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A moral jester? : David Foster Wallace and Infinite Jest's hidden moral heart

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A MORAL JESTER? DAVID FOSTER WALLACE AND *INFINITE JEST'S* HIDDEN MORAL HEART

by

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ABSTRACT

A Moral Jester? David Foster Wallace and *Infinite Jest*'s Hidden Moral Heart
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In this thesis, I explore the frequently overlooked moral dimensions of David Foster Wallace's seminal novel *Infinite Jest*. I seek to propose, in spite of the commonly cited iconoclasm of the text, an alternative reading of it as an old-fashioned *bildungsroman* concerned with the possibilities of moral and spiritual growth. In particular, I illuminate the unconventional ways Wallace reimagines classic narratives of redemption and salvation under the surface of the novel, and I develop a framework with which to understand their centrality. Furthermore, I address how this belongs to his larger attempts to reconcile many of the traditional thematic concerns of the novel with several of the challenges presented by the postmodern avant-garde. I argue that, in its efforts to do so, *Infinite Jest* helped to renew, in many powerful and unexpected ways, the classic story of redemption and offer a profound meditation on many larger ills plaguing society today.

To Nat, Mom, Dad and Eddie

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INTRODUCTION

When it was published in 1996, *Infinite Jest* shook the tectonic plates of the American literary world.[1] A veritable event upon release, it was something legitimately daring, inventive and, more than anything else, defiantly alive at a time when death-knells were beginning to sound for the American novel and as many of its biggest practitioners began to wane in their senescence. The second and final novel David Foster Wallace published during his sadly abbreviated life, *Infinite Jest*, came to not only help change this, but to help transform the dominant and seemingly neutered landscape of late (and now post) millennial literary and avant-garde fiction in North America. The novel, called "world-historical" and "the future of our literature",[2] came into America's cultural consciousness at this decisive moment and, with a force that early on disclosed premonitions of its later epochal importance, came to rouse a cacophony of buzz, confusion and outrage that stirred the gamut of everything from outright dismissal to equally vociferous adulation.[3] Having now, fifteen years later, influenced a generation of younger novelists and opened up new directions for the American novel, *Infinite*

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[1] David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2006). For the remainder of the text, all subsequent page references to *Infinite Jest* will be parenthetically cited and the text will be abbreviated as *IJ*.

[2] Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: the Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (New York: Verso Books, 2005), 386. Also, Dan Cryer, "Infinite Jest – Newsday Review" *Newsday*, February 12, 1996. Accessed March 23 2010. http://infinitejest.wallacewiki.com/david-foster-wallace/index.php?title=Infinite_Jest_-_Newsday_Review,_February_12,_1996.

[3] The critical establishment appeared to be polarized about the novel upon its release. Despite the salivating critics ready to anoint Wallace with a new generational literary crown, there were a number of angry critics who were also immediate to denounce it. For instance, less than enthusiastic reviewers dismissed it as "alternately tedious and effulgent" and considered Wallace a "word machine". Jay McInerney, "Infinite Jest" *New York Times* March 3 1996. Accessed March 13 2010 http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C00E0DC1231F930A35750C0A960958260. Michio Kakutani, "Infinite Jest" *New York Times* February 13, 1996. Accessed March 13 2010. http://www.badgerinternet.com/~bobkat/jest2.html.

Jest fulfilled Walter Benjamin's well-known and canny dictum that "all great works of literature either invent a genre or dissolve one".[4] By ushering in what literary critics have come to dub as a "neo-traditional" worldview or even a "post-postmodernism" --- one which, it must be noted, appears to be enjoying remarkable prominence today --- Wallace's novel demonstrates beyond any doubt that classic and old-fashioned concerns are not mutually exclusive with transformative or avant-garde worldviews.[5] Wallace's achievement with the novel has rightfully earned him a secure position in the highest ranks of a newly forming post-war American literary canon and has set the new benchmark by which all current ambitious literary engagements with contemporary America are measured. It is this remarkable and idiosyncratic reconciliation of these two in *Infinite Jest* that the following analysis will be largely preoccupied with, together with the significant emotional and intellectual punch that its powerful execution has hit its readers with since its publication.

In spite of the contemporary relevance and increasing popularity of the novel, fifteen years since its release, many readers nevertheless remain unsure what to make of it. This bizarre, freewheeling, thousand-plus page novel about tennis, drug addiction and a video cassette so absorbing it literally kills its viewers --- this strange, game-changing and unique

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[4] Walter Benjamin, "On the Image of Proust," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 201.

[5] This new "genre" of writing can especially be seen in the popular writings of Dave Eggers and the prominent group of young novelists who are published by his McSweeney's imprint and enthusiastically champion a "new sincerity" with quirky aesthetic explorations. It is also seen importantly in the later fiction of Jonathan Franzen, one of Wallace's major contemporaries and friends, as well as the novels and stories of Zadie Smith, Junot Diaz, Gary Shyteyngart, George Saunders, and Adam Levin, among others. Also, Cf. Benjamin Kunkel, "Letter to Norway," *N + 1 Magazine* August 6, 2010. Accessed August 6, 2010 http://nplusonemag.com/letter-to-norway.

novel has yet to have its deep riches and insights fully plumbed and explored. The following analysis will aim to modestly elaborate what I view to be, at the core of the text's diverse thematic preoccupations, teeming scope and frequently confusing narrative complexity, the hidden moral pulse of the novel and, more importantly, what I discern to be Wallace's major artistic project in general. That is, the the often overlooked, ethical urgency expressed in *Infinite Jest*. The following pages will consider how his deep moral interest represents the underlying source of *Infinite Jest's* enduring relevance and is where the novel most prominently derives its significant artistic and emotional power. Moreover, they will also attempt to show how the moral center of the novel also, more than anything, is responsible for setting both Wallace and his novel apart from so many contemporaries in the late 1990s, helping to revive a seemingly moribund literary climate, and garnering Wallace a singular position in our current postmillennial literary milieu.

The novel, infamously, is not easy to read. Its very first pages announce not only its alienness from other popular fiction of the time, but also its flagrant defiance of easy reading, classification or straightforward interpretive digestion. The novel clearly encourages all sorts of engagement and interpretation --- Wallace undoubtedly wrote it to be approached, read (and reread) with serious care.[6] However, this also gives rise to one of the most familiar and

[6] Many attempts have been made to grasp its scope and sprawl, addressed its unconventional organization and subject matter, as well as its purported difficulty. Others have discussed on a general level its satire and critiques of American culture, its "posthumanism," its relationship to other postmodern fiction, and its overall engagement with the culture of postmodernity. For instance, consider Marshall Boswell, "Too Much Fun For Anyone Mortal to Hope to Endure," in *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 116-180. Also Toon Theuwis, *The Quest for Infinite Jest: An*

inevitably tricky problems of interpretation: simply, how to decide where and how to enter into the novel and its richly imagined world. With good faith, my analysis will begin not with anything on the surface or immediate in the novel itself --- with characters, plots, storylines, summaries, and so on --- but will, rather, attempt to first engage with it and illuminate its deepest and most important theoretical and ethical preoccupations by starting with an experience. *Infinite Jest* is, simply, a book about the contemporary American experience of loneliness. The text is about being lonely and the peculiar form of suffering that derives from it. Moreover, it is about the complicated and enigmatic nature of this experience and the historically unprecedented and complex ways it has managed to take on new shapes and find a distinctive expression throughout the last quarter of the 20th century. In this vein, the novel centrally examines how this loneliness manifests in our lives and is a monument to the strange lurking sense of unhappiness and dissatisfaction that paradoxically has come to suffocate American life amid historically unprecedented opportunities and proddings to entertain, enjoy and indulge ourselves. My analysis will thus follow from this starting point and look at how *Infinite Jest* is primarily an attempt to understand these complicated experiences of being alive at the end of the 20th century. My thesis will address how, in remarkably keen ways, Wallace engages with the main cultural contradictions of our time and explores the ways they are lived, experienced and suffered by us in everyday life --- psychologically, emotionally, politically, and

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Inquiry into the Encyclopedic and Postmodernist Nature of David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest (Ghent: Ghent University Press, 1999).

culturally.[7] Wallace's novel also represents an incredible effort to positively confront our contemporary experiences of suffering and to explore possibilities of countenancing and eventually overcoming them. This last part, in my view is critical to understanding *Infinite Jest* correctly as a moral novel and as an artistically courageous and creative attempt to critique and think through several of the pernicious forces that have been increasingly besieging contemporary culture.

