sympathy when he is visited by his sponsor Ferocious Francis: "now that somebody he trusts himself to need is here, Gately wants to weep about the pain and tell how bad the pain of it is, how he doesn't think he can stand it one more second" (885). It is only through the positive influence of AA philosophy that Joelle, who dons the veil of U.H.I.D, eventually considers showing someone her face (710).

The friendship which develops between Lenz and Green is a further exemplification of the inescapable presence of the human need to be seen and heard by others. The competing self, however, always presents a threat to one's subjectivity. We are told that:

there's always this slight hangnail of fear, like clinging, whenever he likes somebody. It's like something terrible could happen at any time. Less fear than a kind of tension in the region of stomach and ass, an all-body wince. Deciding to go ahead and think somebody's a stand-up guy: it's like you drop something, you give up all of your power over it: you have to stand there impotent waiting for it to hit the ground: all you can do is brace and wince. It kind of enrages Lenz to like somebody. (554)

Speaking of communication, Clare Hayes-Brady asserts "that strange combination of embracing and crossing the borders between minds, stopping short of wholesale identification is the only possible source of relief from the isolation of our individuality."<sup>79</sup> This is probably why "Lenz on the way home finds himself under huge hydrolystic compulsion to have Green right there by his side — or basically anyone who can't get away or won't go away — right there with him, and to share with Green or any compliant ear pretty much every experience and thought he's ever had." (557)

The ontological dimension of the intersubjective gives the individual a chance to play a part on a larger collective field of reality. Social forces may become oppressive, but to retreat into one's own mind via the distancing process will lead to a loss of humanity. Matthew Mullins states that Wallace's goal is "to get us to think outside our own heads, to

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<sup>79</sup> Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*, 198.

imagine the experiences of others.”<sup>80</sup> By populating his fictional world with characters who struggle with the complexities of connecting to others, we can better grasp how indivisible the individual and social realities ultimately are.

### **2.3 You can't go around giving that kind of thing of yourself away, Pervasive Insincerity**

Recollecting a drug binge, Gately has the epiphany that “a drug addict was at root a craven and pathetic creature: a thing that basically hides” (932). In the lifeworld of *Infinite Jest*, addiction is a way of being that defines the whole of society. The reclusive marijuana smoker, Erdedy, monitors the movements of an insect in his room and notices that eventually “no part of the insect he'd seen was now visible.” (21) Subconsciously identifying the attribute that defines him, his awareness wanders close to the recognition of his own hiddenness. Since the principal province of the intersubjective reality is in-person communication, knowing how genuine a person's input is, can aid the analysis of the state of humanity at a collective level. Being insincere, or withholding parts of one's self from others, is part of the distancing process in the sense that it ruptures the shared reality of mutual understanding. Wallace was quite attentive to earnestness of communication, especially as it pertained to his homeland, America. In his most famous essay *E Unibus Pluram*, he mentions the “enormously stressful U.S. game of appearance poker.”<sup>81</sup> The failure of humanity resides in the act of giving in to the temptation of security associated with projecting a false persona and thus avoiding true vulnerability. Otherwise stated, self-misrepresentation affords one the comfort of not having to face the reality of who one actually is. By caving in and delimiting the subject purely by its own delusions, a vital component of being human is lost. Irrespective of its flawed quality, the tendency to conceal ourselves is regarded by Wallace as a part of our nature and his novel is hence charged with mature forgiveness toward each person in their struggle to connect with others without being psychologically wounded. The intersubjective experience of that which is shared between people may be discomfiting, but it ought not lead to a withdrawal from sincere communication altogether.

At Hal's admission interview, Charles Tavis strives to present himself and his nephew in the best light. Hal reports: “My uncle beams and straightens a straight watchband” (5). This is the behavior which permeates the pages of the entire text; performative conduct aimed at

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<sup>80</sup> Matthew Mullins, “Wallace, Spirituality, and Religion,” in *The Cambridge*, 198.

<sup>81</sup> David Foster Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, 23.

altering the image of one's self perceived by others. Hal himself thinks "I believe I appear neutral, maybe even pleasant, though I've been coached to err on the side of neutrality and not attempt what would feel to me like a pleasant expression or smile" (3). In fact, the coaching of insincerity is undeniably endemic to the whole of future American society.

Telling Mario about different types of liars, Hal says "the truth is nobody can always tell, Boo. Some types are just too good, too complex and idiosyncratic; their lies are too close to the truth's heart for you to tell" (774). Having expounded the complexities of lying, Hal goes on to confess the secrets he was keeping from Mario, and when he does not receive the contentious reaction he was expecting, he tells his brother "You can get hurt and mad at people, Boo. News-flash at almost fucking nineteen, kid. It's called being a person. You can get mad at somebody and it doesn't mean they'll go away. You don't have to put on a Moms-act of total trust and forgiveness. One liar's enough." With Mario still unfazed, Hal concludes "Jesus it's like talking to a big poster of some smily-faced guy. Are you in there?" (784). Being 'in there,' to *Hal*, means being constantly under the weight of having to animate a false front. The reaction he hopes to inspire in his brother is the one missing within himself. Hal knows about perfect liars, because he is afraid he might be one.

Adam Kelly makes the case that Wallace's fiction "asks what happens when the anticipation of others' reception of one's outward behavior begins to take priority for the acting self, so that inner states lose their originating causal status and instead become effects of that anticipatory logic."<sup>82</sup> This being a considerable aspect of the novel in question, it is necessary to take up the examination of the eldest of the three brothers. Orin Incandenza may be the prime example of disingenuous individual, albeit with a discernable yearning for true connection. His almost too exaggeratedly duplicitous approach to romantic relationships merely epitomizes the hypothetical pinnacle of the overarching dishonesty to be expected of most other characters who, like him, stray away from being themselves in the race of accommodating the anticipated responses of others. Marlon Bain, a childhood friend of Orin's, reports:

I saw Orin in bars or at post-tournament dances go up to a young lady he would like to pick up and use this fail-safe cross-sectional pick-up Strategy that involved an opening like "Tell me what sort of man you prefer, and then I'll affect the demeanor of that man." Which in a way of course is being almost pathologically open and sincere about the whole picking-up enterprise, but also has this quality of Look-At-Me-Being-So-

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<sup>82</sup> Kelly, "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity," in *Consider David Foster Wallace*, 131.

Totally-Open-And-Sincere-I - Rise - Above - The - Whole - Disingenuous - Posing - Process - Of - Attracting - Someone -, - And - I - Transcend - The - Common - Disingenuity - In - A - Bar - Herd - In - A - Particularly - Hip - And -Witty - Self - Aware - Way -, - And - If - You - Will - Let - Me - Pick - You - Up - I - Will - Not - Only -Keep - Being - This - Wittily, - Transcendently - Open -, - But - Will - Bring- You - Into - This -World-Of-Social-Falsehood-Transcendence, which of course he cannot do because the whole openness-demeanor thing is itself a purposive social falsehood; it is a pose of poselessness. (1048)

Here, we see the distancing process in action. Removing himself from the circumstances of the situation that would require him to reveal his true intentions and partake in the unmediated intersubjective exchange, Orin conceals his true motives behind a layer of mock sincerity, leaving his inner experience unseen and subjectivity unchallenged. In short, he turns ‘dropping the act’ into an act.

This phenomenon becomes more intricate in his conversation with Helen Steeply, since over the phone with Hal, he referred to her as a “Whole different ballpark of Subject” and added: “Whole levels and dimensions to this one. We’ve had a whole series of very intense verbal interchanges” (1010). Taking into account the fact that Orin might, therefore, have honest affection for Helen, the same technique might actually be a revelation of genuine feelings, or as false as before. He tells her “is there something more going on here, some kind of strange bond I feel between us that sort of like tears down all my normal personal-life boundaries and makes me open totally to you? I guess I have to hope you won’t take advantage. Does this all sound like some kind of line? Maybe if it was a line it’d sound less lame. I guess I do wish I could come off more suave. I don’t know what else to do except just tell what’s going on inside me, even if it sounds lame. I never have any clue what you’re thinking about it” (1043). In his essay, Adam Kelly writes that the risk of sincerity is that “it can always be taken for manipulation.” He states: “true sincerity, if there is ever such a thing, must take place in the aporia between the conditional and the unconditional.” Due to the fact that sincerity rests in this liminal position, there is no way of truly deciding whether one is really sincere. That being said, Kelly claims that “true sincerity happens, is in fact made possible by the impossibility of its certain identification.”<sup>83</sup> Seen from this perspective, Orin’s behavior can be classified as honest as it can ever be determined to be. In this particular

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 131.



conversation with Helen, his words evince what might be taken for genuine participation in the act of communicating with the other.

The world of the novel is filled with instances of this uncertainty over whether the commitment of characters to the realm of the mutually negotiated reality can be trusted. “Michael Pemulis has this habit of looking first to one side and then over to the other before he says anything. It’s impossible to tell whether this is unaffected or whether Pemulis is emulating some film-noir-type character” (211) The scenes at the outcropping are fraught with different affectations. Watching Hugh Steeply, Marathe thinks to himself “His expression of boredom could be real or tactical, either of these.” (107) At another point, Steeply “seemed not only uncalculated and self-enmeshed; his demeanor itself seemed more young, that of some young person. This unless this was part of some performance beyond Marathe, Marathe knew he must consider” (645). Marathe himself is repeatedly pretending to sniff, or later pretends “to search for the watch in his pocket” (639). The two men, being field operatives, are forced to navigate a social reality, which is always under threat of deceit.

As a contravening force against the rampant insincerity, the Boston Alcoholics Anonymous meetings are places where being disingenuous is not approved. One ‘Advanced Basics guy’ is portrayed as “dreadfully, transparently unfunny: painfully new but pretending to be at ease, to be an old hand, desperate to amuse and impress them. The guy’s got the sort of professional background where he’s used to trying to impress gatherings of persons. He’s dying to be liked up there. He’s performing.” We are told that “The White Flag crowd can see all this. Even the true morons among them see right through the guy. This is not a regular audience. A Boston AA is very sensitive to the presence of ego.” Essentially, “Speakers who are accustomed to figuring out what an audience wants to hear and then supplying it find out quickly that this particular audience does not want to be supplied with what someone else thinks it wants.” (367-368) The AA community represents a source of redemption in a fallen society and its major aim is to stop people from turning away from each other by pretending to be who they are not.

In a similar vein, Joelle explains to Gately that:

U.H.I.D.’d say it’s fine to feel inadequate and ashamed because you’re not as bright as some others, but that the cycle becomes annular and insidious if you begin to be ashamed of the fact that being unbright shames you, if you try to hide the fact that you feel mentally inadequate, and so go around making jokes about your own dullness and acting as if it didn’t bother you at all, pretending you didn’t care whether others perceived you as unbright or not. (535-536)

The multileveled nature of the distancing process can be related to the words ‘annular’ and ‘cycle’. Not being truthful about one’s insecurities produces levels of mental walls that separate the individual from the intersubjective reality and eliminates the possibility of social acceptance.

In a letter to his editor, Wallace wrote “brains and wit and technical tightrope-calisthenics are powerful tools in fiction, but I believe that when they’re used primarily to keep the reader at arm’s length they’re being abused—they are functioning as defense mechanisms.” Aware of the human tendency to obscure one’s self from others in fear of being hurt, he identifies the performative compensation that is used to avoid feeling vulnerable and makes his position clear: “I do not wish to be a hidden person, or a hidden writer: it is lonely.”<sup>84</sup> Having the goal in mind, however, does not make sincerity any less difficult to practice.

Overall, the novel manages to capture the paradoxical relationship between the desire to communicate candidly and the terror associated with actually doing so. In a passage of third person narration, which is infused with the mind of Lenz, we get a contemplation of what makes an appropriate eye contact a problematic endeavor:

but like for instance where do you look with your eyes when you tell somebody you like them and mean what you say? You can’t look right at them, because then what if their eyes look at you as your eyes look at them and you lock eyes as you’re saying it, and then there’d be some awful like voltage or energy there, hanging between you. But you can’t look away like you’re nervous, like some nervous kid asking for a date or something. You can’t go around giving that kind of thing of yourself away. Plus the knowing that the whole fucking thing’s not worth this kind of wince and stress: the whole thing’s enraging (554).

The only way to account for the double bind of our social existence is to recognize that forces that facilitate and impede social understanding are ultimately complementary. Even though it may be logically absurd, the need to hide and the need to unveil are both equally justifiable.

## **2.4 I just wanted to get some of that shit out, Scattered Sincerity**

The personae occupying the various environs of *Infinite Jest* are forced to navigate their way through a multitude of different social pressures, which magnify their self-

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<sup>84</sup> D. T. Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, 232-233.

inhibition. Constantly at pains to comply with the expectations put on them, they at times give in to their exhaustion and speak out, telling others the truth of what is on their mind. These instances of forthright communication allow others to witness the unadorned interiority that they themselves might be holding back. In the act of sincerely disclosing one's sense of inner experience, the individual 'steps' outside of their personal, inherently biased notion of reality and has their views reflected in the minds of others; thus entering into and being changed by the domain of the intersubjective. However failed the future society of Wallace's may be in its pretentiousness, it holds within itself an unwavering flicker of heartfelt sensibility that resists complete renunciation. Even though our natural proclivity might be to distance ourselves from the confession of what we are emotionally going through and silence the parts of ourselves that seek to be heard, our agency permits us to claim our humanity through public admission of our feelings and genuine attempt to connect with others. This complementary relationship of the distancing process and aligning process is what Marshall Boswell called "the unique mixture of self-consciousness and dogged earnestness"<sup>85</sup> and it represents the governing force that pervades the novel as a whole.

Since the book unequivocally states that "Mario doesn't lie" (249), his character may serve as a sensible jump off point for a discussion of sincerity. Mario's unique status as a truth-teller is intertwined with his developmental condition. The reader discovers that:

Mario is basically a born listener. One of the positives to being visibly damaged is that people can sometimes forget you're there, even when they're interfacing with you. You almost get to eavesdrop. It's almost like they're like: If nobody's really in there, there's nothing to be shy about. That's why bullshit often tends to drop away around damaged listeners, deep beliefs revealed, diary-type private reveries indulged out loud.  
(80)

The absence of his self-consciousness relieves others of theirs. This can also sometimes be a source of frustration. Talking to Hal, Mario unreservedly relates how he feels about him "Hal, pretty much all I do is love you and be glad I have an excellent brother in every way, Hal." To which his brother responds: "Jesus, it's just like talking to the Moms with you sometimes, Boo" Right after, however, he adds "Except with you I can feel you mean it". (772) Mario is able to give voice to the same sentiment that their mother can only rehearse. This prompts Hal to question whether his brother can recognize insincerity in others: "Maybe it just doesn't occur to you. Even the possibility. Maybe it's never once struck you that something's being

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<sup>85</sup> Marshall Boswell, "Slacker Redemption: Wallace and Generation X," in *The Cambridge*, 19.

fabricated, misrepresented, skewed. Hidden.” He then continues “And maybe that’s the key. Maybe then whatever’s said to you is so completely believed by you that, what, it becomes sort of true in transit. Flies through the air toward you and reverses its spin and hits you true, however mendaciously it comes off the other person’s stick” (772-773). Identifying Mario’s unselfconsciousness as a shield from *perceiving* the behavior of others as contrived, Hal is enraptured by the idea of having an experience untainted by hollow, affected posturing. It is imperative to mention that he goes on to have a moment of unabashed honesty when he confides to Mario: “I smoke high-resin Bob Hope in secret by myself down in the Pump Room off the secondary maintenance tunnel. I use Visine and mint toothpaste and shower with Irish Spring to hide it from almost everyone” (782). Admitting his addiction to marijuana marks a powerful milestone in his evolution as a character and serves to reinforce the sense of hope for redemption that resides within the novel. Hal, along with the reader, is shown the validity of sharing one’s secret and joining the intersubjective space in the continuation of the dialogue. Distraught over what to do with the truth of his life that has been kept from everyone, he pleads to Mario to help him “I’m just two big aprick ears right here, Boo. Listening. Because I do not know what to do.” He concludes “Tell me what you think I should do” and Mario replies “I think you just did it. What you should do. I think you just did.” (785) This is one of the peaks of the novel, where the genuineness of communication guides the reader beyond the text. As Adam Kelly observed “in Wallace’s fiction the guarantee of the writer’s sincere intentions cannot finally lie in representation—sincerity is rather the kind of secret that must always break with representation.”<sup>86</sup> True honesty is ultimately only ever completely unmediated and as such confined to the immediacy of social interaction. Metamodern fiction, however, in its attempt to achieve the possibly impossible task of portraying the unportrayable, ends up coming close to a copy of lived experience.