My first chapter will contextualize Wallace's moral and aesthetic interests. I will situate the novel in relation to these interests and the literary climate of his distinct reinterpretations of the classic narrative of redemption. The second chapter will outline the historical context in which he wrote and set the novel in, specifically focusing on the underlying causes of the spiritual ills *Infinite Jest* diagnoses and seeks to write against. The third chapter will address how *Infinite Jest* critically diagnoses these ills and takes them up in its own unique, satirical ways. In this way, I explore the significant and frequently devastating critiques Wallace's novel makes of particular aspects of contemporary American culture. The fourth chapter examines how Wallace develops his redemptive narrative in the novel and addresses the vision of change *Infinite Jest* offers toward the possibility of overcoming the pervasive suffering felt by so many in late-millenial America. Finally, my analysis will conclude by proposing a new reading

[7] A number of other studies on *Infinite Jest* have also examined the underlying nihilism and experience of dread that lies at the root of the contemporary experience of American culture. Wallace poignantly and vividly depicts these in *Infinite Jest*, and these critical accounts compellingly address their role in relation to questions of loneliness and Selfhood. In particular, I refer the readers to Marshall Boswell and Stefan Hirt's accounts, which highlight the important existential dimensions of the novel. Boswell, "Too Much Fun For Anyone Mortal to Hope to Endure," and Stefan Hirt, *The Iron Bars of Freedom: David Foster Wallace and the Postmodern Self* (Hanover: Ibidem Verlag, 2008).

of the novel's enigmatic ending in relation to this redemption narrative, and will view how Wallace appraises the contemporary cultural scenario and makes a number of modest proposals toward how we can concretely realize a kind of properly "redeemed" and less estranged life.

This underlying narrative is admittedly, not explicit and gets staged mostly allegorically in the novel, through its narratives of recovery, maturity and sobriety. It largely proceeds under the surface of the novel, but as my analysis will show, does so in a number of compelling ways. The most significant aspect my analysis reveals about the novel is the manner by which Wallace executes this and communicates his moral project --- that is, by looking at the precise ways this classic narrative of redemption unfolds amid the adventurous formal experimentation and stylistic zest the text is so well known for. I will thus contend that, in spite of *Infinite Jest*'s much noted unconventional spirit, it can be best read as a traditional *bildungsroman,* as a spiritual exploration and moral education about maturing and overcoming the assorted ills that plague modern society today. Moreover, this reading of the novel will also attempt to affirm the previous interpretations of Wallace as belonging within a lineage of traditional moralist writers --- as an heir to Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Dickens, Austen and others.[8] In addition to the

[8] For instance, consider Timothy Jacob's essay on Wallace and Dostoevsky which invites readers to read *Infinite Jest* as "figurative rewriting" of the *Brothers Karamazov.* His analysis, like mine, suggests that Wallace labored as a traditional moralist and attempted to model himself after the kind of frank moral seriousness Dostoevsky's works possessed. Jacobs also draws attention to *Infinite Jest*'s explicit allusions and re-stagings of some of Dostoevsky's dialogues and conflicts, and points out a number of subtler stylistic and narrative parallels between the two texts. Timothy Jacobs, "The Brothers Incandenza: Translating Ideology in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 49:3 (2007), 265-292.

familiar literary and philosophical predecessors that other critics have correctly discerned to be stylistic or intellectual influences on Wallace's writing, my reading will emphasize his proper place in this equally important moral axis. It will attempt to illuminate the deep kinship his work shares with these authors who many readers would, on first glance at least, hesitate to place Wallace comfortably next to. As such, apart from a few critical accounts, obituaries and brief journalistic retrospectives of his career, not much has been made at the time of writing of the redemptive narrative in *Infinite Jest*. My analysis will thus seek to give it its proper due and address the curiously overlooked ways the novel creatively reappropriates traditional narratives of salvation to offer, through them, a powerful and historically urgent moral story of positive self-transformation.[9]

In the preface to the tenth anniversary edition of *Infinite Jest*, fellow novelist Dave Eggers, whose own writing has been visibly influenced by Wallace, speculates that people are interested in the novel and will continue to read it because they are fascinated by genius.[10] Unfortunately, many misread Wallace in precisely this way --- as little more than a big brain, a writer with a quirky sense of humor or sharp eye for detail, or just as a gifted yet self-indulgent

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[9] In this direction, perhaps the most similar response to *Infinite Jest* to mine is Jon Baskin's, which notes briefly that the novel is about curing the dominant "way of thinking" of contemporary postmodern life and how we can begin to move beyond its inimical worldview. He suggests "*Jest* challenged its readers most directly not with endnotes, long paragraphs, or obscure references to post-structuralist critics . . .but by *validating a life-approach that cuts against everything we've learned is worthy of our attention. . .*", and that the contemporary American's "worst addiction is not to his substance, but *to a highly reflexive and indulgent way of thinking*" (emphasis mine). Jon Baskin, "Death Is Not the End: David Foster Wallace: His Legacy and His Critics," *The Point Magazine.* Accessed May 12, 2010. http://www.thepointmag.com/archive/death-is-not-the-end. Also Hirt and Jacobs' aforementioned readings of Wallace as a moralist generally view *Infinite Jest* in the same ways I do.

[10] Dave Eggers, introduction to Wallace, *IJ*.

prose writer.[11] My thesis will attempt to illustrate why this not only sorely misses the point, but also would be the kind of thing Wallace would have himself been rather embarrassed by. If anything, his innermost desire to sincerely attend to the human experience of suffering in positive ways would suggest that his writing seek to be anything but a mere object of intellectual fascination or funny storytelling or virtuoso stylistic showmanship. Rather, as the following chapters will hope to show, readers currently are (and will continue to be) so deeply touched and moved by the novel because of its intense devotion to serious moral issues, its examination of our shared personal experiences of suffering, and by its ability to communicate what Wallace once poignantly called the "magic of fiction".[12] This magic lies in the singular ability fiction has in offering imaginative ways of connecting with others and in relating common personal experiences and insights in ways that not only enrich the readers' experience of the world, but which expand his moral horizons in profound ways as well. This is the kind of magic that *Infinite Jest* offers in spades, which hits us as readers on higher emotional and affective levels --- which is to say, in ways that are not just intellectual or disinterested and aesthetic. It is this profound feeling that Wallace's writing inspires and whose alchemy allows us to palpably feel exactly what he once suggested only the rarest and best kinds of fiction are

[11] Consider, for instance, some reviews of the novel which suggest that: "It's as though Paul Bunyan had joined the NFL or Wittgenstein had gone on Jeopardy!" (*New York Magazine*) or that it is "a sprawling piece of intellectual wizardry and social satire" (*Harper's Bazaar*), and Sven Birkerts in the *Atlantic Monthly* who noted "Think Beckett, think Pynchon, think Gaddis. Think." All are quotes taken from the promotional press blurbs included in Wallace, *IJ*.

[12] Larry McCaffery, "An Interview With David Foster Wallace," *Review of Contemporary Fiction*.13:2 (1993), 127-150. Accessed February 13 2010. http://www.dalkeyarchive.com/book/?GCOI=15647100621780

able to truly conjure --- that is, a genuine feeling of, redemption, togetherness, and being "less alone inside."[13]

[13] Ibid.

CHAPTER 1

In a well-known and frequently cited interview, often regarded as a manifesto of sorts, conducted with *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* in 1993 while in the middle of writing *Infinite Jest*, David Foster Wallace responded to a question about the task of the novelist and the meaning of fiction by proclaiming that "Fiction's about what it is to be a fucking human being."[14] If one takes even a quick glance at his oeuvre, *Infinite Jest* in particular, it becomes immediately clear that if there is anything his literary efforts held sacred or took as basically axiomatic, it was this fundamental desire to seriously probe and attend to what makes us truly human. Wallace's uncharacteristically blunt response is significant and as this chapter will outline, offers an immensely useful perspective with which one may properly appreciate his writing and find a foothold with which to navigate *Infinite Jest*'s often slippery terrain. It will begin by exploring the literary and cultural context Wallace began writing in and, with reference to his own stated personal aspirations, develop a framework with which one can discern how the beating moral heart of his novel finds expression.

Wallace's answer not only offers us an intimate glimpse into what he was thinking at the time he was so fully immersed in its completion, but more importantly provides a remarkable

[14] Ibid. Regarding the interview's "manifesto" like status see, for instance, Mary Holland "The Art's Heart's Purpose: Braving the Narcissistic Loop of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*," *Critique* 47:3 (2006), 218-242. Also, Baskin, "Death is Not the End" and D.T. Max's lengthy retrospective account of Wallace's life "The Unfinished: David Foster Wallace's Struggle to Surpass *Infinite Jest*." *The New Yorker*. March 9, 2009. Accessed February 2, 2010. http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/03/09/090309fa_fact_max

encapsulation of what inspired *Infinite Jest* and of the core premise that distinguished it from so many other works from the same time. In this direction, it is important to note that his response came immediately after he finished registering to his interviewer his exasperation with what he took to be the exhausted project of so many of his postmodern literary brethren. In particular, he saw in their fiction a deeper loss of the vital ties between literature and the basic concerns of the Self, and he feared the kinds of long-term moral failings and artistic impoverishments that would later ensue when what had once been the major provenance of the novel came to be seen as unfashionable, obsolete or hopelessly sentimental. These fears impressed themselves deeply on his mind and proved to be, from very early on, enduring and decisive sources of both artistic tension and personal dismay. The interview proceeds from Wallace's unusually curt proclamation about what fiction is "fucking about" to clarify and further elaborate some of his own, most central literary aspirations. He especially emphasizes the task of the artist to meaningfully address the simple things that make us human. In particular, he expresses the urgency for the artist to do so in a culture that, like our late 20th and now early 21st century American culture, was beginning to make it increasingly harder to be one. The interview continues with his attempts to properly think these through and explain what this may, in fact, look like. A crucial exchange, which I will quote at length, helps to elucidate this and outline early on what may be understood as the defining and driving moral force of his literary project and *Infinite Jest* in particular --- what he himself calls elsewhere in the interview "the art's heart's purpose", and the spirit that informs the "agenda behind the

text".[15] Wallace candidly offers this personal vision by noting that, in distinction to the dominant postmodern literary aesthetic which appeared intent on finding new ways of intoning how the human conditions is "hopelessly shitty, insipid, materialistic, emotionally retarded, sadomasochistic, and stupid":

> In dark times, the definition of good art would seem to be art that locates and applies CPR to those elements of what's human and magical that still live and glow despite the times' darkness. Really good fiction could have as dark a worldview as it wished, but it'd find a way *both to depict this world and to illuminate the possibilities for being alive a*nd human in it. . .If you operate, which most of us do, from the premise that there are things about the contemporary U.S. that make it distinctively hard to be a real human being, then maybe half of fiction's job is to dramatize what it is that makes it tough. The other half is to dramatize the fact that we still "are" human beings, now. *Or can be*. This isn't that it's fiction's duty to edify or teach . . .I just think that fiction that isn't exploring what it means to be human today isn't art. We've all got this "literary" fiction that simply monotones that we're all becoming less and less human, that presents characters without souls or love, characters who really are exhaustively describable in terms of what brands of stuff they wear, and we all buy the books and go like "Golly, what a mordantly effective commentary on contemporary materialism!" But we already "know" U.S. culture is materialistic. This diagnosis can be done in about two lines. It doesn't engage anybody. What's engaging and artistically real is, taking it as axiomatic that the present is grotesquely materialistic, how is it that we as human beings still have the capacity for joy, charity, genuine connections, for stuff that doesn't have a price? And can these capacities be made to thrive? And if so, how, and if not why not?[16]

In this response, Wallace clearly stresses his personal artistic aims and affinities and, in particular, their inextricable relation to what are unambiguously and irreducibly very basic moral and *spiritual* concerns. In no uncertain terms, he clarifies that his fiction is interested in dealing with the "soul", "joy" and "love" --- and affirms that it aims to do so in traditional ways in order to confront the various ways that our contemporary worldviews have begun to strain them. He is intent, as he admits, not simply to depict, but to "*illuminate the possibilities for being alive*" today and to creatively explore how the wilted things inside of us that make us human

[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid, emphasis mine.

can, indeed, be made, once again "to thrive."[17] His fiction is placed in the service of these unshakeable, old-fashioned concerns, and can be understood to stem from a personally held belief that a morally clarified artistic vision is able to offer a privileged understanding of the underlying suffering and pain we experience today and, from this basis, to offer a powerful means of positively exploring them. For Wallace, truly meaningful, artistic fiction of this kind introduces and enlarges the possibilities of concretely attaining something that he very seriously believed in, however dubious its reputation may have been at the time --- what, in his own words, he simply understood his own work to be inescapably and fundamentally about --- that is, *redemption.*[18] *Infinite Jest*, which came to be his most fully realized and exhaustive attempt to capture some of the essential things that indeed define "what it is to be a fucking human being," entered into the world at this time and consciously set itself apart from so much of the recent American literature he was so frustrated in and disappointed by.

Like several other major theorists, philosophers and artists, Wallace characterized the "distinctively hard" experience of being alive in the late 20th century as a deep-seated feeling of estrangement and isolation. This basic experience of loneliness, which Wallace frequently preferred to liken to the philosophical tradition's conception of "solipsism"[19] but has also been commonly represented as alienation, despair, melancholy, and so on, represented for him the defining feature of "what it meant to be alive." He understood loneliness to be the major

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[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[19] A philosophically skeptical view that posits that one can only be sure of the existence of one's own mind; that the world exists only inside one's own mental representations of it.

source of the assorted personal anxieties and wider forms of cultural malaise that were beginning to progressively erode the basic capacities that he understood made us human. Moreover, he also saw it as ultimately deriving from the widespread ascension of the already dominant American cultural sensibility of self-interest which had, by the end of the 20th century, culminated into a particularly pernicious form of narcissistic self-absorption. Our loneliness and many other contemporary social and existential ills were primarily symptomatic of this new dominant cultural worldview and had, by his time, come to largely determine America's cultural being. Loneliness came to place, for him, an especially powerful hold on the minds of younger American generations and brought into being the historically distinct inflection of the experience of estrangement they in particular so deeply suffered from --- what Wallace once elsewhere notably called that terrible, "peculiarly American loneliness [characterized by] the prospect of dying without once having loved something more than yourself."[20]

In this sense, *Infinite Jest* may ultimately be read as an investigation into why we are so "lonely" today. One that, perhaps even more pressingly, looks into how we may continue to hold onto the precious and irreducibly "human" things about us as we continue to inhabit an environment that continues to make it increasingly difficult to do so. Wallace's moralism finds expression in relation these questions in the ways it addresses the suffering endemic to our new and rabid fascinations with pleasure, success and self-improvement; our contemporary obsessions with entertainment and personal happiness; our growing inabilities to communicate

[20] David Foster Wallace, "Certainly the End of *Something* or Other, One Would Sort of Have to Think," in *Consider the Lobster* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2006), 54.

with each other; the replacement of traditional sources of meaning with seductive but dangerous surrogates; and the other assorted contradictions and competing interests that plague the fraught American psyche at the end of the century.[21] Once we begin to recognize the novel primarily as an uncompromising look at what these latter forces reveal about us as individuals, can we better understand Wallace's moral concerns with "what it means to be a fucking human being" and see where his lengthy dissections and displays of the new anxieties, pathologies and suffering of everyday life are leading.

In another interview, conducted shortly after *Infinite Jest*'s publication, Wallace admits that the novel is ultimately about asking "What sort of resources we're going to have to cultivate in ourselves and our citizenry to keep from sort of dying, on couches'[22] as contemporary entertainment becomes ever more total and inescapably pervasive, as our self-absorption continues to balloon, and as we begin to grow increasingly unable or unwilling to unlock ourselves from its growing appeal. In *Infinite Jest*, a number of passages suggestively speak to this figurative experience of "death in life": a recovering alcoholic talks about his former life of addiction as a 'death-in-life' (IJ, 346-7); Orin Incandenza, arguably the most narcissistic and lonely character in a novel populated by many such figures, repeatedly feels

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[21] Uncoincidentally, the centrality of this question of loneliness is present in virtually all of Wallace's works, and his short stories and non-fiction orbit around this peculiar experience of isolation that he understands to pervade contemporary culture. See any of his works, but in particular, David Foster Wallace, *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1999), *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1997), and *The Girl With Curious Hair* (New York: Norton, 1996) and *Oblivion* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2004).

[22] Judith Strasser, "*Unwholesome Entertainment:* Interview With David Foster Wallace," *To The Best of Our Knowledge* (Wisconsin Public Radio). Accessed from *The David Foster Wallace Audio Project,* May 15, 2010. http://www.sonn-d-robots.com/dfw/interviews-profiles.

"entombed". Irony and an aversion to sincerity, openness and sharing emotion and human vulnerability is likened to "death" (IJ); and the average American's passive absorption in television is viewed by the novel's nefarious Quebecois terrorists as a death-in-life (IJ, 319). If we can read this "death" properly, that is, in terms of the progressive dehumanization of contemporary narcissistic America, as the slow spiritual "death" and atrophying of what "makes us human beings" and, in Wallace's words, "souls"[23] then we can suggest, in an entirely unambiguous way, that the novel and Wallace's urgent moral desires to find out how we can *keep from dying* are, in a very classical and literal sense, about the real possibilities of redemption and survival. Moreover, that the novel is, in this regard, a poignant and earnest spiritual allegory --- concerned with redeeming the beleaguered status of, to use Wallace's words again, the suffering *soul* and the battered status of connection, belief and community in a contemporary America that is palsied by a largely cynical and skeptical, nihilistic and narcissistic culture guided by narrow self-interest and "spiritual puberty" (IJ, 694).[24]

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[23] Once more, these "capacities for joy and charity, genuine human connection" and love, friendship and compassion he outlines in McCaffery, "An Interview With David Foster Wallace".

[24] In this particular direction, despite first appearances and the curious absence of critical discussion on the topic, Wallace may be, in fact, most forcefully read not only as a moralist but also as a deeply and undeniably *spiritual* writer. With respect to this, it should also be worth briefly noting the strangely unremarked fact that in a list of his favourite books he included, at the top, CS Lewis' Christian apologetics novel *The Screwtape Letters*, which is a spiritual tale about the arduous struggles involved in living a proper Christian life amid temptations. J. Peder Zane, "David Foster Wallace: R.I.P." *The News Observer Blog* September 15, 2008. Accessed April 2, 2010. Many revealing parallels emerge between Lewis' narrative and *Infinite Jest*'s own narrative of redemption and these spiritual concerns should be kept in mind throughout. Moreover, they should also underscore how Wallace's own personal moral interests in *Infinite Jest* and his narrative of redemption play out in terms of depicting the struggles of living a "recognizably human" life inside a hostile, apathetic and figuratively "fallen" world.