Jon Baskin provides a perceptive, relevant conception of sincerity:

How do I deduce what you intend from what you say? It depends. If we are face-to-face, I might look you in your eyes, interpret your body language, or consider—if I have known you for a while—how far your words are supported by your past behavior. Art may not allow for those kinds of considerations, but that does not mean we are cast with it into an abyss of guesswork and omens. If I have read enough, I will get a feel for when a writer means what she says.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Kelly, “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity,” in *Consider David Foster Wallace*, 131.

<sup>87</sup> Jon Baskin, *Ordinary Unhappiness*, 17-18.

Adhering to this view, we can point to another instance of honest communication. It is only through a broad understanding of the novel in its entirety that the reader can ascertain the validity of Pemulis's words, when he tells Hal "Incupuddle, all I know's I'm your friend. I am." (1066)

Boston Alcoholics Anonymous sets the standard for sincerity high: "The thing is it has to be the truth to really go over, here. It can't be a calculated crowd-pleaser, and it has to be the truth unslanted, unfortified" (369). After sharing with the group about the frustration related to the visitation rights that he has to comply with in order to see his young son, Mikey closes out his speech by saying "I'm just grateful I got some of that out. It's been up in my head, renting space, you know what I'm saying? I see Vinnie's getting ready to fucking gong me. I want to hear from Tommy E. back there against the wall. Yo Tommy! What are you, spanking the hog back there or what? But I'm just glad to be here. I just wanted to get some of that shit out" (960). Being forthright about one's thoughts and feelings is taken so seriously that when Erdedy politely declines a hug from Roy during the after-session collective hugging segment, Roy candidly asks him "you gone risk vulnerability and discomfort and hug my ass or do I gone fucking rip your head off and shit down your neck?" (506) Being coy is simply not an option in a place where humanity is to be restored.

Making the case for how beneficial honesty can be, the narrator informs us that "Gately's most marked progress in turning his life around in sobriety, besides the fact that he no longer drives off into the night with other people's merchandise, is that he tries to be just about as verbally honest as possible at almost all times, now, without too much calculation about how a listener's going to feel about what he says. This is harder than it sounds." (369-370) Being genuine is here linked with difficulty. The discomfort associated with sincerity can also be identified in the fact that "Gately'd tried hard to share openly about the wreckage of his past, but some issues still seemed suicidal to share about." (818) Cognizant of the hardship which inherently accompanies honesty, Wallace nevertheless nudges his characters to pursue it, knowing that the benefits of doing so outweigh the drawbacks of staying hidden. Wallace's autobiographer referred to the writer as an "apostle of sincerity"<sup>88</sup> and Wallace was frequently linked with the 'New Sincerity' movement. That being said, he once said "I think sincerity can be a shtick."<sup>89</sup> Considering that he was aware of the essentially principal problem associated with sincerity and therefore liable to be merely feigning sincerity himself, it may look as if there is no way to tell what status of veracity does his fiction have. A key to a

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<sup>88</sup> Max, D. T. Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, 242.

<sup>89</sup> Tom Scocca, "There can be no spokesman," in *David Foster Wallace: The Last Interview*, 109.

tenable understanding of this issue is to be found in of his interviews where he propounds that “it seems like the big distinction between good art and so-so art lies somewhere in the art’s heart’s purpose, the agenda of the consciousness behind the text. It’s got something to do with love. With having the discipline to talk out of the part of yourself that can love instead of the part that just wants to be loved.”<sup>90</sup> Even though there may not be a foolproof way of conclusively determining whether someone is being honest or not, it is the uncertainty itself that characterizes the tenuous relationships that bind human beings to one another. This is the ever-returning paradox of the relative subjectivity and absolute objectivity that manifests in the world of the novel and the world of the reader. The appropriate reaction is perhaps, in the words of Hal Incandenza, “Learn to care and not to care” (175).

## **2.5 A tall lemonade on a squeak-free porch swing, Individualism of Americans**

The intersubjective realm where one’s experience of reality becomes entangled with the consciousness of another may be studied at the direct level of singular social interaction, but it also pertains to the way that an individual comes to take part in wider societal currents of activity. The involvement of the subject in the collective thought has far-reaching consequences for both them and society at large. D. T. Max notes that “Wallace was confident that his malaise was not just a personal issue but a societal condition.”<sup>91</sup> In this respect, *Infinite Jest* pits America against Canada in an ideological battle that gives context to many of the seemingly banal incidents that pepper the narrative. While United States are represented by the field operative named Hugh Steeply, Quebecois insurgent Rémy Marathe speaks for Canada. The two men meet at an outcropping, northwest of Tucson in Arizona, and discuss certain themes of the novel explicitly. Steeply works for the Office of Unspecified Services and Marathe is with Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents (referred to by Americans as Wheelchair Assassins). The US governmental organization and Quebecois separatist cell are both after a video recording that renders its viewers essentially comatose, unable to avert their gaze until they die of fatigue. This video is the final film made by James Incandenza called ‘Infinite Jest’ and is also referred to as ‘The Entertainment’ or ‘Samizdat’ throughout the text. The insurgents believe that if they get a hold of the recording that can be made into copies and

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<sup>90</sup> Larry McCaffery, “An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace,” in *Conversations*, 50.

<sup>91</sup> D. T. Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, 213-214.

distributed to American households, the US nation would succumb to the allure of its extreme stimulation and thus debilitated would acquiesce to Quebec procuring independence.

One part of the long conversation between Steeply and Marathe, which is split into many sections in the text, revolves around the concept of freedom. Marathe tells the American agent:

Who would die for this chance to be fed this death of pleasure with spoons, in their warm homes, alone, unmoving: Hugh Steeply, in complete seriousness as a citizen of your neighbor I say to you: forget for a moment the Entertainment, and think instead about a U.S.A. where such a thing could be possible enough for your Office to fear: can such a U.S.A. hope to survive for a much longer time? To survive as a nation of peoples? To much less exercise dominion over other nations of other peoples? (318)

His question can be boiled down to this: If the citizens of the United States cannot be trusted not to indulge in the extreme gratification of watching the Entertainment, then can they really pose a threat to those with a stronger resolve? Steeply comes back with a repartee: “These things you find so weak and contemptible in us — these are just the hazards of being free.” He then adds “you will say how free are we if you dangle fatal fruit before us and we cannot help ourselves from temptation. And we say “human” to you. We say that one cannot be human without freedom.” According to Steeply, the American culture safeguards the individual by protecting their freedom to choose, seeing as that is what makes one human.

Marathe disputes this claim by saying “Your freedom is the freedom-from: no one tells your precious individual U.S.A. selves what they must do. It is this meaning only, this freedom from constraint and forced duress.” Steeply defends his view: “But U.S. citizens aren’t presumed by us to be children, to paternalistically do their thinking and choosing for them. Human beings are not children” (320-321). The idea of ‘freedom-from forced duress’ identifies America as upholding standards that permit and reinforce self-centeredness. Steeply, who naturally puts the needs of the individual above the needs of the society, views the notion of telling Americans how to act itself as oppressive. This is the axiomatic distinction to be made between the two perspectives. Whereas Steeply values the wellbeing of each person independently, Marathe regards the welfare of people collectively.

Later, Marathe dares Steeply to list what does America generally stand for and Steeply says “Me, for me personally, as an American, Rémy, if you’re really serious, I think it’s probably your standard old basic American dreams and ideals. Freedom from tyranny, from excessive want, fear, censorship of speech and thought.” He adds “The old ones, tested by time. Relative plenty, meaningful work, adequate leisure-time. The ones you might call

corny.” After enumerating some more, he concludes the list: “The little things. Access to transport. Good digestion. Work-saving appliances. A wife who doesn’t mistake your job’s requirements for your own fetishes. Reliable waste-removal and disposal. Sunsets over the Pacific. Shoes that don’t cut off circulation. Frozen yogurt. A tall lemonade on a squeak-free porch swing.” To this, Marathe replies “This U.S.A. type of person and desires appears to me like almost the classic, how do you say, utilitaire.” He specifies that “Maximize pleasure, minimize displeasure: result: what is good. This is the U.S.A. of you.” (423). As Andrew Warren writes “Steepley will defend American free markets and the self’s desires, and Marathe will claim that true freedom necessitates authority and sacrifice.”<sup>92</sup> Americans distance themselves from the pressures that come with participating in the intersubjective reality and their worship of the self robs them of their humanity.

Steepley goes on to make the case that the principles he described are subsumed under the philosophy of ‘enlightened self-interest.’ He defines United States as “a community of sacred individuals which reveres the sacredness of the individual choice. The individual’s right to pursue his own vision of the best ratio of pleasure to pain: utterly sacrosanct” and justifies the idea by stating that “because a certain basic amount of respect for the wishes of other people is required, is in my interest, in order to preserve a community where my own wishes and interests are respected” (424-426). What the reader may derive from the state of the American society depicted in the novel is that what this doctrine actually brings about is what David Hering described as the “solipsistic cycle with only the illusion of choice, a trap within which one becomes locked into pathological, infantile behavior.”<sup>93</sup>

The Quebecois assassin, Marathe, challenges the validity of Steepley’s argument by pointing out the US government’s intense involvement in preventing the fatal video getting into the hands of ordinary Americans: “Why make a simple Entertainment, no matter how seducing its pleasures, a samizdat and forbidden in the first place, if you do not fear so many U.S.A.s cannot make the enlightened choices?” (430) His critique exposes a logical incongruity. Specifically, if the American leadership supposedly believes in the sacred rights of the individual to make their own choices, why would they go to such lengths to circumscribe the number of choices that are available to them? In other words, if the US government truly believed in personal freedom, it would not censor what Americans choose to watch. Jamie Redgate states “where the Americans are solipsistic and obsessed with their pursuit of self-pleasure, the assassins are all about transcendence and wilful sacrifice in

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<sup>92</sup> Andrew Warren, “Wallace and Politics,” in *The Cambridge Companion*, 181.

<sup>93</sup> David Hering, “Infinite Jest: Triangles, Cycles, Choices, & Chases,” in *Consider David Foster Wallace*, 89.



service of some larger political goal.”<sup>94</sup> Marathe, at one point, essentially spells out the problem of American society as what happens “when a people choose nothing over themselves to love, each one” (318).

His thinking becomes more elaborate when he tells Steeply “My opinions are only that the love you of this country speak of yields none of the pleasure you seek in love. This whole idea of the pleasure and good feelings being what to choose. To give yourself away to. That all choice for you leads there — this pleasure of not choosing” (781). His stance is that since the American populace shies away from the real choices that pertain to the intersubjective exchange of views and beliefs among the whole of society, the only choices left, which are related to individual pleasure, are in reality not choices at all. Steeply celebrates American values because they afford him the freedom-from having to relate to others and adjust his life to theirs. His enlightened self-interest may be seen as a mere rationalization of pure self-interest. Andrew Warren, in this respect, talks about broken authority: “Wallace’s America lacks strong and flexible leadership, its families are anxious or authoritarian, and its citizens fail to govern their desires.”<sup>95</sup> The fallen status of the society depicted in the novel is shown to have an ideological component. The rift between individual persons is, undoubtedly, formed by the guiding principles of the nation. Ultimately, if the ontological dimension of the intersubjective is to be repaired and humanity restored, bottom-up and top-down approaches must be utilized simultaneously; each person and organization putting the interests of others before their own. Although Wallace honors selflessness, we must remain aware of his desire to acknowledge the legitimacy of distancing one’s self from others as well. His intention is to elucidate both success and failure, not to merely validate success. It is only through an acute representation of the conflict between the individual and society that his fiction stays in line with the paradoxical reality to be found outside the text. In this regard, we may consider Gately’s courageous choice to protect the residents of the Ennet House when they get attacked. Putting himself in harm’s way fully knowing that he may lose his life since one of his foes is holding a handgun, Gately deems the wellbeing of his community more important than his own. Additionally, the head coach at E.T.A. Gerhardt Schtitt, is said to have been inculcated with “Old World patriarchal stuff like honor and discipline and fidelity to some larger unit.” He believes that “jr. athletics was about learning to sacrifice the hot narrow imperatives of the Self — the needs, the desires, the fears, the multiform cravings of the individual appetitive will — to the larger imperatives of a team (OK, the State) and a set of

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<sup>94</sup> Redgate, *Wallace and I*, 66.

<sup>95</sup> Warren, “Wallace and Politics,” in *The Cambridge Companion*, 176.

delimiting rules (OK, the Law)” (82-83). Thirdly, James Incandenza makes movies in the spirit of “complete unfigured egalitarian aural realism,” which involves making sure that “you could bloody well hear every single performer’s voice, no matter how far out on the cinematographic or narrative periphery they were” (835). His insistence on the inclusive representation of the experiences of all actors that frame a scene stands as another example of the collective mindset. It is not by chance that the novel itself does not have a single protagonist. James’s approach to filmmaking, Schtitt’s conditioning at the academy, coupled with Gately’s selfless conduct, testify to Wallace’s aim of implanting even the largely damned country of the United States with seeds of redemption.

## **2.6 Without the choice of her life there are no other choices, Collectivism of Canadians**

Members of the Quebecois insurgent cell called ‘Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents,’ or A.F.R. are determined to fight back against the Organization of North American Nations, or O.N.A.N. The Quebecers were mistreated by the Americans and seek to prove how decadent their oppressors are by disseminating the terminal Entertainment to Americans and counting on their inability to resist the attraction of instant and absolute satisfaction, thus weakening the nation and getting one step closer self-governance. Eschewing their individual needs for the interests of the nation, the A.F.R. operatives are dedicated to the cause of their collective. They are aligned with the intersubjective reality in their shared vision of the world and preference for ends-justify-the-means approach. Matthew Mullins explains that “Wallace’s faith is not concerned with a particular set of doctrines but with a generalized belief in something larger than oneself. The “something larger” in this case is community itself.”<sup>96</sup> Canada signifies this larger element and its resolute, tenacious inhabitants are to be recognized as an alternative to the self-interested Americans.