In light of this view of Wallace as a contemporary moralist with a spiritual and redemptive bent, Wallace's moralism may be considered in the aforementioned lineage of rich and radical moral writers and, in particular, in relation to one of his biggest influences --- Fyodor Dostoevsky. Also a few months after *Infinite Jest* was published, Wallace wrote a review of a literary biography which he used as an occasion to publicly affirm Dostoevsky's contemporary relevance and to, moreover, reflect on the enduring artistic significance and richness that serious engagement with moral problems could represent.[25] The review essentially reads as Wallace's reminder, if not call-to-arms for the current postmodern literary world of the lasting importance and artistic depth that an intense confrontation with age-old spiritual concerns can continue to have, even --- or rather, especially --- in today's climate. He celebrates Dostoevsky's "bravery" and affirms his inexhaustible commitment to the ideas and innermost moral beliefs he held so dear, however unfashionable they may have been to the dominant Russian and European sentiments of his time. Wallace notes that

> The thrust here is that Dostoevsky wrote fiction about the stuff that's really important. He wrote fiction about identity, moral value, death, will, sexual vs. spiritual love, greed, freedom, obsession, reason, faith, suicide. And he did it without ever reducing his characters to mouthpieces or his books to tracts. *His concern was always what it is to be a human being --- that is, how to be an actual person,* someone whose life is informed by values and principles . . . [and Dostoevsky] appears to possess degrees of passion, conviction and engagement with deep moral issues that we here, today — cannot or do not permit ourselves.[26]

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[25] David Foster Wallace, "Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky," in *Consider the Lobster* (Boston: Little Brown, Co., 2006), 255-274. Interestingly, this review was originally printed in the Village Voice Literary Supplement as a lengthy feature, clearly intended to be read by a wide public audience and his literary peers. Timothy Jacobs's earlier cited article offers a brief reading of *Infinite Jest* and this review together with *The Brothers Karamazov* to address Dostoevsky's influence on Wallace.

[26] Ibid, 265, 271.

The moral rigor and vigor upheld by Dostoevsky helped Wallace to discover a vital resource to develop, in his own hostile artistic and cultural context, a new perspective and way of formulating original articulations of the basic and, what have proven to be, timeless moral concerns and questions of literature. Wallace notes, this time in another interview, that

> . . . every two or three generations the world gets vastly different, and the context in which you have *to learn how to be a human being,* or to have good relationships, or decide whether or not there is a God, or decide whether there's such a thing as love, and whether it's redemptive, become vastly different. And the structures with which you can communicate those dilemmas or have characters struggle with them seem to become appropriate and then inappropriate again and so on.[27]

In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace seeks to find new ways of asking some of these fundamental and enduring questions from within the distinct specificity of his own late-millenial cultural climate of unbridled self-interest, consumerism, and accelerated media-saturation: how can we continue to live *human* lives in such antagonistic conditions? What is responsible for our suffering and isolation? How is it consciously (or unconsciously) affecting who we are and how we understand the world? How much can we endure before we can start to recognize the pain we inflict on ourselves (and others)? How can we begin to recognize it and start to reevaluate the present for the better? What does the future hold for us if we fail to realize these changes? How can we be *saved*? The novel's moral force is expressed through these questions, which are asked and re-asked continually throughout the course of the novel, and its profound contemporary relevance and urgency derive, I contend, primarily from its ability to rediscover

[27] Hugh Kennedy and Geoffrey Polk, "Looking For a Garde of Which To Be Avant: An Interview With David Foster Wallace," in *Whiskey Island Magazine* (1993), 6.

ways of offering answers to them not merely in "appropriate" forms, but in original, artistically engaging and deeply moving ways instead.

Although many of his popular postmodern contemporaries and similarly minded readers would have likely found many of these concerns fairly banal, if we take a classically Wallacean gesture and consciously attempt to eschew what he saw as facile cynicism or a knee-jerk ironic distance, we can begin to carefully approach in new ways what may appear deceivingly on the surface to be (as he was acutely aware) maudlin or overly-clichéd concerns. That is, we can begin to find ways of detecting under their apparent blandness, the edges of something that remains vigorously alive beneath it. In the interview with the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, he repeatedly invoked the phrase "redemption" and earnestly discussed what he believed to be the "magic of fiction", the "soul" and literature's "redeeming, remedy-ing" capacities. However, he was extremely cautious about the use of these terms and how they would appear to readers, repeatedly interrupting the interview to self-consciously interject clarifications and highlight the precise ways he was employing these terms. As he well knew, the language and rhetoric of redemption is sensitive and liable to be easily misread or misinterpreted in a number of ways, and he wanted to guard his affirmative and, it must be stressed, *critical* vision of redemption from being misunderstood in retrograde or overly conservative or literal ways. For instance, he consciously sought to distance himself from the evangelically flavoured cultural conservatism and reactionary responses to the cultural and existential problems of his time, and to also keep at an arms-length the new-age pseudo-

spiritualism or reductive pop-psychologies.[28] It is worth mentioning that this is, in fact, one of the important things that today's readers of Wallace, as well as the custodians of his legacy, must contend with, as selective misreadings of his work have begun to already claim him as some Zen-like guru, champion of shallow self-help or deeply conservative thinker. These remain at best misguided and incomplete views of Wallace's work that are both reductive and ignore several of his most characteristic features. At their worst, they strip his texts altogether of their critical bent and aesthetic radicality, and disarm the ethical urgency of his critiques, progressive vision, and positive hopes. The understanding of redemption I will elaborate in the moral narrative of *Infinite Jest* belongs rather to a forward thinking and critical view that is, if anything, placed in the service of advocating an ethical vision predicated on seriously challenging and reverse-thrusting the atomizing experience and suffering that is induced by the dominant cultural forms of life and ideologies of contemporary culture. In particular, *Infinite Jest* is a sustained, thousand-plus page critique of the problematic, overly self-interested ways that we currently conceive of ourselves as individuals. It is directed toward opening up, preserving and making available the possibilities for dialogic interaction and identification and in nurturing the intrinsically "*nourishing, redeeming*"[29] experiences that our currently starved forms of life can nevertheless, with some changes, be made to recover. My analysis will go on to assert how this represents, above all, a critical vision of redemption which asserts its

[28] McCaffery, "An Interview With David Foster Wallace." In addition to these, his fiction and non-fiction have also leveled several critiques against shallow forms of popular psychology or reductive understandings of self-help. He similarly wanted to distance his own work and positive understanding of redemption and validation from them in important ways as well.
[29] McCaffery, "An Interview With David Foster Wallace."

possibility only on the condition of first demystifying and destabilizing the dominant conservative status quo and conception of Self, and then in effectively overturning them and transforming their negative and self-defeating conditions to make possible the positive and liberating experiences of connection, empathy and interrelation.[30] This, moreover, implies the important politically progressive and critical undercurrents that accompany every moral impulse and aesthetically radical move *Infinite Jest* makes. Readers should, in this regard, be similarly cognizant of Wallace's attempts to critique and upset the dominant conceptions of freedom, happiness and selfhood that our current socio-cultural priorities promote, and pay special attention to the novel's efforts to depict the troubling and suffering forms of life that they predicate and prescribe. In other words, we can understand Wallace as putting forth a vision of redemption that is, unlike a nostalgic or traditional model, interested in creatively reappropriating classic understandings of salvation and in reimagining the traditional narratives they follow. *Infinite Jest* has, we will see, indeed proven to be committed to finding ways of re-introducing them and, moreover, to articulating them through our contemporary concerns and obsessions, in order to allow them to better speak to us and address the spiritual ills that have come to dominate our present.

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[30] Wallace's positive vision of redemption, nourished by a deeply ethical and humanist stance thus affirms the valuable and personally enriching experiences of solace and transcendence, and the powerful transformative potential that can be had via openness, mutual recognition, love and empathy (a sensitivity and new relation to others' suffering and vulnerability). In other words, it is what permits a recuperation of relationships with others that have been barred by the dominant narcissistic and privately self-interested attitudes of contemporary life. Hirt notes this as well about *Infinite Jest*, suggesting that "[Wallace's] idea of therapy is not bound to a restitution of a pre-postmodern authority, religiosity, or master narrative, but to a surrender of such egocentrism in favor of a recognition of the individual interrelatedness with the 'other' . . ." Hirt, *The Iron Bars of Freedom*, 34.

This singular vision of redemption and desire to realize a robust "morally passionate, passionately moral" engagement with the major cultural forces of the last part of the 20th century is what distinguishes *Infinite Jest*. However, Wallace was hardly the first novelist to tackle the experience of contemporary nihilism or despair and disorientation in the late twentieth century; nor was he especially unique insofar as he wrote about the experience of alienation, loneliness, and the vexing cultural contradictions of his time. It should go without saying that these were topics being widely taken up by his fellow novelists, poets, artists, filmmakers and philosophers, and represent some of the defining hallmarks of the postmodern artistic milieu. Yet, with rare exceptions, the apparent postmodern allergy or indifference to the urgent and fundamental moral concerns with the Self, together with a general hostility to the positive expression of change or progress seemed to offer their engagements with contemporary culture a fundamentally limited perspective[31]. Wallace, for his part, took up in relation to this a strange and needless to say complicated position in the landscape of contemporary fiction amid them --- as I mention before, a "neo-traditional", or similarly

[31] For instance, consider among Wallace's generation of authors, some of the more representative (though by no means exhaustive) strains of postmodern fiction: the more outright experimental writing of his compatriots Mark Leyner and David Markson; the more abstract fiction delivered to 'ideas' and cultural phenomena (Don Delillo, Thomas Pynchon); and those intent on primarily depicting "how hopelessly shitty, etc." everything is (Bret Easton Ellis, Chuck Palahniuk). Interestingly, a number of years before *Infinite Jest*, Wallace wrote an essay on young fiction writers in the late 1980s and dubbed three distinct strands that embodied much of the hyped bunch. These were: 1) "Neiman-Marcus Nihilism" which chronicle ennui, money, drugs and so on, 2) "Catatonic Realism" whose narrators were "blank perceptual engines" living in "wastelands" and 3) "Workshop Hermeticism" where the fiction was submitted to the concerns of "craft" at the expense of everything else (i.e.. moral concerns). These all typified the scene for Wallace at the time and were things he carefully sought to distance himself from, even at this relatively young age. David Foster Wallace, "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young," *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 8:3 (1988). Accessed June 14, 2010. http://neugierig.org/content/dfw/ffacy.pdf.

paradoxical form of radical conservatism (or conservative radicalism) that straddles both the forward thinking directions of the literary avant-garde as well as the classic, traditional moralist concerns of redemption and salvation. For instance, he once suggested to an interviewer, in a tongue in cheek --- though nevertheless revealing --- way that he was "the only 'postmodernist' you'll ever meet who absolutely worships Tolstoy."[32] To Wallace's immense credit he was able to coherently sustain this delicate position, rejecting the stultifying binary of postmodernism/conservatism that was apparently crippling so many of his fellow novelists. He was able to assume instead a radical position that emerged from an embrace of both camps and a personal desire to use the innovative perspectives and lively experimentation of the former to find new insights and possibilities of expressing the moral impetus and seriousness of the latter. The success with which *Infinite Jest* is able to execute this seemingly unholy alliance between the avant-garde and traditional moral concerns and touch on our deep-seated experience of loneliness and personal suffering is testament to the novel's longstanding resonance and is perhaps what continues to make *Infinite Jest* such a strangely alien yet compelling piece of fiction. It is what allowed Wallace to renew and reconceptualize a positive, liberating vision of redemption and creatively attend to our dominant cultural ills and personal suffering with an artistic depth that was lacking in more sentimental or popular cultural works, and with a moral frankness and interest that was equally absent among most other serious contemporary artists.

[32] Kennedy and Polk, "Looking For a Garde of Which To Be Avant," 6.

My analysis will now address the specific ways Wallace was able to carry out this "neo"-traditional outlook in the novel and articulate his idiosyncratic vision of redemption. The following chapters will consider how it emerged as his response to the moral injunctions that our contemporary experience of suffering made on him as an artist. They will address how *Infinite Jest* and its positive efforts to explore our suffering express the "morally passionate and passionately moral" spirit that so forcefully gripped Wallace. They will consider the ways he detected the hidden yet concrete possibilities of redemption that exist (or could be made to concretely exist) in our current cultural moment, and how they can be made to let us live "human" lives once again. My analysis will presently address the historical context in which our distinct late 20th century experience of loneliness came into being. As we will see, this context is critical for understanding how Wallace's critiques took shape. It will also help us to better comprehend his critical narrative of redemption and how we may begin to overcome the spiritually asphyxiating condition of our age.

CHAPTER 2

If we think back to Wallace's guiding concerns about "what it is to be a human being" and understand the experience of loneliness as well as the new dominant narcissism to be the two indissociable, defining features of contemporary American life, we can find in them a fairly obvious starting point from which to understand the terrain of his critical and positive moral engagements. It can be useful to begin by first briefly viewing some of the decisive historical shifts and cultural transformations which have unfolded throughout the 20th century and have been responsible for opening the way up for and later coordinating the narcissistic disposition of contemporary American society. In so doing, we can better understand Wallace's smudged, dystopian reflections of contemporary America and situate *Infinite Jest*'s indictments of its moral ugliness in more concrete and historically contextualized ways, as well as locate the historical grounds from which he goes on to articulate his critical, positive narrative of redemption and change.

A number of important factors played a role in creating conditions for what the American historian Christopher Lasch famously dubbed the "culture of narcissism". These shifts, which formed the "new organizing framework of American culture" led throughout the second half of the century, to the formation and intensification of the unprecedently self-interested conception of Self that we know so well today.[33] Wallace's attempts to give form to

[33] Lasch specifically identifies the phenomenon as coming into being in the early 1970s from the already rich American traditions of indvidualism and exceptionalism. Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life In An Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1991), 11.

the lived experience of contemporary life engage with this new dominant character structure, and *Infinite Jest*'s dystopian America (as part of the new Organization of North American Nations --- note the acronym, O.N.A.N.) can be read as offering us a kind of hyperbolic expression of Lasch's lament of our profoundly narcissistic age. In this peculiar way, *Infinite Jest* can be said to participate in a skewed form of literary realism, one that sets out to faithfully do justice to the complex textures of the world in all of its fullness and frequent incoherence. Interestingly, Wallace once admitted "I've always thought of myself as a realist"[34] and, in this particular respect at least, his engagement with narcissism and loneliness centrally deals with the real constellation of socio-cultural and political features that have gone into (re)shaping the basic everyday conditions of existence at the end of the twentieth-century. *Infinite Jest*, thus importantly addresses several key aspects of contemporary American life and much of the novel should be read precisely as teasing out several of the darker peculiarities and tensions that have begun to uncomfortably express themselves by the early 1990s. The novel's explicit and familiar satire derives its punch and pungency from this, inflating and defamiliarizing some of these contemporary trends to render their frightening and oftentimes surreal character more visibly. As such, the novel is set in the near future in a "reconfigured' post-millenial America that remains somewhat familiar, yet distorted enough so that readers are invited to see its fictional universe, which has accelerated and realized several of our current lurking tendencies,

[34] Miller, "The Salon Interview: David Foster Wallace."

not so much as an alternate world but as a reflection of the present in a cracked and tilted mirror.[35]

In this direction, *Infinite Jest* and its critical interests in positively intervening in today's experience of suffering critically engages with and places into question two of the defining (and by no means inseparable) forces of the 20th century: nihilism (the crisis of meaning and rise of a secular immanent culture) and the rise of neoliberalism (in the political and economic sphere) and its robust cultural ideologies of individualism (the culture of the Self and the atomism it helped enforce). In light of the rise of the cultural narcissism they helped to introduce, I will also address these in relation to the ways they themselves were compounded and reinforced by the dangerous and "infantilizing" obsessions with popular culture (primarily consumerism, advertising, and television), as well as by the dominant postmodern cultural attitudes of ironic skepticism and cynical distance (which helped to reinforce a disengaged and apathetic relation to the world).[36] These latter forces represent two of the deep and abiding concerns Wallace directly engaged with throughout his life, as well as in his short stories and non-fiction, and they

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[35] Or, a "slightly askew parallel universe" as Marshall Boswell suggests. Boswell, "Too Much Fun For Anyone Mortal to Hope to Endure", 125. For instance, in the novel, the United States has a "subsidized" calendar (which I will return to later), faces terrorist threats from a gang of radical Quebecois separatists, has a population who are, collectively, almost enslaved to the wild popularity of "teleputers", which anticipated a vague combination between the Internet and television (which has caused the population to recede "behind drawn curtains in the dreamy familiarity of home" (IJ, 604).

[36] Elsewhere, Wallace has discussed at length the ways contemporary American economic policies, advertising and ideologies have underwritten this narcissism, also pointing out the complicity of postmodern ideologies and television. Cf. a widely-circulated, recently unearthed interview with German television station ZDF from 2003. ZDF, "Interview With David Foster Wallace" Initially accessed via David Foster Wallace online fansite *The Howling Fantods* (www.thehowlingfantods.com). The interview is available for view at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N5IDAnB_rns Accessed February 21, 2010. Also see his popular essay on television "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction," in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1997), 21-82.

feature prominently throughout *Infinite Jest*'s discussions of loneliness, depression and anxiety. A proper recognition of the centrality of these forces in late 20th century culture is thus absolutely essential to understanding what set the conditions for what Wallace called our "ethos of jaded irony and self-aware nihilism and acquisitivism"[37] to one day become our "default settings".[38] It is, moreover, equally important to appreciating the roots of the suffering that stamps the experience of "what it means to be alive" for so many in *Infinite Jest*'s O.N.A.N. and contemporary American life.