In the lengthy dialogue at the outcropping, Marathe makes a distinction between the freedom of Americans and freedom of Canadians. Speaking of the Canadian type, he asks: “what of the freedom-to? Not just free-from. Not all compulsion comes from without. You pretend you do not see this. What of freedom-to. How for the person to freely choose? How to choose any but a child’s greedy choices if there is no loving-filled father to guide, inform, teach the person how to choose? How is there freedom to choose if one does not learn how to choose?” He goes on to pose the question: “The rich father who can afford the cost of candy

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<sup>96</sup> Mullins, “Wallace, Spirituality, and Religion,” in *The Cambridge Companion*, 200.

as well as food for his children: but if he cries out “Freedom!” and allows his child to choose only what is sweet, eating only candy, not pea soup and bread and eggs, so his child becomes weak and sick: is the rich man who cries “Freedom!” the good father?” (320-321) Marathe’s point is that a parent must infringe on the personal freedom of his children in order to guide them to make the right choices; choices which will, in turn, also potentially infringe on the freedom of others. Marathe is fighting for freedom-to have an influence that an American would categorize as domineering, but that he sees as necessary to affect positive change in the world. In his view, society loses integrity when it prohibits individuals imposing their will on others. Paul Giles states that “much of Wallace’s writing might be seen to operate allegorically as an attempt to make connections with a world outside of himself, a deliberate exploration in both psychological and theoretical terms of how an isolated self enters into dialogue and conversation with a wider community.”<sup>97</sup> We can view Marathe’s words as enacting a similar attitude. Entering into a conversation with his community can only be made possible through an enforcement of his will and infringement of theirs.

A distinctive sign of the A.F.R. agents that may serve as evidence of their communal determination is their willingness for self-sacrifice. When the need arises to verify whether a particular video recording is the one that induces coma, “young Tassigny, with characteristic valor, volunteered to be rolled into the room of storage and strapped in, in order to verify this.” His like-minded peers are all cooperating: “All had drunk the gesture of a toast to Tassigny and promised to look after his aged father and fur-traps, and M. Fortier had embraced the young volunteer and kissed both his face’s cheeks as he was rolled in and fitted by M. Broullime with EEG wires and strapped in before the viewer placed in the room of storage.” (722) The young man risks his life to further the cause of his nation. We are later informed about the steadfastness of the leader himself: “Like all of them, Fortier was willing to sacrifice” (723). Making the distinction between the national perspectives clear, the reader learns that “Marathe was prepared to die violently at any time, which rendered him free to choose among emotions. U.S.A.’s B.S.S.’s M. Steeply had verified that U.S.A.s did not comprehend this or appreciate it; it was foreign to them” (732). The dedication of the Canadians is without limit. They despise the selfish, distancing process, so prevalent among the Americans, and put their lives on the line to succeed as a people, not a mere collection of individuals.

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<sup>97</sup> Paul Giles, “All Swallowed Up: David Foster Wallace and American Literature,” in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, 11.

A turning point in Marathe's narrative arc is his saving the life of Gertraude, a woman who will afterward become his wife. The devotion to his spouse actually trumps even the allegiance to his country. Although he may be liable to betray his nation, Marathe would do so because his connection to the intersubjective reality is so firm. He comments on the event of saving Gertraude, in his conversation with Kate Gompert: "In one instant and without thought I was allowed to choose something as more important than my thinking of my life." He claims that "choosing Gertraude to love as my wife was necessary for the others, these other choices. Without the choice of her life there are no other choices," and then adds: "this choice, Katherine: I made it. It chains me, but the chains are of my choice. The other chains: no. The others were the chains of not choosing." (778-781) It can be stated that 'the chains of not choosing' are the ones binding America. Disconnected from the shared reality of any larger structure, the Americans only delude themselves in thinking they are making choices. Their self-indulgence masquerades as personal freedom and this is the cause of their spiritual bankruptcy. Unable to impose themselves on their fellow citizens in the name of positive change, they fail to keep their humanity. The Canadians in the novel, on the other hand, are fully engaged with the intersubjective dimension and work together to protect their communities. As a portrait of the paradoxical reality, *Infinite Jest* outlines the nature of both social discord and social synergy; the predilection for egocentrism and aspiration for self-abnegation. It is the complementarity of the two impulses that defines the nature of the text and of our world.

### 3.0 Objective Reality

#### 3.1 Bodies bodies everywhere, Physicality as the Basis of the Real

“I am seated in an office, surrounded by heads and bodies” (3). The opening line of *Infinite Jest* draws attention to the realm of the physical. Hal, accompanied by his uncle and an E.T.A. prorector, is being considered for a spot at the University of Arizona by several of its representatives. Following the theme, two deans are later described as having “inclined together in soft conference, forming a kind of tepee of skin and hair” (6). It has been observed that “Much of Wallace’s fiction and creative non-fiction is explicitly about the pains of having, or being a body.”<sup>98</sup> My argument is that the purpose of emphasizing the physical can be associated with the author’s intention to ground the world of the novel in a domain of the objective reality; to present that which exists uncontestably, beyond mere speculation and outside of subjective judgement. The corporeal nature of human existence is to be understood as an unshakeable foundation of reality and represents an avenue, for the characters and readers alike, to align with what is undoubtedly real, only to eventually realize that there is an underlying complementarity between the subjective and objective ontological planes that best represents how paradoxical reality actually is.

The incorporation of the somatic experience is at work at all parts of Wallace’s fictional universe. The unnamed narrator informs us that “most of the E.T.A. upperclassmen have these vivid shoe-and-shirt tans that give them the classic look of bodies hastily assembled from different bodies’ parts, especially when you throw in the heavily muscled legs and usually shallow chests and the two arms of different sizes” (100). One moment of American football is described as “Thousands of kilos of padded meat assume four-point stances and chuff at each other, poised to charge and stave. (298). Stripped of their immaterial characteristics, the focus on the very matter that forms the academy students and American football players puts to the fore the embodiment of the human subject.

Gately says of Minty that “he’s got that sooty complexion homeless guys get where the soot has insinuated itself into the dermal layer and thickened, making Minty look somehow upholstered” (275-276). The reference to a character’s skin of course relates to the confines of the body and accentuates the inner experience of being delimited by the physical form; making Minty seem somewhat more solidified. Inversely, there is the experience of Poor Tony whose “body began to swell,” who “watched his limbs become airy white dirigibles and felt them deny his authority and detach from him and float sluggishly up.” He

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<sup>98</sup> Peter Sloane, *David Foster Wallace and the Body*, 7.

felt a “pre-tornadic stillness of zero sensation, as if he were the very space he occupied” (305). Here, that same bodily delimitation is being undermined by Tony’s felt detachment from the body. The fact that it is merely felt, however, in actuality affirms the physical boundaries again.

Keeping with the idea of delimiting the body, *Infinite Jest* features people of abnormally small or feeble constitution, such as the “impossibly tiny little Tina Echt” (518), “elf-sized U.S. male” (85) named Tiny Ewell or Charles Tavis, who is “physically small in a way that seems less endocrine than perspectival. His smallness resembles the smallness of something that’s farther away from you than it wants to be, plus is receding” (519). We also meet “the spectrally thin April Cortelyu” (601), Ruth van Cleve, who is “many kilos underweight” (698), Little 14-C Bernard Makulic, who is “constitutionally delicate and not long for E.T.A.” (634) and Elizabeth Tavis, “who in the stilted Vermont wedding photo seems almost certainly to have been a dwarf” (901).

Contrarily, there are also those of a larger build; for example, “Lenz tells Green how spectacularly obese his own late mother had been, using his arms to dramatically illustrate the dimensions involved” (557). When Hal comes to a men’s group meeting, he sees a man he “would have to call almost morbidly round, his body nearly Leith-sized and globularly round and the smaller but still large globe of a head atop it, his socks plaid and his legs not all the way crossable so it looks like he might pitch disastrously backward in his chair any minute” (800). Joelle has her arm grabbed by “a grotesquely huge woman whose hose bulged with stubble and whose face and head were four times larger than the largest woman Joelle had ever seen” (934). Hal’s mother, “Avril Incandenza was one of the tallest women Joelle had ever seen” (744) and is reported to be “over two meters tall” (745). A principal illustration of the big body is Don Gately: “though the size of a young dinosaur, with a massive and almost perfectly square head he used to amuse his friends when drunk by letting them open and close elevator doors on” (55). The twenty-nine-year-old “looks less built than poured, the smooth immovability of an Easter Island statue (277).” In order to paint his dimensions at one AA meeting, the narrator says “Gately is so huge no one sits behind him for several rows.”

Of special interest is Gately’s head, which is described as having “real weight and pressure” (279) and as “almost perfectly square, massive and boxy and mysticetously blunt: the head of somebody who looks like he likes to lower his head and charge” (476). “A regulation football helmet was like a beanie on him. His coaches had to order special helmets” (902). Wallace casts the limit of the body in extreme dimensions in order to bring awareness to the physicality of human experience. The reader is continually reminded that the characters

they read about, are not just disembodied voices, or collections of memories, opinions, or other mental phenomena. The character of Hal Incandenza stands as a stark case in point as someone, who may be detached from his emotions and other people, but who, nevertheless, seeks to confirm that “he’s in there, inside his own hull, as a human being” (694). Jamie Redgate explicates Wallace’s view when he says that “to be conscious is to wake up inside a pre-existing form and realise that you are trapped, chained to a body and a brain that rule your existence so long as you occupy them.”<sup>99</sup> The somatic experience can be linked to the symbol of cage in the novel. It is the body that imposes itself on the spirit and as such invades personal autonomy of the individual.

The character of Joelle van Dyne is likewise determined by the confines of her corporeality. In her own words: “I am 1.7 meters tall and weigh 48 kilograms. I occupy space and have mass. I breathe in and breathe out (234).” What defines her is her material presence. For a more depersonalized account of somatic existence as it pertains to another character, one may refer to a narrator’s perspective: “If you could open Stice’s head you’d see a wheel inside another wheel, gears and cogs being widgeted into place” (635). Even though this sentence may seem to contain post-humanist undertones of humanity without a soul, it is more accurate to think of it in terms of “the metaphor of the ghost in the machine—a model of the essential self chained to a meaty body.”<sup>100</sup> Wallace’s characters might struggle to confront the perceived void inside of themselves, but it is precisely this struggle, which indicates that they are more than a sum of their body parts.

The distancing process makes people preoccupied with their inner, mental conceptions of themselves. What the academy’s guru Lyle, on the other hand, seeks to impart to one of the E.T.A. students is the importance of the outer, physical dimension of the real. He says “Do not underestimate objects” and “Do not leave objects out of account. The world, after all, which is radically old, is made up mostly of objects” (395). His emphasis of the relevance of objects is very close to one imparted to Hal’s father Jim by his own father James O. Incandenza, Sr. Hal’s grandfather confidently asserts “Son, you’re a body, son” (159). This is, essentially, the central message of all preceding examples. Its objective is to remind the reader of the matter that constitutes their organism and determines who and what they are, in order to reestablish a connection with objective reality. James continues “head is still just body, Jim. Commit this to memory. Head is body. Jim, brace yourself against my shoulders here for this hard news, at ten: you’re a machine a body an object, Jim (159). He goes on to extend his scope: “Bodies

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<sup>99</sup> Redgate, *Wallace and I*, 39.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*, 76.

bodies everywhere. A tennis ball is the ultimate body, kid.” and specifies “Perfectly round. Even distribution of mass. But empty inside, utterly, a vacuum. Susceptible to whim, spin, to force — used well or poorly. It will reflect your own character. Characterless itself. Pure potential (160). This point is worthy of note, since it becomes evident that the world is not just a mechanistic, deterministic interaction of human and non-human objects, but that the human object must exercise their will to find a proper way to handle and interact with other objects. As noted by Adam S. Miller “*Infinite Jest* is one long spiraling meditation on how heads and bodies can either come together or fall apart.”<sup>101</sup>

The grandfather is so keenly aware of the physical aspect of life because he suffered a grave injury on a tennis court, in his youth. He depicts the incident “I left my knees’ meat behind me, slid, ended in a posture of supplication on my knees’ disclosed bones with my fingers racquetless hooked through the mesh of the net” and tells Jim “I felt the religion of the physical that day, at not much more than your age, Jim, shoes filling with blood, held under the arms by two bodies big as yours and dragged off a public court with two extra lines. It’s a pivotal, it’s a seminal, religious day when you get to both hear and feel your destiny at the same moment, Jim. (169) This testimony touches on a significant part of the overarching theme. Being encased inside of a body is not only, metaphorically, equal to one’s existence in a cage; it also puts the individual in a position of having to live up to social expectations. James O. Incandenza, Sr. wanted to excel at tennis to please his father, but his body was unable to perform adequately. In the battle of meeting intersubjective standards, the application of James’s will was circumscribed by his capacity to interact with his own body. In other words, it is not necessarily that he failed, but that his body might have also failed him. Karl A Plank makes it clear that “these selves do always have bodies whose cells may burn with rage, suffer urgent and desperate need, and furnish the ongoing arena of struggle where whatever it finally means to be a human being is won or lost.”<sup>102</sup> The way to read Wallace’s work is to remain cognizant of the fact that being human is not just a matter of the head, but also the body. Ultimately, our corporeal existence binds us to the objective reality of the physical world and as such stands in complementarity to the linguistic, relativistic aspects of the real.

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<sup>101</sup> Adam S. Miller, *The Gospel According to David Foster Wallace*, 5.

<sup>102</sup> Karl A. Plank, *The Fact of the Cage*, 29.



### 3.2 Swollen and Misshapen, Deformity Expands

Inside the microcosm of *Infinite Jest*, those deemed aesthetically challenged find solace in the support group called Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed and its dictum of covering one's face by a veil, thereby professing an affirmation of their wish, to disclose the need to conceal their appearance from the gaze of others, to the outside world. "Wallace's fascination with anomalous bodies, with deformity, disability, and disfigurement"<sup>103</sup> is related to his effort to centralize the plane of existence that is perceived by the senses and whose essential nature is impervious to the linguistic, subjective assessments of the mind. The bodies in their abnormality subvert the reader's abstract, idealistic concept of the human form and allow them to rediscover how anomalous the objective reality is, before the machinations of abstraction take place.

The features of a considerable number of characters are strikingly asymmetrical. Chares Tavis, the E.T.A. headmaster, has a mustache whose two halves never quite match (5). In fact, "the two sides of his face didn't quite go together" (521). The academy's students are forced to constantly squeeze a tennis ball by their racquet-wielding hand, which ends up looking "from across a court like a gorilla's arm or a stevedore's arm pasted on the body of a child (173)". The boys discuss "why girls who hit backhands one-handed seem prone to having different-sized breasts" (634). Marathe in disguise at Ennet House notices that "one leg of [a] woman was thinner by far of her other leg" (748) and Mr. Green finds that one of his legs "was all of a sudden nearly six inches longer than the other" (579). Mario's "one eyelid hung lower than the other over his open eyes" (314). Orin plays with a strabismic doubles partner (289) and the academy is attended by violently cross-eyed Carl Whale (119). One of the members of the White Flag Group, Louise B, is characterized as a "a prognathous lady" (348), which refers to a protrusion of the jaw and one cheekbone of Gately's nurse "sticks out farther than the other" (884).