One can begin, then, with the wide onset of the experience of nihilism as the first major phenomenon to historically appear and set the initial conditions that, in one way or another, directed many of the later shifts that were experienced throughout the remainder of the century and helped to create the dominant narcissistic worldview that emerged in its wake. Nihilism, literally the belief in *nothing*, commonly refers to the rejection and absence of any objective source of meaning or guarantor of value and significance in our lives. Friedrich Nietzsche best explains it as the condition that ensues when the basic supports that had once ordered our world become thrown into question --- where "the highest values devalue themselves" and suddenly, "'why?' finds no answer".[39] Among other things, this crisis marked the loss of a foundation to the moral norms, sources of meaning and ways of life that had for thousands of years governed our lives and ways of thinking. This was reflected in the deep uncertainties and

[37] Kennedy and Polk, "Looking For a Garde of Which To Be Avant," 6.
[38] David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2009), 38.
[39] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), 9.

insecurities that undermined our stability and led to the various anxieties and tensions we so typically associate with the phenomenon of nihilism today. Wallace, for his own part, understood it to result in the kind of "spiritual puberty" that I mentioned earlier (IJ, 694), culminating in an essentially wholesale rejection of values and norms that exceed the Self or self-interest, as well as with a crippling of belief that permitted the popular emergence of a general allergy toward anything even hinting at spirituality. Nonetheless, in general terms, the experience of nihilism has been characterized in a number of diverse ways, with the accounts most relevant to the phenomenon of contemporary narcissism suggesting that it marks a "collapse of transcendence" and a spiritual and metaphysical slippage into an immanent, secular world that is drained of, and later closed off to, the former transcendent and universal sources of meaning it was once supported by (for instance, God or classic notions of truth, beauty and the good). This "collapse" signaled not just the loss of external foundations, but implied the rise, in their stead, of the new authority of historical forces --- where the world was delivered over to its socio-historical context and the man-made forces of reason, politics, technology and so on, which came to assert their dominance and re-organize life within it. This profound destabilization has had enormous consequences that have steered the course of the 20th century in immeasurable ways, reshaping our identities, our relation to the world and the cultural environment we inhabit. Though nihilism has played out in many decisive and far-reaching ways, including obvious profound moral and ethical shifts, for the present purposes and in relation to the novel, it is worth specifically highlighting the tremendous shifts it

introduced in terms of how our subjective experience of the world became (re)ordered inside it and how this came to crystallize in the new experience of narcissism.

For instance, one of the most prominent sociological accounts of the phenomenon suggests that the "disenchantment" and demystification of the world that led to the state of nihilism came to later fully realize itself in the rationalized "iron cage" of contemporary society, where the former external sources of meaning in life yielded to the continuing advances of instrumental reason.[40] For many nihilism came to mark a kind of spiritual disaster as reason came to usurp the role these transcendental sources once represented. Reason came to be defined as an end in itself, severed from the multiple ideals and values that it was once importantly placed in the service of. This shift is believed to have had a number of deeply disfiguring effects on the individual which Wallace himself specifically takes up and develops both in *Infinite Jest* and his other writings.[41] For instance, in the novel, he most explicitly depicts the subjective embodiment of these effects of nihilism with his brief but rich vignette about Barry Loach and the "dark revision" that his and his brother's souls respectively undergo as they "beg[u]n to sprout little fungal patches of necrotic rot" (IJ, 970) in the face of man's continued naked self-interest, indifference and unwillingness to connect with one another. The

[40] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Routledge, 2001). For Weber, reason (or for Nietzsche, "the will to truth") helped to ultimately undermine the believability of God and transcendental values. A significant difference, however, must be explicitly noted to make clear that Nietzsche identified Christianity as the negative force responsible for nihilism, whereas Weber saw in Christianity the last possible vestiges of a positive "enchantment" that was becoming progressively eliminated by secular, instrumental reason and processes of modernization.
[41] Also see, for instance, Wallace, *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men*. Or several of the interviews mentioned in the previous chapter.

black, misanthropic skepticism the Loach brothers develop toward spiritual values, altruism or the possibility of any human action existing outside of immediate personal self-interest (anything "better than self-interested #1-looking-out" (IJ, 968)) represents part of a key passage in *Infinite Jest* as well as some of Wallace's most direct reflections on nihilism and the possibilities of being redeemed from it.[42] It is worth noting that for Nietzsche himself, the problem of nihilism and the state of crisis it introduced was not something the majority of his fellow men consciously registered the modern situation of nihilism as a real crisis, but went on, blissfully oblivious with their everyday lives).[43] Like Nietzsche, Wallace also wants to make it clear that, unlike the admittedly rare experiences of the Loach brothers, our contemporary American loneliness and "spiritual puberty" are largely unregistered experiences, ones that issue from the unconscious of the contemporary narcissistic Self. The repeated jokes about fish in water and the frequent imagery of blindness and submergence that appear throughout *Infinite Jest*, as well as Wallace's otherwise expressed belief that today we suffer from an "imprisonment so total that the prisoner doesn't even know he's locked up"[44], all resoundingly testify to this kind of unconscious experience and the obivious ways we exist inside and experience our nihilistic surroundings.

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[42] This example should be importantly kept in mind later as Loach eventually does find redemption via the human warmth and contact offered by the novel's "holy fool" Mario Incandenza. This passage should be understood in relation to *Infinite Jest*'s view of the possibilities of overcoming the subjective experience of nihilism and disconnect we presently suffer from.
[43] Cf. Nietzsche's foundational remarks on nihilism, *The Will to Power*, 9-85.
[44] Wallace, *This Is Water*, 32.

Along with the new kind of subjective experience, nihilism played a major role in introducing many similarly disconcerting effects on a wider, socio-cultural and political level. These may be seen in the ways that the march of rationalization, separated from its former transcendent ideals and certain binding communal experiences, came to similarly reorganize society around the Self and in terms of its instrumental logic and the rationally defined ends it articulated through it. These changes came to mark a profound shift, as the only thing we had left to understand how to relate to society, our selves and our desires was refitted in reductively instrumental perspectives --- ones that, moreover, did not only privilege the Self but also invited us to primarily understand our activity, goals and meaningfulness primarily within the narrow purviews of what could rationally yield us the best results (most "rationally desirable" outcomes). In many ways, these transformations can be seen to have begun to pave the way for the ascent of the hugely self-centred and narcissistic character of society that later ensued. In fact, we can trace this precise development rather productively if we look at the particular historical paths that this dominant instrumental rationality came to follow in the wake of nihilism and as it rose throughout the 20th century. Without an absolute basis or reference to anything outside of itself (and thus historically contingent and vulnerable to the influence of the context it existed in), the dominant rationality and its calculative logic can be seen to have been inflected in a number of decisive ways throughout the 20th century by several significant emergent forces.[45] In this respect, the rise of the narrow instrumental rationality through the 20th century

[45] In this sense, it is worth explicitly reemphasizing that with a divorce from transcendent conceptions of

must be understood in relation to the historical formation of a number of other underlying forces which, themselves, came to help bring into being and advance a particular form of reason that newly redefined certain aspects of our contemporary life and the "default settings" we inhabited within it. In particular, I am here referring to the historical rise of neoliberalism and the particular ways it articulated the dominant form of rationality within narrower and largely instrumental conceptions of Self and self-interest. With the already fertile American and Protestant traditions of individualism, neoliberal ideologies served to intensify the already consecrated centrality of the individual in American life and, in turn, contribute the major force responsible for underwriting the particular form contemporary American narcissism has taken on. To Wallace's own mind, it is rather simply what has been responsible for turning the United States throughout the latter half of the 20th century into "one enormous engine and temple of self-gratification and self-advancement".[46]

By the late 1970s, the political and economic spheres of the United States --- and the same could be said of Thatcher's Britain --- were comprehensively reorganized around

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meaning or reason, competing historical forms were able to make claims on how we understood it. Historically, different variations of rationality have thus become available and operational throughout the 20th century, eclipsing our former, classical understanding of it. Moreover, as these distinct forms have emerged at different times, they have historically promoted and privileged correspondingly different logics and ways of existing in the world (for instance, the historical intensifications of "instrumental" or technological reason). This proved to be problematic for a number of fairly obvious ways, perhaps most glaringly with respect to the ways "reason" presupposed and expressed the interests of particular dominant historical forces (e.g., capitalism, science, technology). Cf. Weber's concept of "bureaucratic rationality" in Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, and Nietzsche's "will to power" in *The Will to Power*, as well as the vast body of critical scholarship on the issue.