One of the elements that defines the "grotesque cripples"<sup>104</sup> of the novel has to do with what their bodies are missing. Ennet House is occupied by a one-eared alumni counselor, Eugenio Martinez (273), a man without hands and feet called Burt F.S. (730) and a young woman with a glass eye, Neil Gunther (362). One of the speakers at an AA meeting is "a round pink girl with no eyelashes at all" (376). At E.T.A, there's Trevor Axford, who "has a total of only three-and-a-half digits on his right hand" (332), Felicity Zweig, "a breastless

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<sup>103</sup> Peter Sloane, *David Foster Wallace and the Body*, 16.

<sup>104</sup> Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 71.

senior” (389), and Ingersoll, who is “seemingly wholly devoid of eyebrows” (104). An America Football player referred to as “B.U.’s best defensive tackle” is portrayed as “a 180-kilo future pro who had no teeth” (291). The Advanced Basics chairperson is “almost flamboyantly bald (344) and Bobby C is described as having “no lips at all” (917).

Many figures in the novel possess physical features that are excessive. “The Director of Composition seems to have more than the normal number of eyebrows” (4), whereas one tabloid header includes a photo of an “old guy with basically one eyebrow running all the way across his forehead” (392-393). Mario’s head “is hyper auxetic, and two to three times the size of your more average elf-to-jockey-sized head and facies” (1022) and requires the support of four pillows (32). Trent Kite has “a nose like a tapir” (904), while the fingers of Ferocious Francis are described as “swollen and misshapen” (884). Additionally, the very first scene of the book includes a tennis coach, extending his hypertrophied arm (8) and toward the end there is a pharmacist with an ingrown thumbnail (979). Whether the idea of a body is unsettled by the absence of what it is usually constituted by, or the surplus of that which unsettles the same denotation, the effect it has is one of expansion. Essentially, the mental concept of human form as it exists in one’s subjective reality is broadened by the particularity of objective reality.

The theme of physical deformity takes on a more innate quality in several cases. Hal meets a hypophalangial Grief-Therapist, whose “hands were no bigger than a four-year-old girl’s” (257). There is a drug dealer with a harelip (18) and McDade at one point asks other Ennet House residents about cleft palates (596). Mario is born with arms characterized as contractured, bradyauxetic, and atrophic (313-314). As a homodont, “all his teeth are bicuspid and identical, front and back” (1022). An Advanced Basics girl, who speaks at one AA meeting, shares about growing up with a step-sister who had been “totally paralyzed and retarded and catatonic” from birth (370). Another female speaker opens up about delivering a stillborn baby, who “had no face”, “developed no eyes or nostrils” and whose “limbs were malformed and arachnodactylic” (376). The blind nine-year-old kid at E.T.A. that comes from the contaminated regions of ‘Feral Infants’ has “several eyes in various stages of evolutionary development” and an “on-court use of only one hand because the other had to pull around beside him a kind of rolling IV-stand appliance with a halo-shaped metal brace welded to it at head-height, to encircle and support his head” (518). Lastly, Marathe’s wife, also suffering the consequences of environmental pollution, is “born without a skull,” excretes “the cerebro- and-spinal fluids which dribbled at all times from her distending oral cavity.” and has a hook for a hand (778-780).

Karl A. Plank ties the idea of physical disfigurement to the notion of damage.<sup>105</sup> After suffering a stroke, Pat Montesian “walked with a dignified but godawful lurch, dragging a terribly thin right leg in black leather pants behind her like something hanging on to her that she was trying to get away from.” One of her arms “had atrophied into a kind of semi-claw” (465-466). The devastation of drug abuse can be recognized by the physical appearance of Tony Krause: “sucked-out, hollow-eyed, past ill, grave-ready, his face’s skin the greenish white of extreme-depth marine life, looking less alive than undead” (683). By the same token, “Several of the Ennet House residents who’d hit bottom with the glass pipe had no teeth or blackened and disintegrating teeth (723). Having been supposedly hit in the face by a flask of acid, Joelle van Dyne, may have “hideous facial burn-scars” (795). Similarly, the wife of Bud O. is hit in the face so hard that she ends up having “her nose bent over flat against her left cheek” (844). Dave K. undergoes a limbo dance accident that leaves him “scuttl[ing] around the Ennet House living room like a crab, his scalp brushing the floor and his knees trembling with effort.” (824). Lastly, the E.T.A. receptionist Lateral Alice Moore, having been the victim of a helicopter collision and subsequent crash, is forced to live “with chronic oxygen debt and a neurological condition whereby she was able to move only from side to side” (510).

As Heather Houser observed, the different abnormalities of the body in the text serve the purpose of invoking disgust in the readership.<sup>106</sup> At one point, Hal notices “a boil on the inside of Schacht’s thigh” (104). Likewise, Steeply makes note of a “translucent mole on Poutrincourt’s long cheek.” (675). Steeply himself is reported to be “scratching absently at his wens.” at the outcropping (639) and his feet are portrayed as “broad and yellow-nailed, hairy and trollesque, the ugliest feet Marathe had observed anywhere south of 60° N” (419). While Poor Tony has “a sty that had scraped one eyeball as pink as a bunny’s.” (301), Charlotte Treat “developed some kind of goopy Virus-related eye infection that’s got her bumping into walls” (826). There is Calvin Thrust with “more or less permanent sore on his upper lip.” (825-826) and Anton Doucette with “the big round dark raised mole on his upper-upper lip” (390), Kenkle, the janitor, described as “dark-freckled and carbuncular and afflicted with excess phlegm” (873-874) and “two hideous white golden retrievers with suppurating scabs and skin afflictions” (278). As a matter of fact, the survey of the inmates at the Shattuck Shelter for the homeless may serve as a sublime compilation of all the aforementioned distortions of the body: “There are colostomy bags and projectile vomiting and cirrhotic discharges and missing limbs and misshapen heads and incontinence and Kaposi’s Sarcoma

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<sup>105</sup> Plank, *The Fact of the Cage*, 83.

<sup>106</sup> Houser, “Environmental Case for Disgust,” in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, 118.

and suppurating sores and all different levels of enfeeblement and impulse-control-deficit and damage” (435).

Madame Psychosis broaches the topic of hideousness directly in her radio show when she enumerates specific ailments; she speaks of “nodular leprosy with leonine facies” along with “The acromegalic and hyperkeratotic” and “spasmodically torticollic” (185) and a profusion of others. She is reading from a document related to the principles of U.H.I.D. “find Nurturing and Support and the Inner Resources to face your own unblinking sight,” which continues with “It says Come don the veil of the type and token. Come learn to love what’s hidden inside. To hold and cherish” (190). This sentiment of accepting that which deviates from the norm is what informs the text as a whole. In essence, by expanding the idea of a body to include all the unique, divergent bodies within the novel, the reader is made hyperaware of the solid, physical reality as it pre-exists the generalizations and idealizations of the mind. Finally, the objective and subjective aspects of the real are delineated as fundamentally interdependent.

### **3.3 The turd emergeth, Excretion and Mental Resistance**

The pages of *Infinite Jest* are figuratively oversaturated with various bodily fluids. If the image of the body as it exists in one’s mind can be said to be unstained, or spotless, then the very opposite is to be found in the imagery of the novel. Wallace, in his effort to depict reality as it is, chooses to devote a substantial amount of the text to the body’s waste products. By accentuating that which is physically and psychologically expelled, the author makes the reader aware of the misrepresentation of subjective thought and simultaneously allows them to reconnect with the filthy, unhygienic side of the real.

Some characters have difficulties with urination. Having seen the Entertainment, the medical attaché, wets “both his pants and the special recliner” (54). Poor Tony Krause has “some negative urine-incidents” (304), while “Struck looks to have wet his pants in his sleep” (341). During the portrayal of the Shattuck homeless shelter, we are told that “The barrackses’s cots reek of urine” (435). Both Gately and Fackelmann become consecutively incontinent as a result of drug use. Intoxicated, they begin by watching “the pool of urine spread out against the hardwood floor, changing shape, growing curved arms, exploring the fine oak floor.” Moments later “The puddle had grown many arms like a Hindu god. Gately couldn’t quite tell if the urine had explored its way almost back to their feet or if they were

already sitting in urine” (936-937). Presenting these regressive proclivities makes palpable just how little control certain individuals can exercise over themselves and their bodies.

Being glad that he finally caught him on the phone, Pemulis addresses Hal with “The turd emergeth” (171). Fecal matter has a way of recurring throughout the novel, signifying the presence of that which humanity seeks to distance itself from. One Enfield resident comes to Pat for instructions about a clogged toilet:

I’ve got the men’s upstairs bathroom. There’s something... Pat there’s something in the toilet up there. That won’t flush. The thing. It won’t go away. It keeps reappearing. Flush after flush. I’m only here for instructions. Possibly also protective equipment. I couldn’t even describe the thing in the toilet. All I can say is if it was produced by anything human then I have to say I’m really worried. Don’t even ask me to describe it. If you want to go up and have a look, I’m a 100% confident it’s still there. It’s made it real clear it’s not going anywhere. (178-179)

This passage encapsulates the attitude which undergirds the whole narrative; there are parts of being a human that simply resist suppression. The theme of defecation can be followed when Poor Tony is standing on an underground platform and “the first hot loose load fell out into the baggy slacks and down his leg and out around his high heel” (304). Likewise, when Matty is waiting for a soup in a restaurant, he sees “a bag-lady-type older female in several clothing-layers lift her skirts and lower herself to the pavement and move her scaggly old bowels right there in full view of passersby and diners both, then gather all her plastic shopping bags together and walk stolidly out of view (683). One Advanced Basics Group speaker described as “a green-card Irishman” tells the audience how he conquered his struggles with the consistency of his bowel movements: “T’were a tard in t’loo. A rail tard.” (351). Feces simultaneously represent a part of what defines our embodied experience and a part of what defines our associated mental resistance. In the words of Adam S. Miller: “Nothing more clearly compromises our idolatry than excrement. Nothing more clearly attests to the passage of time and the inversion of transcendence. Shit is the idol disenchanting. It’s proof of disappointment. It’s what follows on the far side of desire, on the flipside of the Möbius loop’s turning. It shows the nature of life’s passing and displays how transcendence and immanence continually traverse just one single surface. Shit is the world inassimilable.”<sup>107</sup>

A group of E.T.A. boys also discuss the subject of flatulence. Carl Whale raises the issue: “say you’re playing out there, and suddenly you have to fart. It feels like one of those

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<sup>107</sup> Miller, *The Gospel According to David Foster Wallace*, 62.

real hot nasty pressurized ones.” He continues “But that it’s not impossible it’s actually a need to go to the bathroom, instead, masquerading as a fart.” Gopnik then points out the risk of not visiting the bathroom: “But then you’ve denied yourself an urgent fart, and you’re running around trying to compete with a terrible hot nasty uncomfortable fart riding around the court inside you.” (119) What may be gleaned from this exchange is that the same juvenile openness which allows the boys to discuss the adverse impositions of the body is what the novel seeks to rekindle within the society at large. That is to say, if the matters of the body could be included in the conversations of adults, the prevailing culture would not incite the level of mental resistance to one’s physical being as it normally does.

There is a cruel E.T.A. practice of administering particularly vicious drills, or “attitude-adjusters” that students call ‘pukers.’ Vomit plays a noteworthy role in the text due to the way it marks the involuntary, spontaneous nature of the body. At Molly Notkin's party, “Vogelsong of Emerson College tries suddenly to stand on his head and is immediately ill in a spreading plum-colored ectoplasm the dancers do not even try to evade the spread of” (231). One of the cart-owners at the Public Gardens’ far hillside is said to have “vomited in his sleep, and the vomit has assumed a lava-like course toward the huddled form of another man curled just downhill” (623). Lastly, Bernard Makulic at the academy’s dining hall, “throws up in a silky tan cataract onto the floor by his chair, and there is the shriek of the feet of other chairs being scooted in a star pattern away from the table, and the protracted vowels of repulsed children” (634). The unintended discharge of stomach contents is indicative of the loss of individual autonomy and its inclusion among the thematic concerns by the author, is to be understood as an attempt to make accessible for the reader, the volatility of human agency. Additionally, “Being open about those aspects of being embodied that usually inspire disgust in others and therefore shame, offers the possibility of sincere interpersonal connection and the alleviation of the pan-human aloneness.”<sup>108</sup> The disgusting aspects of bodily existence, as they are made visible in the novel, reveal how universal the objective reality of the somatic experience truly is.

One aspect of the human physical existence that is completely uncontrolled and therefore especially invasive is the secretion of sweat. The act of perspiration is inherently coupled with the sense of the body being soiled, or unclean. A case in point is Marlon Bain, whose condition is described as “Arms purling, T-shirt darkly V’d, face and forehead ever gleaming.” The narrator tells us “It had had a lemony, low-cal taste, the boy’s omniwetness”

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<sup>108</sup>Peter Sloane, *David Foster Wallace and the Body*, 5.

and “It always looked like Marlon had been rained on. But it wasn’t rain. It’s like Marlon hadn’t been dry since the womb. It’s like he leaked” (386-387). Even his older brother Kevin Bain “has the same capacity for constant incredible sweating that always made Marlon Bain look to Hal, both on-court and off-, like a toad hunched moist and unblinking in humid shade” (805). While the overflow of sweat signifies a surplus of corporeality and humanity, the opposite can be said for its absence, which can be observed in Hal’s grand-grandfather, when his son, James O. Incandenza, Sr. recounts that he “wasn’t even sweating.” He says “I grew up with the man in this town and never once saw him sweat, Jim” (164). This is the same father, whose inhumanity is to be associated with never approving of his son’s effort on the tennis court. In keeping with the theme, one must not ignore the E.T.A guru Lyle, who actually “lives off the sweat of others,” specifically, “The fluids and salts and fatty acids” (128). In the attempt to reclaim the supposedly impure and defiled, Wallace makes use of this extreme imagery in order to render even the smelly and sticky aspect of being a human acceptable.

Hal reports that his grief-counselor “always had the remains of a sneeze in his mustache” and refers to it as a “glistening mucoidal dew” (252-253) At one point, Poor Tony’s nose “ran like twin spigots and the output had a yellow-green tinge he didn’t think looked promising at all.” (301). Sternutation, or sneezing, is yet another one of the bodily processes that accompany human lives. It represents a loss of control and inspires disgust. In his dedication to capture the world in its objectivity, Wallace does not shy away from depicting any of the bodily waste products. There is a mention of “booger-eating morons from E.M.P.H.H. Security” (822). At the men’s group meeting, we are told that “tears and other fluids flow and roll.” and the narrator informs us that “Hal has never actually seen projectile-weeping before. Bain’s tears are actually exiting his eyes and projecting outward several cm. before starting to fall.” Additionally, when Gately details the nature of his work at the homeless shelter, he mentions a hidden corner “that’s always got sperm moving slowly down the walls. And way too much sperm for just one or two guys, either” (435). The novel as a whole, recasts and recreates the image of the body in all its desecrated, profane form to protest the mental expectations of immaculate perfection. Through the inclusion and embracement of all the repugnant, socially inappropriate aspects of having a somatic experience, the author recognizes the physical as a source of the universal humanity and allows the reader to realize how strong their attachment to objective reality is, thus mitigating the mental resistance they have to bear and nudging them one step closer to the recognition of the underlying complementarity of the inner and outer ontological dimensions.

### 3.4 Not with pliers! The Extremes of Physical and Mental Suffering

Wallace's autobiographer reported that the author had, at one point, added a newspaper picture of Kafka to his room's corkboard with a caption that said "The disease was life itself."<sup>109</sup> Naturally, Wallace's novel features copious amounts of suffering. So much so, it can at times seem hyperbolic. Considering the fact that misfortune is often unseen, purposefully hidden from sight for its tendency to render the sufferer vulnerable to judgement, it becomes apparent why the abundant hardships depicted in the text might give the hyperbolic impression. As an integral part of the somatic experience, suffering is part of being human at fundamental level. It is there, before the acquisition of words to articulate it. This pre-verbal attribute is what makes suffering a prime example of what resides within the bounds of the objective reality. Highlighting that which is unequivocally real, serves to raise the reader's awareness of the primacy of felt experience and helps to fend off the temptation of the distancing process.

The tennis accident of Hal's grandfather paints a vivid picture of what it is to go through pain. In his recollection of the incident:

A rude whip-lashing shove square in the back and my promising body with all its webs of nerves pulsing and firing was in full airborne flight and came down on my knees this flask is empty right down on my knees with all my weight and inertia on that scabrous hot sandpaper surface forced into what was an exact parody of an imitation of contemplative prayer, sliding forward. The flesh and then tissue and bone left twin tracks of brown red gray white like tire tracks of bodily gore extending from the service line to the net. I slid on my flaming knees, rushed past the dribbling ball and toward the net that ended my slide". (168)

This life-defining trip associates physical pain with a failure to perform.

Two generations later, fifteen-year-old Hal tears "all the soft left-ankle tissue he then owned" at Atlanta's Easter Bowl (457). His ankle is a recurrent source of discomfort and causes Hal to underperform in his matches. At one point he conveys his uneasiness about the future at the academy: "I look at these guys that've been here six, seven years, eight years, still suffering, hurt, beat up, so tired, just like I feel tired and suffer, I feel this what, dread, this dread, I see seven or eight years of unhappiness every day and day after day of tiredness and stress and suffering stretching ahead" (109). Hal's attitude is made explicit in Mario's film entitled 'Tennis and the Feral Prodigy'. In it, he evidently gives advice to aspiring

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<sup>109</sup> D. T. Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, 25.



athletes such as himself: “Here is how to take nonnarcotic muscle relaxants for the back spasms that come from thousands of serves to no one” and later concludes “here is Motrin for your joints, Noxzema for your burn, Lemon Pledge if you prefer nausea to burn, Contracol for your back, benzoin for your hands, Epsom salts and anti-inflammatories for your ankle, and extracurriculars for your folks, who just wanted to make sure you didn’t miss anything they got” (174-176). His life at the academy is portrayed as being defined by constant suffering.

When Todd Possalthwaite weeps in the locker room, he receives counsel from Pemulis and Freer, who says:

Let him cry. Let baby have his dinkle. Piss and moan. Thirteen for Christ’s sake. A kid thirteen hasn’t even been in the same room with real disappointment yet. Hasn’t even locked eyes across a room with real disillusion and and frustration and pain. Thirteen: pain’s a rumor. What’s the word. Angst. Baby wouldn’t know genuine-article angst if it walked up and got him in a headlock. (1068)

Human existence, here, is equated to a progressive agony. Misery, in the world of the story, is lurking at every corner. One of the Head Trainers at E.T.A. suffers a “terrible accident that resulted in all locks being taken off E.T.A. saunas’ doors and the saunas’ maximum temperature being hard-wired down to no more than 50°C” (971). The threat of danger is so ever-present that during a conversation the boys have in one of the Viewing Rooms, Beak, who was asleep up until then “sits up and says ‘God no not with pliers!’ and collapses back again” (113).

Orin’s American football career got under way because he replaced a punter, who suffered a collision with B.U.’s best defensive tackle, who “crashed into the little padless guy while the punter’s cleated foot was still up over his head, falling on him in a beefy heap and snapping everything from femur to tarsus in the punter’s leg with a dreadful high-caliber snap. Two Pep majorettes and a waterboy fainted from the sound of the punter’s screams alone” (291-292). The fragile human body is always under pressure from external forces and suffering is therefore never too far away.

Marathe, who suffered the loss of both legs, confides to Kate Gompert about how his initial response to the experialist actions of O.N.A.N. was to become despondent and dejected: ‘I see no point and do no work and belong to nothing; I am alone. I think of death. I do nothing but frequently drink, roll around the despoiled countryside, sometimes dodging falling projectiles of invasion, thinking of death, bemoaning the depredation of the Swiss land, in great pain. But it is myself I bemoan. I have pain. I have no legs.’ (777) His active participation in the A.F.R. struggle can be said to have been partially determined by the level

of resentment he felt toward O.N.A.N. for contaminating his homeland. The pain inflicted upon him by the government of O.N.A.N was instrumental in directing his life path. Suffering cannot be completely suppressed and it is this quality that makes the characters of the novel realign themselves to confront the objective reality.

In one of his interviews, Wallace said “since an ineluctable part of being a human self is suffering, part of what we humans come to art for is an experience of suffering, necessarily a vicarious experience, more like a sort of generalization of suffering.”<sup>110</sup> This is why Burt F.S. gets “mugged and beaten half to death in Cambridge on Xmas Eve” and is “left there to like freeze there, in an alley, in a storm” (275) and why Poor Tony “wept silently in shame and pain at the passage of each brightly lit public second’s edge” when he “sat all alone at one end of the car, feeling each slow second take its cut” (304). Suffering is given prominence in the text, because of its capacity to penetrate through the fog of self-centered delusions by providing the reader with the opportunity to empathize with another consciousness.

When Joelle studies the cinematographic work of James Incandenza, she notices ‘little flashes of something,’ which refer to the “three quick cuts to the sides of the gorgeous combatants’ faces, twisted past recognition with some kind of torment. Each cut to a flash of pained face had followed the crash of a petrified spectator toppling over in her chair. Three split-seconds, no more, of glimpses of facial pain” (741). The movie being studied depicts a screening of another movie and includes shots of the audience. By witnessing the pain of the characters in the projected movie, the audience members are themselves directly affected. The novel is, of course, reenacting the very dynamic which is at play between itself and its own readers. Recognizing the universal experience of pain in others reconnects one with their individual pain and deepens their sense of how real it must be for others as well.

A similar concept can be observed in the ad campaign of The National Cranio-Facial Pain Foundation, which features paintings related to crippling cranio-facial pain. We are told: there was one of a woman with every carpenter’s tool known to God exiting her face. One of a young male with a spear of scarlet light through the right temple and coming clear out the other side. A woman with her crown between the incisors of some sort of shark so huge it passes from view past the frame. A grand-motherly type with roses, human hands, a pencil, and other lush-type flora all coming serpentine out of her open skull’s top. A head coming out in a long string from a throttled tube of paste; a

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<sup>110</sup> McCaffery, “An Expanded Interview,” in *Conversations*, 22.

Talmudic scholar bearded in needles; a Baconian pope with his hat on fire. (1030-1031)

These images illustrate a characteristic aspect of the novel, which is its propensity to veer toward the extreme, in order to perform the defamiliarizing function of entertainment, however self-consciously that may be. Portraying the most intense forms of suffering allows Wallace to reproduce the highly stimulating culture of the modern world that he seeks to critique, whilst taking advantage of its capacity to ‘topple the spectator over their char’ and inspire a profound change in them. Suffering makes palpable the realm of experience, which is shared by everyone, the objective reality beyond individual solipsism. In the words of Emil Minty: “Its’ a fucking bitch of a life dont’ let any body get over on you diffrent” (129).

### **3.5 The impost I’ve carried, The Indelibility of Trauma**

Certain events in a person’s formative years have far-reaching consequences for the way they act in later life. Negative experiences especially, are known for their capacity to determine one’s behavioral patterns. Greg Carlisle has noted the “many occurrences of child abuse” in *Infinite Jest*, and specified that they are “often manifested as a cyclical continuance of previous abuse.”<sup>111</sup> Since childhood trauma is such a ubiquitous phenomenon in the text, and its role in the lives of the characters so central, it stands to reason that it does not come from purely conceptual, mental domain, but that its primary component can be ascribed to the objective realm of the visceral experience. Traumatic events are, in other words, etched not just into the minds, but into the brains of those traumatized.

Hal Incandenza cannot remember the incident in which he, as a child, ate a piece of a large patch of mold, terrifying his mother. Orin, however, does have a recollection of the event. The shock that Hal went through is evident from his frozen demeanor: “I had stopped crying, he remembers, and simply stood there, the size and shape of a hydrant, in red PJ’s with attached feet, holding out the mold, seriously, like the report of some kind of audit” (11). Having witnessed the neurotic reaction of their mother, Orin later recalls: “I and Hallie staggered back, literally like staggered back, gaping at our first taste of apocalypse, a corner of the universe suddenly peeled back to reveal what seethed out there just beyond tidiness. What lay just north of order” (1043). This is the boys’ original encounter with what is deemed wholly unacceptable and must be mentally suppressed.

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<sup>111</sup> Carlisle, *Elegant Complexity*, 33.

The significance of the incident lies in its connection to Hal's possible ingestion of the hallucinogenic DMZ, which is synthesized from a mold. During the opening episode of the novel, which is chronologically the end of the narrative, Hal gives his account of the traumatic experience right before the representatives of the university become aware of his inability to communicate. The last words that capture Hal's own recognition of the fact that he is losing control are 'I cannot make myself understood, now.' He justifies this loss of control by stating "Call it something I ate" (10). The trauma of acting in an unacceptable way, which is suppressed and medicated with addictive substances throughout his life, concludes with the ingestion of a substance made from the same material that started the pattern in the first place. The past, here, haunts the present. Hal also finds the deceased body of his father. The actual experience is again removed from the situation itself. As observed by Jamie Redgate: "We learn about his episode with the grief therapist when Hal re-performs his performance for his brother Orin over the phone."<sup>112</sup> Both events are, therefore, kept at arm's length by the distancing process. Hal's anhedonic disposition is the consequence of not confronting the most painful aspects of his life. Unable to face his own emotions, he reverts to drugs and intellectual abstraction.

Trauma is a recurring theme of the novel. While Hal cannot remember his original trauma, Matty Pemulis, who is sexually abused by his father and most probably becomes a prostitute because of it, "remembered every inch and pimple of every single time" (684). Marlon Bain suffers from obsessive-compulsive disorder, which has been supposedly brought on by compulsive sweating that can be traced to his parents being killed in a grotesque freak accident (1039). Gately is traumatized by seeing his mother physically assaulted by her live-in lover and not being able to help her (446). His incompetence resurfaces in a dream where "his mother was getting the shit beaten out of her by a man with a shepherd's crook in the kitchen" (816). He runs away, incapable of handling the situation again. Likewise, having repeatedly made to witness the rape of her step-sister, the 'skinny hard-faced Advanced Basics girl' "had legged it from the bedroom and foster house into the brooding North Shore teen-runaway night, and had stripped and semi-whored and IV-injected her way all the way to that standard two-option addicted cliff-edge, hoping only to Forget" (374).

Whether conscious or not of the influence that trauma has over them, the personae of *Infinite Jest* are tethered to their past and struggle to break free. Joelle's mother admits that her father "had molested her and her sister all through childhood, ogled and touched and

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<sup>112</sup> Redgate, *Wallace and I*. 104.

worse, and that this had been why she'd married at just sixteen, to escape." She recognizes the repetitive nature of trauma in herself when she goes on to say "she'd married the exact same kind of monster, the kind who spurns his ordained mate and wants his daughter." (794). The same hereditary nature of trauma can be observed when Lenz tells Green that:

his phobic fear of timepieces stems from his stepfather, an Amtrak train conductor with deeply unresolved issues which he used to make Lenz wind his pocketwatch and polish his fob daily with a chamois cloth and nightly make sure his watch's displayed time was correct to the second or else he'd lay into the pint-sized Randy with a rolled-up copy of *Track and Flange*, a slick and wicked-heavy coffee-table-sized trade periodical. (557)

The hold that trauma has over these characters is deeply ingrained in what constitutes their identity, how they see themselves in relation to the outside world. Tiny Ewell verbalizes the inescapability of this predicament when he reflects on a period of his past wrongdoings: "this buried interval and the impost I've carried ever since may have informed my whole life. Why I was drawn to tax law, helping wealthy suburbanites two-step around their fair share. My marriage to a woman who looks at me as if I were a dark stain at the back of her child's trousers" (815). This sense of predestination is indicative of one's awareness of being subject to forces that circumvent the linguistic, and conceptual. Trauma arises in the somatic experience. Its pre-verbal essence belongs to objective reality, which is to be acknowledged as a fundamental plane of existence and ultimately reconciled with the merely subjective plane in a relationship of complementarity.

## 4.0 Multiplanar Humanity

### 4.1 Trust math. As in Matics, Obeysance of Logic

David Foster Wallace made *Infinite Jest* into an amalgamation of contradictions on purpose. The uncertainty of subjective and intersubjective realities rivals the certainty of objective reality. The relativity of language and social constructs is at odds with the absolute nature of the physical, emotional, and volitional aspects of our experience. It is through the deletion of the concept of contradiction that is dependent on logical coherence and its replacement with the idea of a complement that ultimately allows for a coexistence of seemingly incompatible ontological dimensions. The reader is presented with a fictional world brimming with so many logical discrepancies that they soon give way to a recognition of the logically contestable, but ontologically indisputable multiformity of the extra-textual reality. The awareness of the multiplicity of layers of reality begets the process whose end is to reclaim humanity. By embracing logical incoherence, the readership is moved closer to an existential alignment with the world as it is and themselves as they are, as opposed to being out of touch with it, because of a logically sound, but existentially false delusion of the mind.

A prevalent pitfall of many characters in the narrative is an excessive reliance on their reasoning capacity; a stubborn veneration of logic. Gately's stepfather, the former Navy M.P. "logged each beer he drank carefully in a little spiral notebook he used to monitor his intake of alcohol" (447). He "noted the date and time of each Heineken he consumed" (841). Rodney Tine, the Chief of the Office of Unspecified Services, has a special metric ruler with which he "measures his penis every A.M., like clockwork." And "there's also the special pocket-Franklin-Plannersized chart he charts the daily A.M. penis-measurement in" (548-549). Addicted to promiscuity, Orin Incandenza "kept a record of Subjects that was sort of a cross between a chart and a journal" (634).