[46] Though he doesn't call it out by name, he is continually referring to neoliberalism as the contemporary economic ideology and logic that came to dramatically transform US culture and help introduce this new conception of Self and relation to the world. Once more, see the interview he conducted with the German television station ZDF. ZDF, "Interview with David Foster Wallace."

neoliberalism's new economic and political rationality whose philosophical underpinnings and values derived from a set of classical liberal and libertarian assumptions predicated on a view of the individual ("economic man") and his personal actions. This rationality rests on this vision of the isolated individual and put into motion the set of largely utilitarian presuppositions that hugely privilege and harness a calculative instrumentality in order to propose that the autonomous individual's self-interest is *the* unconditional starting point and enabling condition for advancement toward both personal and collective good.[47] The widespread implementation of neoliberal economic and political logic and the dissemination of its particular ideologies and cultural discourses were all, whether one adopts ~~a~~ materialist position or not, undoubtedly responsible for helping to institute and encourage some of the massive cultural changes that followed. Neoliberalism's implementation and normative political vision, for instance, expressly sought to give form to these core assumptions about the Self and self-interest. Historically, these changes were enacted through various attempts to orchestrate widespread policy and ideological measures to help create the appropriate socio-political and cultural conditions that could best stimulate and maximize self-interested activity --- unburdened by such things as commitments to the State or community. Neoliberal society's features rapidly transformed the environment of everyday life and introduced countless new ways of understanding the world

[47] These views draw heavily upon the work of Austrian economist Friedrich Von Hayek and the Chicago School of economics he led in the mid 20th century. Friedrich Von Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). Also see David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

and each other within it.[48] More troublingly, these new attitudes were now interpreted as actually constituting our basic human nature. Its new views, which firmly took hold of the popular imagination, can perhaps be most poetically and succinctly summed up by one of neoliberalism's best-known proponents Margaret Thatcher, whose notorious proclamation that "there is no such thing as society" but only individuals and families looking after their own good, announced a whole new way of looking at and living in the world. The connection between neoliberalism's governing rationality and the burgeoning of a broad cultural narcissism and social experience of atomization should here be obvious, as well as several of the widespread changes that were beginning to similarly be felt across the cultural landscape.[49]

Alongside of this economic and political development, it should also be noted how, in our day-to-day lives, these emergent cultural ideologies (of freedom, selfhood and so on) began to be widely and aggressively introduced to help legitimize and spread the new neoliberal worldview. Wallace's term "default settings", in this sense, evokes part of the ways that the 20th century has come to secure and celebrate this new and, above all, naturalized

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[48] For instance, these dramatically shifted the political, economic, socio-cultural and aesthetic areas in corresponding ways, and in many respects refurbished them within the overly instrumental rationality modeled after the pursuit of individual self-interest and market values in general. Political theorist Wendy Brown observes that "Neo-liberal rationality, while foregrounding the market, is not only or even primarily focused on the economy; rather it involves extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action," and its changes initially manifested in everything from increased deregulation to widespread privatization to the elimination of social programs. Moreover, the new worldview it promoted considerably transformed the political, economic, socio-cultural and aesthetic areas in corresponding ways. Wendy O. Brown, "Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy," *Theory and Event* 7:1 (2003). DOI 10.1353/tae.2003.0020.

[49] I refer the reader to Harvey, "A Brief History of Neoliberalism," as well as Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), which goes on to suggest that cultural production and in particular what we know loosely as "postmodernism" was the artistic expression of the new lifeworld that neoliberalism or "late capitalism" introduced.

vision of the Self. Katherine Hayles astutely notes the importance of these historical changes in relation to *Infinite Jest* and Wallace's understanding of contemporary suffering by suggesting that "in a large sense the culprit [of the novel] is no single person, family, or even nation, but rather an ideology that celebrates an autonomous, independent subject who is free to engage in the pursuit of happiness, a subject who has the right to grab what pleasure he can without regard for the cost of that pursuit to others".[50] This new worldview can be seen to have dominated American culture over the last thirty years, crystallizing in everything from the rise of the bemoaned "Me Generation" (uncoincidentally Wallace's generation) as well as the competitive individualism that blossomed alongside it. These respectively represent two of the major cultural expressions of this new worldview Wallace explicitly sets his sights on in *Infinite Jest* --- the two basic yet deeply troubled, guiding myths of contemporary culture: our "illusion of autonomy" and what Wallace refers to in the novel as our "idolatry of uniqueness" (IJ, 604). Furthermore, it is also worth briefly noting that many of the novel's explicit critiques of American life come from foreigners (Coach Schtitt and Remy Marathe) or the perspectives of grotesquely disfigured characters who have been either horribly mangled by the American way of life or have managed to successfully recover from it. If we address this in relation to the submergence and "fish in water" imagery and how Wallace understands the "default settings" of our suffering existence, this underscores one of his central critiques that our basic attitudes are so deeply entrenched and ostensibly "natural", that we remain for the most part entirely

[50] N. Katherine Hayles, "The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity: Virtual Ecologies, Entertainment, and Infinite Jest," *New Literary History*, 30:3 (1999), 691. DOI: 10.1353/nlh.1999.0036.

unaware of them. Moreover, that, without any major changes to our ways of understanding the world, we will remain unconscious of the ways our attitudes are self-destructive, and continue to blindly perpetuate them.

In this direction, much of *Infinite Jest*'s critical efforts are dedicated to demystifying these misguided and, for Wallace, corrosive, worldviews. In the novel, he specifically attacks how they came to corrupt and redefine the content of such foundational concepts as freedom, value, and fulfillment. In powerful ways, these became re-determined in the dominant worldviews of American culture at the end of the 20th century, changing the relationships between the Self, his personal desires, and his community in profound and complicated ways. For instance, the neoliberal logic conflated self-realization with self-gratification and transformed our collective understandings of value, satisfaction and achievement in considerable ways, measuring them largely in terms of self-interest --- or as Wallace writes, "nothing but the care and feeding of Numero Uno" (IJ, 968).[51] The novel, for instance, notes the various ways politicians, corporations and advertisers alike came to manipulate "the psychic matrix [rationality] where [individuals] had been conditioned . . .to associate the Freedom to Choose and the Right to Be Entertained with all that was US and true." (IJ, 412). These transformations were also being experienced in far more insidious ways in their intrusion and concrete unfolding in the day-to-day lives of individuals. The corrosive effects of neoliberalism were at the same time compounded by the concomitant rise of the culture

[51] Also see Lasch, "Culture of Narcissism" and Brown, "Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy."

industry, which was responsible, for example, for the commonly recognized creation of new individual needs and wants (and the production of accompanying products to satisfy them). More importantly and disquietingly though, was the large stake that these changes held in redefining the individual's very attitudes, goals, and personal relationship to his desires and sense of fulfillment and gratification. These shifts signaled new ways of mediating our experience and sense of Self, and came to deeply influence how we came to understand and relate to the world and our individual desires and interests within it. For instance, the newfound importance placed on private gratification, self-improvement and acquisitiveness took hold of the Self in a number of prominent ways and, coupled with cultural injunctions to "Enjoy!", dramatically changed the way she lived in the world.[52] These led to the correspondingly vast modifications of the conditions of American life, where in *Infinite Jest*'s O.N.A.N. at least, virtually all of the concerns of everyday life became lost to "the hot narrow imperatives of the Self --- the needs, the desires, the fears, the multiform cravings of the individual appetitive will" (IJ, 319). *Infinite Jest* satirically depicts these particular changes in a number of damning ways, for instance, with "Subsidized Time", where corporations are able to vie for nominal sponsorship over each calendar year --- with "The Year Of the Whopper" having passed, for instance, and the majority of the narrative itself set, tellingly, in "The Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment". As I will emphasize later, Wallace's critiques do not shy away from attacking

[52] Social theorist Slavoj Zizek's popular refrain is that contemporary culture has a Superegoic injunction to "Enjoy!" and that an almost pathological unconscious compulsion exists toward gratifying our personal impulses and urges. Slavoj Zizek, "You May!" *London Review of Books* 21: 6, 4.

the ways these historical changes have debased traditional values of freedom and rationality, and have turned them into little more than permission slips encouraging our most base, infantile fascinations and desires for passive and easy gratification. Consider, for example, one of the many fairly overt gestures the novel makes toward these devolutions, where we find, in "Subsidized Time", the sponsor with nominal rights over the year able to place their logo on the Statue of Liberty. With the "Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment" in which most of the novel is set, we rather unambiguously have America's most recognizable and enduring symbol of freedom, no longer very grandiose or proud, wearing an enormous, oversized diaper (IJ, 367).

Along with the rise of neoliberalism and consumerism throughout the 1980s and early 90s, the popular cultural attitudes in America were also in the process of being reformed by the popularity of television. Several of the effects that its almost universal grasp on the minds of Americans helped to give further shape to the growing narcissistic character that came into being in the late nihilistic, neoliberal 20th century. Marshall McLuhan's visionary insights about media's power in shaping and controlling its social environment and the minds of those within it highlight some of the ways excessive television watching functioned to (re)shape both its viewers and their world.[53] In addition to the effects of nihilism, neoliberalism and the new

[53] McLuhan's famous declaration that the "media is the message" asserts this foundational insight. It expresses the force that media hold over its users, suggesting that, "All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. . .Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments."

"Self", television came to reformat the Self's life (both consciously and not) around the kinds of habits, attitudes and relationships that the act of television watching introduced. As this new atmosphere was what was lived, breathed and thought within (recall once again Wallace's "fish in water" imagery), the hundreds of millions of viewers who watched hours every day came to be significantly "worked over", to use McLuhan's term, in a number of decisive ways. Neil Postman explores these effects in his study *Amusing Ourselves to Death,* which develops McLuhan's analysis and appears to have inspired Wallace in a number of important ways. For instance, the threatened catastrophe of *Infinite Jest*'s fatal cartridge seems to offer a literalized exploration of Postman's titular thesis and views on the effects that the new emphasis television placed on entertainment, speed and the passive reception of spectacle were beginning to have on the Self. Among other things, both Postman and Wallace look at the various, alarming ways television (and the larger entertainment industry it belonged to) came to train and unconsciously reinforce in its viewers the new attitudes and values that they came to later interpret much of everyday life with.[54] Clearly throughout *Infinite Jest*, Wallace suggests that

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Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (New York: Gingko Press, 2005), 26.