There's also Steeply's father who becomes obsessed with the television show 'M\*A\*S\*H.' Steeply talks about "The gradual immersion. The withdrawal from life" and reports that "It was at some point during this gradual shift the notebook first appeared. He began writing notes in a notebook as he viewed." We later learn that the man is working on "a secret book that revised and explicated much of the world's military, medical, philosophical and religious history by analogies to certain subtle and complex thematic codes" in the show. The neurotic preoccupation ends in death: "He died in his easy chair, set at full Recline" (640-646). Thinking that logic alone can explain everything has fatal consequences.

By the same token, as one of the Ennet House residents: “Randy Lenz’s obsessive compulsions include the need to be north, a fear of disks, a tendency to constantly take his own pulse, a fear of all forms of timepieces, and a need to always know the time with great precision” (279). This is what Orin tells Helen Steeply about his friend Marlon Bain: “It’d also be good if you could avoid mentioning the number 2 to him. He has problems with the number 2” (1043). An extreme case of over-reliance on the mind can be observed when a student at E.T.A. called Kyle D. Coyle shares his concerns about Ortho Stice with Hal: “He keeps staring at things with his temple-veins flexing, trying to exert will on them.” Coyle tells Hal: “He bet me 20 beans he could stand on his desk chair and lift it up at the same time, and then he wouldn’t let me cancel the bet when I got embarrassed for him after half an hour, standing up there flexing his temples” (943). Lastly, the mother of three sons and the Dean of Academic Affairs at E.T.A, Avril Incandenza is said to have ‘issues of enclosure’ and one can infer this is why the Headmaster’s House “has no interior doors between rooms, and not even much in the way of walls” (189). At a Thanksgiving dinner, she is seen directing “every fourth comment” to the attendants as a “cycle of even inclusion” (744). The irresistible craving to arrange the world according to a certain logical pattern is a sign of angst toward the objective reality and its chaotic nature.

Wallace’s writing process was meticulous. He identified himself as a “Five Draft man.”<sup>113</sup> He also studied formal logic at university<sup>114</sup> and went on to write a book about mathematics<sup>115</sup>. Very much interested in making sense of the world through reason, he incorporated this inclination into the novel. Clare Hayes-Brady makes clear how: “Each character becomes driven by the notion of perfection, the perfect serve, the perfect high, the perfect film. Applied to Wittgenstein’s theory of language games, speakers become obsessed with rules and with perfect communication, leading to stagnant dialogue and isolation.” She goes on to say that the text “dramatizes the static tyranny of perfection, the dying of creativity in its attainment of a teleological imperative.”<sup>116</sup> Rationality becomes misguided the moment reason elevates itself to the supreme position, presupposing that it can decipher and resolve any problem. According to Jon Baskin: “For Wallace, the separation of philosophy from literature—and the crude dichotomies often correlated with that separation: mind/body, theoretical/practical, intellectual/emotional—are both a cause and a symptom of a “dis-ease,”

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<sup>113</sup> Stacey Schmeidel, “A Brief Interview with a Five-Draft Man,” in *David Foster Wallace: The Last Interview*, 121.

<sup>114</sup> D. T. Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, 41.

<sup>115</sup> The title in question is *Everything and More: A Compact History of Infinity*.

<sup>116</sup> Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*, 72.

as he calls it in *Infinite Jest*<sup>117</sup> Separating the intellect from emotion and relying on logic too much, proves to be catastrophic.

A distinctive type of obsession that afflicts several characters has to do with cleanliness. Avril Incandenza has “a violent phobic thing about vermin and waste and insects and overall facility hygiene” (671). We learn from Mario that she “couldn’t change diapers” when he was little (768). Moreover, she is described as gardening while wearing “two pairs of work-gloves and plastic surgery-type bags over her espadrilles” along with a “Fukoama microfiltration pollution mask” (1041). She also suffers a panic attack when Hal tells her he ate a piece of a large patch of mold (11). Her obsessiveness seems to be a temperamental disposition and much of the familial dysfunction can be traced back to her neuroses and compulsive behaviors.

Likewise, Orin’s ex-girlfriend, Joelle van Dyne, “liked to get really high and clean. ... Scrub sinks until they were mint-white. Dust the ceilings without using any kind of ladder. Vacuum like a fiend and put in a fresh vacuum-bag after each room” (225). Her germophobic tendencies are linked with stress release:

When relations were strained, or she was seized with anxiety at the seriousness and possible impermanence of the thing in the Back Bay’s co-op, the getting high and cleaning became an important exercise, like creative visualization, a preview of the discipline and order with which she could survive alone if it came to that. ... An aura of steely independence surrounded her when she cleaned the co-op, even with the little whimpers and anxious moans that exited her writhing mouth when she cleaned high. (736)

The purification of the unclean environment can be likened to the imposition of internal order on external chaos. Joelle finds relief in the mind-like spotlessness of her surroundings, because it signifies the absence of the filth and sewage normally found in the objective reality of the real world. By making her home perfectly clean, she gives in to the fantasy of solipsism in which the mind alone can determine the experience.

Similarly, the US president Johny Gentle, who, at times, closes himself off from others in a “oxygenated Lucite portabubble,” (438) gave an Inaugural Address that “heralded the advent of a Tighter, Tidier Nation”. He promised Americans “to clean up government and trim fat and sweep out waste and hose down our chemically troubled streets” and to get rid of “the toxic effluvia choking our highways and littering our byways and grungeing up our sunsets”

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<sup>117</sup> Baskin, *Ordinary Unhappiness*, 4.



(382-383). An important part of the story is that it is on Gentle's authority that US gave Canada a part of its territory, albeit one that is immensely polluted, in order to free itself from the responsibility of dealing with the toxicity of the area themselves. The exploitative act of putting their environmental burden on Canadians is to be recognized as another case of reallocating problems instead of solving them, which is the hallmark of the solipsistic mindset and the pedestalization of logic. Heather Houser makes the case that "The need to put distance between itself and waste, a source of opprobrium and fear, inspires the U.S.'s reworking of international relations and of space itself. Under the organizing concept of detachment, then, *Infinite Jest's* psychological climate hooks up with its ecopolitical arrangements."<sup>118</sup>

The dominance of reason can also be located in the representation of compulsive thinking. In the section that portrays the experience of the marijuana addict Ken Erdedy, there is a clear sense of his mind being wholly consumed by repetitive thoughts. The sentences "He sat and thought," along with "he was committed to several courses of action," and "Where was the woman who had said she'd come" (17-25) are all repeated. The following passage, detailing how he feels about a woman with whom he arranged a delivery of cannabis, illustrates the overwhelming force of his thoughts:

This arrangement, very casual, made him anxious, so he'd been even more casual and said sure, fine, whatever. Thinking back, he was sure he'd said whatever, which in retrospect worried him because it might have sounded as if he didn't care at all, not at all, so little that it wouldn't matter if she forgot to get it or call, and once he'd made the decision to have marijuana in his home one more time it mattered a lot. It mattered a lot. (19)

Unable to stop himself from obsessing about the woman bringing him his drug of choice, his reasoning capacity becomes a source of anguish.

At the Ennet halfway house, the reader is made privy to the 'exotic fact' that "most Substance-addicted people are also addicted to thinking, meaning they have a compulsive and unhealthy relationship with their own thinking" (203). The uncontrollable thought patterns also beset Hal Incandenza:

It was as if his head perched on the bedpost all night now and in the terribly early A.M. when Hal's eyes snapped open immediately said Glad You're UP I've Been Wanting To TALK To You and then didn't let up all day, having at him like a well-

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<sup>118</sup> Houser, "Environmental Case for Disgust," in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, 123-124.

revved chain-saw all day until he could finally try to fall unconscious, crawling into the rack wretched to await more bad dreams. (795)

As the embodiment of excessive intellect, Hal is overdependent on his linguistic talents and must suffer the ramifications. It is easy to concur with Karl A. Plank when he says “It may be too much to say that, for Wallace, the problem in the head is thinking *per se*,”<sup>119</sup> because the text makes evident that it is rather the inability to control one’s thoughts that gives rise to the character’s distress or anxiety.

Interestingly, the beauty of the logical mindset is on display when the E.T.A. student, Michael Pemulis tells the distraught Todd Possalthwaite about the benefits of relying on the faculty of reason:

Todd, trust math. As in Matics, Math E. First-order predicate logic. Never fail you. Quantities and their relation. Rates of change. The vital statistics of God or equivalent. When all else fails. When the boulder’s slid all the way back to the bottom. When the headless are blaming. When you do not know your way about. You can fall back and regroup around math. Whose truth is deductive truth. Independent of sense or emotionality. ... Caius is mortal. Math is not mortal. What it is is: listen: it’s true. (1071)

This glorification of logic represents the recognition of the phenomenal potential that is contained within words. As stated by Pemulis, the discipline of mathematics can uncover the truth of the universe. The passage, significantly, affirms the legitimacy of the novel itself. However, Wallace is depicting reality in its paradoxical nature and viewing the text, or any scientific discipline as an ultimate answer is to be perpetually denied. We must keep in mind the sentiment expressed in the words Hal tells himself during his admission interview: “I believe, with Hegel, that transcendence is absorption” (12). Logic may be a powerful tool, but it needs to be integrated to a more elaborate understanding of the world; one that includes an awareness of the phenomena that escape linguistic delimitation.

## 4.2 So tired it’s out of *tired*’s word-range, Defiance of Logic

Although many characters that occupy the pages of *Infinite Jest* look to the authority of rationality to guide them through life, there are those whose justification for what they do stems from a determination to not let the rules of logic confine them. Wallace engineers the

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<sup>119</sup> Plank, *The Fact of the Cage*, 122.

collision between the force of reason and the provisional perception of what lies beyond it, in order to emulate the logically incongruous reality that envelops the reader. It is only by becoming cognizant of the paradoxical duality of the world and of the self that one's humanity can be reclaimed. When the seemingly sensible integrity of recognizing a single paradigm gives way to the apprehension of the multiplanarity of existence, language loses its sovereignty and one's consciousness shifts from being contradictory to being complementary.

There are times when the text teeters on the very edge of linguistic definability. Avril Incandenza, at one point, opens her mouth "in a mute way that was itself eloquent" (312). At another point, Hal recalls his mother's face as "past describing" (11). Similarly, Marlon Bain's face is characterized as "unspeakable" (808). Gately's recurring dream features an Oriental woman who "has no particular expression and never says anything, though her face's scars have a certain elusive pattern to them that seems like it wants to mean something" (828).

The appeal of irrationality is encompassed in the portrayal of fortuitous success. During a phone conversation with his older brother, Hal talks about the enchanting nature of being "perfectly calibrated" while clipping his toenails into a wastebasket: "you never know when the magic will descend on you." He explains that "once the magic descends you don't want to change even the smallest detail. You don't know what concordance of factors and variables yields that calibrated can't-miss feeling, and you don't want to soil the magic by trying to figure it out" (248). His acknowledgment of factors, which circumvent direct conscious control but still decide the outcome of human efforts, prompts the reader to accept that relying on logic alone is objectionable.

The impulse to defy the laws of language and logic can be observed in the discussion that pertains to semantic boundaries. Words prove insufficient when, exhausted from physical exertion, the players at E.T.A. talk about their burned out state. Michael Pemulis says that he is "so tired it's out of *tired*'s word-range." He adds: "*tired* just doesn't do it." After several attempts to find the appropriate adjective, the boys conclude that "None even come close, the words." One of them remarks: "here we are sitting here needing whole new words and terms," and Jim Struck adds: "need a whole new syntax for fatigue on days like this" (100-101). The inability to account for their experience verbally leaves the players at the threshold of what is expressible lexically in the same way the text as a whole verges on border of the extra-textual reality.

The effectiveness of Alcoholics Anonymous program is a clear example of that which escapes rational explanation. The narrator tells us: "it seemed to be impossible to figure out just how AA worked. It did, yes, tentatively seem maybe actually to be working, but Gately

couldn't for the life of him figure out how" (349). We also learn that what is required to successfully reach abstinence is encapsulated in the imperative: "check your head at the door" (374). Ultimately, all of the ways in which the narrative chronicles the inclination to defy logic are made manifest explicitly in one of Ennet's house 'exotic facts'; we are told that those who happen to spend time at a recovery facility will learn that "logical validity is not a guarantee of truth" (202). This is the key insight of the novel.

It becomes apparent that the right action to take on the journey to recovery is to relinquish one's attachment to total logical understanding of and intellectual justification for one's actions. Roy tony, one of Ennet's residents, provides Erdedy with an explanation for his abdication of personal autonomy when he clarifies his stance on hugging: "You think I fucking *like* to go around hug on folks? You think *any* of us *like* this *shit*? We fucking do what they tell us. They tell us Hugs Not Drugs in here. We done motherfucking *surrendered* our wills in here" (506). Gately learns to yield control as a way to survive the torment of being incapacitated at the hospital. He calls the act of abandoning the mental compulsion to project into the future 'abiding.' The narrator reports: "No one single instant of it was unendurable. Here was a second right here: he endured it. What was undearable-with was the thought of all the instants all lined up and stretching ahead, glittering." He continues: "What's unendurable is what his own head could make of it all. What his head could report to him, looking over and ahead and reporting" (860). As Adam Miller observed: "The head has to stop adding things up and, instead, let life pass as it actually comes, single file."<sup>120</sup> Letting go of the need to be completely in control of one's self is a critical lesson in the process of overcoming addiction and it also represents a validation of the rebellion against the hegemony of logic.

The logical order is undermined whenever characters access an altered frame of mind that has come to be known as 'flow state.' Considering the fact that the concept has been originally popularized by the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, it is by no means accidental that the reader encounters a young student of the Enfield Tennis Academy with the name 'Zoltan Csikzentmihalyi'. Wallace experienced the immersive state while producing literature. In an interview, Wallace said: "Writing fiction takes me out of time" and "I sit down and the clock will not exist for me for a few hours."<sup>121</sup> The players at E.T.A watch a visualization tape that repeats the mantra "Don't Think Just See Don't Know Just Flow" (110). The father of James Incandenza tells his son about entering a trance in which one can "slip into the clear current of back and forth" and "[play] with such ease and total mindless

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<sup>120</sup> Miller, *The Gospel According to David Foster Wallace*, 92.

<sup>121</sup> William Katovsky, "David Foster Wallace: A Profile," in *David Foster Wallace: The Last Interview*, 9.

effortless effort” (166). In much the same vein, Hal speaks of “playing out of your head” and “being in The Zone” (242). The playstyle of the highest rated player at the academy, John Wayne, is reported to have “a kind of automatic beauty” (260). Being wholly absorbed by an activity is revealed to be liberating due to the concomitant disengagement of the mind. The flow state momentarily unhinges the shackles of mental micromanagement and opens the doors to the dormant faculties that operate above thought.

Depicting the various ways of embracing irrationality enables Wallace to offset the widespread dependency on logic and demonstrate that the two aspects are inseparably intertwined. Distinguishing the validity of both impulses allows the reader to accept the multiplanarity of reality and, by extension, restore their humanity.

### **4.3 Shouldn't there be violas for this part? Hollow Irony**

A discernable pattern across the various regions and districts of *Infinite Jest* is the human propensity to employ irony in the interest of putting distance between one's self and the world. The personae of the novel often give in to the omnipresent detachment that sunders their bond with objective reality. Wallace once said: “It seems to me that the intellectualization and aestheticizing of principles and values in this country is one of the things that's gutted our generation.”<sup>122</sup> He furnished his novel with this cynical aspect in the name of personifying the problem and allowing himself to provide a solution. Correspondingly, Ralph Clare mentions Wallace's “diagnosis of debilitating, cultural irony” in connection to “his ability to reveal a core sadness that persisted in a post-Cold War would-be utopian America.”<sup>123</sup> Mary K. Holland goes as far as saying that the novel's “irony is so pervasive ... it is impossible to communicate without it.”<sup>124</sup> The representation of the tendency to avoid life's adversity by ironizing it, facilitates the process of noticing the different, ostensibly contradictory, ontological dimensions that constitute the real, and steers the reader toward the assimilation of the idea that their own existence includes logical contradiction.

To deflate the seriousness of a situation with a sardonic comment is to choose the comfort of detachment. When Hal is making an important observation about the practices at the academy, Ingersoll retorts: “Shouldn't there be violas for this part, Hal, if this is the

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<sup>122</sup> Miller, “The Salon Interview,” in *Conversations*, 60.

<sup>123</sup> Ralph Clare, “Introduction: An Exquisite Corpus: Assembling a Wallace without Organs,” in *The Cambridge Companion*, 3.

<sup>124</sup> Holland, “Infinite Jest,” in *The Cambridge Companion*, 128.

point?” (111). Just as the Quebecois Insurgent, Marathe, conveys his conviction in the concepts of patriotism and self-transcendence, the American operative Steeply starts singing: “Ohh... *Canada*...” (107) to mock his resoluteness. The hollow ironic disposition is identified as a characteristic of the United States. The narrator describes Steeply’s body language: “he pivoted on one heel and looked, and cocked his head in a way of cynicism that seemed to Marathe consummately U.S.A.” (489) The American society is prone to disassociate from unvarnished earnestness and much of its discontent can be traced back to this scoffing attitude. A response to this mindset can be observed in the way Marathe feels when with Steeply: “Marathe wondered why the presence of Americans could always make him feel vaguely ashamed after saying things he believed. An aftertaste of shame after revealing passion of any belief and type when with Americans, as if he had made flatulence instead of had revealed belief” (318). When having strong beliefs arouses ridicule, the capacity of an individual to partake in the intersubjective reality is gravely disrupted.

There are, however, cases of resistance, where Americans acknowledge the error of their ways. Hal’s grandfather tells his son James: “you kids today somehow don’t know how to *feel*, much less love, to say nothing of respect” (167). Speaking about the Ennet recovery facility, the narrator makes clear that for a speech to receive the audience’s approval, it must be “maximally unironic.” We are told that “an ironist in a Boston AA meeting is a witch in church,” because it is an “Irony-free zone” (369). A significant part of the refusal of irony is to be found in the scrupulous analysis of the problem. The narrator links the caustic outlook within United States to the type of art that is being produced in the nation. He states that “It’s of some interest that the lively arts of the millennial U.S.A. treat anhedonia and internal emptiness as hip and cool,” and then goes on to say:

The U.S. arts are our guide to inclusion. A how-to. We are shown how to fashion masks of ennui and jaded irony at a young age where the face is fictile enough to assume the shape of whatever it wears. And then it’s stuck there, the weary cynicism that saves us from gooey sentiment and unsophisticated naïveté.” (694)

The seed for the ironic frame of mind is planted in the dispassionate nature of art and what allows it to grow is the juvenile predilection for conformity. Contained within this argument is the possibility of reversing the process through the text itself; if art corrodes the disposition of the public, it can also remedy it as well.

Furthermore, we learn that Hal “theorizes privately that what passes for hip cynical transcendence of sentiment is really some kind of fear of being really human, since to be really human ... is probably to be unavoidably sentimental and naïve and goo-prone.” This

idea, essentially, summarizes the central hypothesis of the novel. It illustrates the ‘gridlocked,’ conflicted, contraparadigmatic position that human beings are made to contend with. The narration continues with a revelation of the internally irreconcilable nature of human existence: “One of the really American things about Hal, probably, is the way he despises what it is he’s really lonely for: this hideous internal self, incontinent of sentiment and need, that pules and writhes just under the hip empty mask, anhedonia” (694-695) At a later point, Hal speaks in first person: “It now lately sometimes seemed like a kind of black miracle to me that people could actually care deeply about a subject or pursuit, and could go on caring this way for years on end. Could dedicate their entire lives to it. It seemed admirable and at the same time pathetic” (900). The dualism expressed in the last clause signifies the cardinal quality of the conflict: complementarity.

#### **4.4 Something way bigger than your personal ass, Solid Belief**

Opting to affirm a particular version of reality permits one to truly experience life’s highs and lows; to engage with others and with the world. It is through commitment to the veracity of certain ideas that the subject is allowed to align with the objective reality. This aligning process brings together the conceptual representation of the real and the real itself. In his study of *Infinite Jest*, Stephen J. Burn claims that “the spiritual hollowness of a life without belief seems to be one of the most persistent themes.”<sup>125</sup> By incorporating the human need to maintain specific views and values into the novel, Wallace is presenting a way out of the mental jail of solipsism that obstructs the full expression of humanity.

This theme is made explicit in the conversations at the outcropping, where a member of an anti-American terrorist cell, Rémy Marathe, talks to an American secret agent, Hugh Steeply about their personal and national differences. Marathe tells Steeply: “Attachments are of great seriousness. Choose your attachments carefully.” He poses a rhetorical question: “Die for one person?” only to explain “this is a craziness. Persons change, leave, die, become ill. They leave, lie, go mad, have sickness, betray you, die. Your nation outlives you. A cause outlives you.” His words provide a commentary of the American society, which he sees as being defined by unmitigated self-interest. He continues: “You are what you love. No? You are, completely and only, what you would die for without, as you say, the *thinking twice*” Combining the strength of one's convictions with the ultimate sacrifice cements Marathe’s position as someone, who is completely immersed in life and participating in the

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<sup>125</sup> Burn, *David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest: A Reader's Guide*, 63.

intersubjective reality in the name of influencing and changing the lives of others. He affirms the importance of having strong beliefs when he says: “For this choice determines all else. No? All other of our you say *free* choices follow from this: what is our temple” (106-107). In his line of thinking, Americans worship every whim of the individual self, while Canadians eschew their ego-centric inclinations to serve a larger purpose that advances the interests of the whole collective. Clare Hayes-Brady points out that “only by choosing to believe in systems of authority, in the rules of language games, can we find common ground.”<sup>126</sup> Marathe regards the cooperative efforts of society as morally superior to the culture of self-centeredness that permeates the US. At one point, his determination becomes evident even to his conversational partner: “Steeply could tell this was important to Marathe; he really believed it” (318). The indomitability of his character shines through, when the narrator states: “Marathe was prepared for death in all forms” (734).

The anomie of American society is reproduced on the streets of Boston as well. We learn that “the encaged and suicidal have a really hard time imagining anyone caring passionately about anything” (224). Disconnected from the intersubjective reality, the downtrodden are left with nothing but involuntary self-absorption. Similarly, Hal Indandenza is so repressed that he cannot consciously recognize the moments on court when his uncertainty subsides. His brother Mario tells him “I don’t get how you couldn’t feel like you believed, today, out there. It was so *right there*. You moved like you totally believed” (41). Immured in their own minds and suffering, the majority of the novel’s characters become untethered from the dimension of reality that holds within itself the capacity to infuse life with value and meaning. In the words of Adam S. Miller: “If you never surrender that abstract freedom and commit to the limitation of something real, the crucial revelation will never dawn. You’ll fail to discover that such commitments aren’t just a kind of dying, they’re the substance of life.”<sup>127</sup> Caring about others not only alleviates the uneasiness of narcissism, it also solidifies our very existence in the world.

It is necessary to note that the USA of the novel is not depicted as unredeemable. We may point to the head tennis instructor at the Enfield Academy, Gerhardt Schtitt, whose mindset is communicated through the words of one of the students who tells the younger players: “You’ll hear him say it over and over. What have you got to give. What are you willing to part with.” The student continues: “He’ll tell you straight the fuck out. It’s about discipline and sacrifice and honor to something way bigger than your personal ass. He’ll

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<sup>126</sup> Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*, 33.

<sup>127</sup> Miller, *The Gospel According to David Foster Wallace*, 58.



mention America. He'll talk patriotism and don't think he won't," and concludes with: "He'll say it's how to learn to be a good American during a time, boys, when America isn't good its own self" (120). Here we see a reverence of sacrifice for one's nation being imparted to young students of an American academy. Schtitt is making the players aware of a flaw which is systemic, but that they have a responsibility to rectify. His perspective gives the reader a sense that the connection between the individual and social reality can be eventually restored. I concur with Lee Konstantinou in that "Wallace uses fiction in what can often seem like a last desperate effort to make us believe something, to feel anything."<sup>128</sup>

The forces of belief and disbelief are textually woven together in a way that suggests that while the attraction of irony may be ever-present, one should embrace their social duty and pursue the path of belief, without losing sight of how human it is to stray from it. Having recognized the legitimacy of both, the impulse to shirk responsibility and the impulse to take it on, the reader can grasp the paradoxical unity of subjective and intersubjective planes of reality. It is the perception of this multiplanarity that allows them to reclaim their humanity.

#### **4.5 Just one night to relax and indulge, The Immorality of Inaction**

By its very nature, *Infinite Jest* is a moralistic text. It seeks to dissuade the reader from seeing the world as uniplanar and logically coherent, especially warning against a reliance on the hollow relativity of the individual, subjective reality. Through the incorporation of subjective, intersubjective, and objective layers of the real, a plea is made to the reader to accept the logical incoherence found in the coexistence of nihilism and conviction. Sitting across three academic deans at his university interview, Hal Incandenza relates how the one on the left has "a personality-type I've come lately to appreciate." He describes it as "the type who delays need of any response from me by relating my side of the story for me, to me" (3). The opening scene, which marks the chronological end of the novel, presents the disturbing end point of the narrative. Hal has become so dejected that he finds solace in the act of renouncing his will. This spiritual capitulation signifies the utter loss of humanity. The section ends with a question addressed to Hal: "So yo then man what's *your* story?" (17). It calls on to Hal and the reader to not surrender to the docile passivity of being at the effect of the world, and to, instead, be at the cause.

Lassitude has infiltrated every strata of society in the future America the novel portrays. Addicted to marijuana, Erdedy "thought very broadly of desires and ideas being

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<sup>128</sup> Konstantinou, "No Bull," in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, 106.

watched but not acted upon, he thought of impulses being starved of expression and drying out and floating dryly away” (26). Gately’s ex-girlfriend, Pamela Hoffman-Jeep, is described as “the single passivest person Gately ever met. He never once saw P.H.-J. actually get from one spot to another under her own power.” His friend calls Pamela “Death’s Poster-Child” (925). Wallace repeatedly equates inaction with death. Marathe tells Steeply “This appetite to choose death by pleasure if it is available to choose — this *appetite* of your people unable to choose appetites, *this* is the death” He presents an explanation for the cynical and despondent culture of the US: “Someone taught that temples are for fanatics only and took away the temples and promised there was no need for temples. And now there is no shelter. And no map for finding the shelter of a temple. And you all stumble about in the dark” (319-320) The absence of belief is identified as the reason for the despair that afflicts American society.

Aboard a luxury cruise, Wallace, in his essay, outlined the part of himself that the characters of his novel give into. He becomes inspired by the ship’s brochure and ponders:

How long has it been since you did Absolutely Nothing? I know exactly how long it’s been for me. I know how long it’s been since I had every need met choicelessly from someplace outside me, without my having to ask or even acknowledge that I needed.

And that time I was floating, too, and the fluid was salty, and warm but not too-, and if I was conscious at all I’m sure I felt dreadless, and was having a really good time, and would have sent postcards to everyone wishing they were here. (268)

In another essay, he speaks of the same part, when he talks about doing “what I do best whenever I feel confused and guilty: assume, inside, a sort of fetal position, a pose of passive reception to comfort, escape, reassurance” (41). Marshall Boswell managed to capture this psychological state when, in relation to the novel’s unhappy society, he wrote about “the culture’s desire for self-forgetting, a desire to be returned to the catatonic state of the womb, where needs are met and fed perpetually, endlessly”<sup>129</sup> This image and idea of absolute infantile regression is foundational for the text as a whole. It sits beneath the level of consciousness, animating the motivation of the characters without being directly portrayed. In his non-fiction, Wallace wrote about “the Dissatisfied Infant part of me, the part that always and indiscriminately WANTS.”<sup>130</sup>

The images and symbols of babies in the text are copious. At unit number 4 of Enfield Marine Public Health Hospital complex, the “residents wear jammies 24/7, the diapers underneath giving them a lumpy and toddlerish aspect” (196). When the US operative Steeply

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<sup>129</sup> Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 91.

<sup>130</sup> Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again*, 316.

goes to visit his former associate Hank, a victim of the Entertainment in a catatonic state, he describes his eyes as “wobbling around like some drug-addicted newborn” (507). Gately’s desperately passive, former girlfriend Pamela Hoffman-Jeep, is said to have “yawned an infant’s little milky yawn” (925) at one point. Constantly blurring the lines between toddlerhood and adulthood, the novel reproduces the psychological inability to leave the childish outlook behind and adopt the mentality of a parent.

One way the infantile regression manifests is in the desire to be stimulated. The character referred to as ‘Prince Q ———’ “refuses to eat pretty much anything but,” the Swiss chocolate, “Töblerone” (33). The extreme intensity of the stimulation can be observed in the way the medical attaché, who works indirectly for the Prince, “[heats] the prepared *halal* lamb and spicy *halal* garnish in the microwave oven until piping-hot” (36). The narrator states that “recreational drugs are more or less traditional at any U.S. secondary school” (53). He also relates Gately’s view that the opioid called Demerol has a “womb-warm buzz of a serious narcotic” (890). Additionally, multiple characters give the impression of “having several cigarettes going at one time” (556, 645, 701, 732).

It could be said that the events of the novel all revolve around the fatal movie ‘Infinite Jest,’ also called ‘Entertainment,’ that gives the book its name and that reduces the existence of those who watch it to “such a narrow focus that no other activity or connection could hold their attention. Possessed of roughly the mental/ spiritual energies of a moth” (548-549). This video recording, or cartridge as they are known in the text, epitomizes the furthest point of stimulation and, by extension, of passivity. Wallace himself said “what entertainment ultimately leads to is ‘Infinite Jest,’ that’s the star it’s steering by”<sup>131</sup> Marathe presents the Entertainment to Kate Gompert by saying “you would feel more good feeling and pleasure than ever before for you: you would never again feel sorrow or pity or the pain of the chains and cage of never choosing.” (781) Boswell makes the case that “The film itself is Wallace’s most visible emblem of his Lacanian debt. The fundamental source of the Entertainment’s lethal appeal is its ability to give viewers what they think they have wanted all their lives: namely a return to some state of maternal connection.”<sup>132</sup>

The maternal connection refers to the person depicted in the film, Joelle van Dyne, also known as Madame Psychosis. She is said to possess “transhuman beauty” (290) and is “too Goddamn-all petrifyingly pretty to approach any other way but liquored up past all horror” (741). She once tells Gately:

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<sup>131</sup> David Lipsky, “The Lost Years and Last Days of David Foster Wallace,” in *Conversations*, 172.

<sup>132</sup> Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 76.

Don, I'm perfect. I'm so beautiful I drive anybody with a nervous system out of their fucking mind. Once they've seen me they can't think of anything else and don't want to look at anything else and stop carrying out normal responsibilities and believe that if they can only have me right there with them at all times everything will be all right. (538)

This description is analogic to the effect that the Entertainment has on its viewers. Molly Notkin, at one point, provides a description of what happens in the fatally entertaining film by stating that it features Madame Psychosis “as some kind of maternal instantiation of the archetypal figure Death, sitting naked, corporeally gorgeous, ravishing, hugely pregnant” She goes on to explain that Joelle is “sitting there nude, explaining in very simple childlike language to whomever the film’s camera represents that Death is always female, and that the female is always maternal” (788). Boswell illuminates the meaning of this pivotal segment: “the thing you desire most—Lacan’s (m)other—is the thing that will kill you. Such desiring will also lead you to death-in-life, a catatonic state of pure desiring, one that involves a form of self-annihilation similar to the process of metempsychosis.”<sup>133</sup> As the embodiment of the uttermost tantalizing object, ‘Madame Psychosis’ is also an alternative name for DMZ, which is “the hardest recreational compound to acquire in North America after raw Vietnamese opium” and “the single grimmest thing ever conceived in a tube” (170). The incredibly beautiful woman, extremely potent hallucinogen, and lethally entertaining film are all interconnected in their subjugation and enslavement of the human spirit.

The characters in the novel are infatuated with the fantasy of absolute, effortless satisfaction. This desire is, however, delusive. It actually denies the willful aspect of their humanity and robs them of their agency. Being docile is the antithesis of responsible behavior and inaction in the novel is seen as inherently immoral. Furthermore, when Steeply tells Marathe about one of the Entertainment’s victims, he describes the effect the film has had: “His world’s as if it has collapsed into one small bright point. Inner world. Lost to us.” (508) It is easy to see that the infantile regression, passive stimulation, and death are all related to solipsism.

Without belief, the denizens of the future America are depressed and in pain. Their existence is, fundamentally, one of coping. The clinically depressed Kate Gompert confesses to her doctor: “I’ll start out doing just like a couple of hits off a duBois<sup>134</sup> after work, to get me through dinner” (76). The students at E.T.A. discuss their ideas of unwinding from the

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid, 78.

<sup>134</sup> A slang term for a marijuana cigarette.

rigors of the academy and one says “It’d be like a pleasant fatigue if I could just go up after dinner and hunker on down with the mind in neutral and watch something uncomplex.” Struck tells the others he would like to “relax, do bongos, kick back, look at lingerie catalogues, eat granola with a great big wooden spoon” and one of his peers declares he wants “just one night to relax and indulge” (102). One of the residents at the Ennet halfway house poses the question: “Who wouldn’t have to get high just to stand it?” (180). D. T. Max wrote about how Wallace wanted to “anatomize the unending American quest for distraction.”<sup>135</sup>

Wallace spoke of his own experience of the solipsistic cage: “Drugs, movies where stuff blows up, loud parties—all these chase loneliness away by making me forget my name’s Dave and I live in a one-by-one box of bone no other party can penetrate or know.”<sup>136</sup> Relatedly, Avril Incandenza explains to her son Mario: “People, then, who are sad, but who can’t let themselves feel sad, or express it, the sadness ... they may drink alcohol or take other drugs” (767) Moreover, the narrator reports how “Gately realized even then, this was your drug addict’s basic way of dealing with problems, was using the good old Substance to blot out the problem.” (932) Hal Incandenza, at one point, realizes that “we’re all lonely for something we don’t know we’re lonely for” (1053). Attending Molly Notkin’s party, Reeves Mainwaring articulates this phenomenon by saying “life is essentially one long search for an ashtray” (238).

In an interview with David Lipsky, Wallace talked about the basic problem that essentially brought the novel into being:

Well for me, as an American male, the face I’d put on the terror is the dawning realization that nothing’s enough, you know? That no pleasure is enough, that no achievement is enough. That there’s a kind of queer dissatisfaction or emptiness at the core of the self that is unassuageable by outside stuff<sup>137</sup>

It can be inferred from this passage that Wallace finds the answer to genuine fulfillment within himself; that it is the internal force of human will that can, in the end, assuage one’s inner wellbeing. His exact words that define this way of thinking are: “To treat ourselves the way we would treat a really good, precious friend. Or a tiny child of ours that we absolutely loved more than life itself.”

The world of the novel, however, reflects the state of society which is, frequently, defined by a lack of love. The compulsive nature of the various coping patterns, which are

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<sup>135</sup> D. T. Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, 252.

<sup>136</sup> Gerald Howard, “Infinite Jester,” in *David Foster Wallace: The Last Interview*, 14.

<sup>137</sup> David Lipsky, “An Interview with David Foster Wallace,” in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, 116.

popular among the American public, makes the activities habitual. In the words of Mary K. Holland: the “desire to transcend the empty, suffering self results in a culture of addiction.”<sup>138</sup> Speaking of America, Wallace said: “Addiction is a mode of existence for everyone, whether approved culturally or not.”<sup>139</sup> We learn that the addict named Erdedy “had tried to stop smoking marijuana maybe 70 or 80 times before” (18) and that “he didn’t even know why he liked it anymore” (21). When she gets home from Molly Notkin’s party, Joelle van Dyne, who is addicted to freebase cocaine, is said to have finally confronted “the predicament that she didn’t love it anymore she hated it and wanted to stop and also couldn’t stop or imagine stopping or living without it” (223). These examples of characters not being able to rationally justify the continuance of their coping behaviors are indicative of them being under the spell of the primal desire for intense, unending pleasure. In their wish to be absolved of having to choose, the addicts are robbed of their will and eventually, their humanity.

Wallace’s future America has been lulled to a state, which borders on unconsciousness. Alienated from the world and each other, many people walk through their lives in a drowsy daze; half awake, half asleep. At Enfield Tennis Academy, “Peter Beak is asleep with his eyes open” (110). Conversely, Rik Dunkel “has been observed sitting at community gatherings with his eyes closed but not sleeping” (457). During Tiny Ewell’s taxi ride he sees that “some schoolboys in knee-pads and skallycaps are playing street hockey on a passing school’s cement playground. Except none of the boys seems to be moving” (86). When Hal visits Schtitt’s room, his “sound system’s lights are on but nothing’s playing” (686). Reading about the Shattuck shelter, we find that “the state employees who supervise the shelter at night are dead-eyed” (435). Toward the end of the text, Gene Fackelmann has his eyes sewn open (979). Interestingly, the effect of the DMZ drug, described as “the Great White Shark of organo-synthesized hallucinogens,” (211) is “a kind of semi-sleep-like trance” (66). With the populace stuck between reality and dream, the goal, embedded in the text and addressed to the reader, is to wake up.

Remaining stagnant in a society that requires purposeful action is morally unacceptable. Even though the comfort-seeking part inside everyone draws them ever closer to the titillating attraction of various exhilarating substances and frivolous distractions, each individual is called on to shake off the slumber and kick the habit of numbing themselves. Never growing up equals death; individually, socially, and spiritually.

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<sup>138</sup> Holland, “Infinite Jest,” in *The Cambridge Companion*, 128.

<sup>139</sup> Streitfeld, “The Wasted Land,” in *David Foster Wallace: The Last Interview*, 33.

#### 4.6 All that mattered was what he *did*, The Morality of Action

*Infinite Jest* may dramatize the downfall of civilization by depicting human beings with not much humanity left, but its inclusion of individuals, who have the potential to make the world better, makes it hopeful. It is by seeing the conflicted nature of the human condition, drifting between the temptation of passivity and the righteousness of action, that the reader is saved from the logically coherent, but myopic point of view that only recognizes one plane of reality at the expense of another. Embracing one's free will whilst staying mindful of the tranquilizing appeal of inaction unveils the logically incoherent, but experientially incontestable reality that is comprised of multiplicity of ontological dimensions. The novel was designed to be difficult to read, because it is through the process of arduous interpretation that one's will becomes reinvigorated. In an interview, Wallace said: "TV-type art's biggest hook is that it's figured out ways to reward passive spectation. A certain amount of the form-conscious stuff I write is trying—with whatever success—to do the opposite. It's supposed to be uneasy."<sup>140</sup> The hermeneutic work that Wallace demanded from his readers was in accordance with the moral imperative of his books. D. T. Max wrote: "*Infinite Jest* wasn't just an assertion of anomie ... [it] was also supposed to be an answer to despair, a corrective to the misery of youth, a recipe for personal growth"<sup>141</sup> George Saunders called Wallace a "wake-up artist."<sup>142</sup>

The redemptive power of action can be observed in the narrator's rendering of what the director of the recovery house, Pat Montesian, tells Gately: "Pat had said it didn't matter at this point what he thought or believed or even said. All that mattered was what he *did*. If he did the right things, and kept doing them for long enough, what Gately thought and believed would magically change." (466). In much the same vein, Gately is later given an analogy by his counselor Gene M. about a cake mix box, whose instructions on the side can be followed blindly:

It didn't matter one fuckola whether Gately like *believed* a cake would result, or whether he *understood* the like fucking baking-chemistry of *how* a cake would result: if he just followed the motherfucking directions, and had sense enough to get help from slightly more experienced bakers to keep from fucking the directions up if he got

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<sup>140</sup> McCaffery, "An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace," in *Conversations*, 33.

<sup>141</sup> D. T. Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*. 299-300.

<sup>142</sup> George Saunders, "Informal Remarks from the David Foster Wallace Memorial Service in New York on October 23, 2008," in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, 54.

confused somehow, but basically the point was if he just followed the childish directions, a cake would result. He'd have his cake. (467)

This passage acts as yet another warning against the "Analysis-Paralysis" (203) type of thinking that is typical of the characters in the text. Essentially, having trust in one's intuition and not being overly dependent on one's intellect can lead to successful action-taking. When Marathe, almost instinctively, saves his future wife Gertraude's life, he relates his epiphany to Kate Gompert: "I realized the pain of inside no longer pained me. I became, then, adult" (778). The novel associates the determination to act in the world for the benefit of another as a marker of adulthood. Abandoning the overreliance on the inherently ego-centered faculty of reason indicates a more developed level of personal maturity.

The reinvigoration of the human will to make choices is also encapsulated in Marathe's argument: "choosing is everything" (318). Struggling with the right way to combat her addiction, Joelle van Dyne, at one point, tells Gately "I don't *have* to do it that way. I get to choose how to do it, and they'll help me stick to the choice. I don't think I'd realized before that I could — I can really *do* this." (860). It is the doing, rather than thinking that brings about change. A pivotal decision, which represents a defining moment for the character, is Gately's choice to decline pain-killing narcotics, after being hospitalized with a serious injury, in order to categorically repudiate any probability of reawakening his substance abuse tendencies. His resoluteness echoes the words of the tennis coach Schtitt who told the young athletes "it's about how to reach down into parts of yourself you didn't know were there and get down in there and live inside these parts. And the only way to get to them: sacrifice. Suffer. Deny" (119). The saint-like act of enduring pain symbolizes Gately's confrontation with the objective reality and a disavowal of the solipsistic existence. Adamant about getting out of the cage of his own mind, he chooses to confront the challenges of living in the real world. In the words of Allard den Dulk: "Only through choice, as a commitment to the outside world and to others, will the individual be able to develop a self."<sup>143</sup> Stepping out of one's own limited subjectivity and interacting with others within the intersubjective reality leads to a recovery of individual humanity.

*Infinite Jest* contains a loving sensibility that is characteristically and intentionally indiscriminate. In the trauma ward of the hospital, Joelle's thoughts reveal how Gately's decision to put his life in danger by fighting a gun-wielding attacker for the sake of protecting the socially rejected recovering addicts of the Ennet house, makes him especially noble:

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<sup>143</sup> Allard den Dulk, "Boredom, Irony, and Anxiety: Wallace and the Kierkegaardian View of the Self," in *The Long Thing*, 57.



“what’s admirable is he has no idea how heroic or even romantic he looks, unshaven and intubated, huge and helpless, wounded in service to somebody who did not deserve service” (855). It is the magnanimity of serving those ‘who do not deserve service’ that denotes the moral attitude contained within the pages of the novel. Correspondingly, the founder of the Ennet halfway facility is said to have passionately believed that “everyone, no matter how broad the trail of slime they dragged in behind them, deserved the same chance at sobriety through utterly total surrender he’d been granted” (138). Furthermore, the narrator describes Pat Montesian’s behavior around the contumacious residents of the halfway house as an “odd gullibility in the presence of human sludge” (276). I believe this elevated type of love for even the most contemptible of human beings is what inspired the very existence of the text.

The reader of *Infinite Jest* may not possess the right ‘map’ of how to be truly human, but making the choice to face the challenges of the world without one, happens to be the only way to find what being human really is.

## Conclusion

The primary intention of this thesis has been to alter the simplified understanding of *Infinite Jest* as merely a story, by means of using a larger interpretive framework that categorizes the novel as manifestly post-postmodern, to show how it endeavors to redefine the notion of storytelling altogether. The principal argument that the text blends together contradictory paradigms and realities in order to expose their underlying complementarity was put to use in three ontological dimensions to counterbalance the analytical efforts which concentrate exclusively on one.

Wallace's narrative toes the line between the tentative, disputable quality of language and the incontrovertible reality of the body, emotion, interpersonal connection, and will. Through its logical incoherence, it grants the reader an opportunity to experience the multiplanar nature of the real, and by doing so, allows them to reconsider their sense of the world and themselves in it in such a way that they can make a choice to pursue the virtue of humanity and live morally. Exposing the human condition as fundamentally conflicted between the two inverse processes of detachment and confrontation informs the contraparamigmatic scheme as well. Whether it is the inconsistency of the characters, the narrator, or the text itself, it is evident that the book strives to portray life as paradoxical and that this incongruity is to be embraced.

It is my conviction that the numerous unresolved plot lines, discrepancies, and blind spots within the text are not to be ultimately settled in any conclusive way. They are, however, meant to be fiercely debated. Making connections, testing hypothesis, constructing theories, are all part of the edifying process of wrestling with the book. Admittedly, the novel's indecipherability has always been a large part of its allure. The nebulous character of *Infinite Jest* makes it as intimidating as the perplexing reality it seeks to portray, and it is through the attempts to pierce the veil of the former that the reader comes to understand the unembellished truth of the latter.

David Foster Wallace was widely known for his extraordinary intellect. I have tried, nonetheless, to demonstrate that what made his literary work so perceptive was, in actuality, his ability to address the aspects of the modern human experience that are irreducible to mere logical, conceptual representation. His mind could leap bounds ahead of others, but it was his audacity to undertake questions that reason alone could not answer that made him one of the great American writers of his time.

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