[54] Following McLuhan's insights but taking into account the effects of television content, Postman illustrates how its naturalized "epistemology", complicit with the rise of neoliberalism, helped to foster the dominant self-interested, passive, and entertainment obsessed environment of the late 20th century. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 79. Wallace was himself acutely aware of the effects television was beginning to have on the individual and culture at large, and several years before *Infinite Jest*, he penned his essay on fiction's relationship to television's "aura". The essay served as an important early forum for Wallace to rehearse many of the theoretical kernels of *Infinite Jest* and allowed him to expound on the relationship between the pervasive experiences of loneliness, the popularity of television, and how an unprecedented cultural fascination with entertainment flourished at the same time as a new sense of narcissism and self-entitlement. Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction."

the new "mindset" television came to formally impose and reinforce --- one characterized by the passive reception of television's constant stream of entertaining and absorbing content --- led to the development of a worldview that was not simply individualistic and passive, but more to the point, infantile and narcissistic in character.[55]

Infinite Jest takes this new relationship to the world and, with the figure of the addict, offers it as the paradigmatic expression of the contemporary Self, whose new passive, dependent and exclusively self-interested (that is to say, *infantile*) mentality came to usurp the former one which had traditionally located its sources of meaning, desire and fulfillment outside of its own immediate gratification. Wallace was especially wary about how these changes came to set new conditions that displaced the possibilities for the Self to develop substantive interpersonal relationships and meet his basic human needs for connection, fulfillment and love. In particular, he was deeply pessimistic with respect to the abject failures of our new disposable and mass-produced forms of entertainment. Their essential inability to satisfy these deep and personal human needs and their failures to suitably replace our traditional sources and engagements with the world, proved to be particularly dire points of concern.[56] For

[55] Wallace notes, drawing on psychoanalytic theory, that this essentially conforms to the psychoanalytic model of the passive infant having its demands and needs met by its mother. Moreover, he discusses how, in a number of ways, the new relations television introduced came to dangerously manipulate the psychic dispositions of the Self, affecting her sense of self-perception, her desires, and transforming the ways she interacts and relates to others into "puerile and dependent" ways. In particular, noting how television worked to reward and gratify and, by extension, reinforce the autoerotic relationship it created and the narcissistic and self-oriented mindset it helped to foster. Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction." Also see McCaffery, "An Interview With David Foster Wallace."

[56] For instance, with respect to the active imaginative interaction art, literature and philosophy provided, or the interpersonal involvement that community, religion, politics offered, or the emotional fulfillment that deep interpersonal friendship, sexual relationships and love made possible.

Wallace, unlike the more superficial forms of personal gratification (which, as we will see, along with television include drugs, work, and shopping, among others), our former resources had been historically equipped to better ensure and nourish the basic and essentially human capacities of "joy, charity, genuine connection" that he earlier enumerated. The new forms that the narcissistic Self sought out, on the other hand, began to find demonstrably negative expression for Wallace, with the progressive withdrawal of the individual from the outside world, his increasing submergence in his own gratification, his growing dependencies on what provides fulfillment, and with an unhealthy, growing disinterest in cultivating interpersonal relationships. These came to superficially cover over the underlying needs for stable fulfillment and, in doing so, agitated our experience of what Nietzsche called contemporary man's "wretched contentment".[57] This experience reflected the curious and damningly paradoxical experience of contemporary loneliness Wallace was so gripped by, where we remained detached from others and totally paralyzed by our self-absorption and submission to the innumerable opportunities and constant injunctions to simply "enjoy ourselves" and "be happy".

Having considered the roles nihilism and neoliberalism have played in shaping the narcissistic character of the late twentieth century, along with television, I have mentioned that postmodernity's defining features also helped to reinforce the new narcissistic orientation to the world in several important ways. Its rejection of traditional sources of meaning, suspicion

[57] In Nietzsche's well-known tight-rope walker scene, Zarathustra asks a crowd of townspeople gathering around to watch: "what does your body proclaim of your soul? Is not your soul poverty and filth and wretched contentment?" Friedrich Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. by Walter Kaufmann, (New York: Viking Penguin Books, 1954), 125.

toward values and belief, and the atomized experience it famously gave rise to, have all been, like nihilism, understood to result in the disoriented, inward retreat of the Self today. Moreover, its skepticism and dominant cultural sensibilities of cynicism and irony were, for Wallace, pernicious and ultimately isolating forces. As he saw it, these attitudes and their popular forms of expression (especially, he notes, on television) throughout the 1980s and 90s came to negatively influence the individual's attitudes toward connectedness and traditional ideals. By contrast, popular culture privileged a social outlook that was cold, emotionally distanced and evasive of serious moral or interpersonal investment with the world and others.[58] For Wallace, the most troubling prospects of this popular world-weariness resulted from the ways it preemptively arrested the potential for the individual to engage with emotional and spiritual issues, which it had suddenly deemed sentimental or hopelessly naïve. As Wallace put it in *Infinite Jest*, sentiment and its open expression represented the "last true terrible sin in the theology of millennial America" (IJ, 694) and the prevailing cynicism and irony that covered over it seemed to ultimately level a weighty blow to the possibilities for connection, opening up oneself, and giving sincere expression to what, for Wallace, is at root most human about us.

What was most urgent to Wallace, as an artist, were the kinds of effects that this new narcissistic mindset was beginning to have on the emotional and existential levels of the Self. Born in nihilism, nourished by neoliberalism and supported by television, unbridled

[58] For instance, it took the traditional moral concepts Wallace regards as crucial (such as love, belief, the soul and genuine connection) from this skeptical and wearily ironic perspective, and came to place them in quotation marks, viewing them as quaint or nostalgic remnants of the past, if not entirely foreign and utterly incomprehensible ideas. Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction." Also, once more, see the interviews and several obituaries I have earlier cited for his discussions on irony.

consumerism and postmodern discourses, Wallace feared at its extreme that this narcissistic and isolated Self would eventually submit to a total, docile lapse into solipsistic self-absorption. *Infinite Jest*, in other words, is intent on cautioning us against the ways our current conception of Self, and the specific relations to the world it already began to express in the early 1990s, holds within it the potential to eradicate forever the basic opportunities for us to meet our most elementary and intrinsically human needs. In this respect, the novel reveals itself to be even more importantly about *survival* and how we may protect ourselves against the looming threat of "death-in-life". For Wallace, these dwindling possibilities of connection and communication, along with the widespread recession of the individual Self into her own private self-absorption, unambiguously signaled the encroaching march of further dehumanization. They expressed, in all seriousness, the threat of a looming spiritual apocalypse for the United States which, itself, can go a long way in explaining why the novel's narrative and dark reflections on the present are largely organized around its literally apocalyptic narrative of the fatal cartridge and the fears that America's self-destructive pursuits of personal enjoyment might lead the country into a state of total and collective annihilation.

Ultimately, these aspects of contemporary American culture may lead us to a fuller appreciation of the specific critical indictments made throughout *Infinite Jest* and properly set the ground for us to prefigure the positive vision of redemption Wallace later makes from the basis of these critiques. That is, we can see how his criticisms of America's failures to adequately provide the conditions for properly mature and moral lives will point us to the

specific sites where we can later direct our efforts of redemptive repair and positive social change. For this reason, it will be necessary to outline the novel's depictions of our infantile narcissism and experiences of suffering, as well as the particular ways Wallace engages with his historical surroundings and deals with the looming spiritual crisis of "death-in-life" in America.

CHAPTER 3

Infinite Jest's vicious critiques and the failing moral grade Wallace gives to the United States find expression consistently throughout the novel: in each of its converging narratives and disparate narrative strands, in many of its vivid character studies, as well as through its many brief vignettes. Because the following analysis will focus on reconstructing the underlying narrative of redemption in the novel, it will limit its treatment of *Infinite Jest*'s many, additional critical ambitions. As such, it will sacrifice a comprehensive and summary account of the novel's plot, the nature of its overlapping and interlocking narratives, its character development and several other major concerns. Instead, it will continue to address the novel, especially in relation to this psychoanalytic preoccupation, in terms of Wallace's most central and urgent thematic concerns and will offer a sustained exploration of how, in particular, these other central features of the novel (plot, characters, style) intersect with them and are organized around this hidden narrative of redemption.[59] Among a number of potential interpretive perspectives, psychoanalysis, in particular, can help us to better understand not only the problem of narcissism, but more importantly, the manner by which Wallace both diagnoses and therapeutically intervenes into the pervasive narcissism of contemporary culture. As we will see, its critical --- and positive --- insights and vocabulary represent the most consistently deployed set of resources Wallace consciously draws on throughout *Infinite Jest*. Marshall

[59] For a more comprehensive analysis of the novel in terms of plot, thematic development, character studies, etc., I refer the reader to Greg Carlisle's thorough reader's guide *Elegant Complexity* (New York: SSMG Press, 2007). As well as Hirt, *The Iron Bars of Freedom.*

Boswell's account addresses Wallace's debts to psychoanalysis in *Infinite Jest* and highlights the novel's extensive engagement with many of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's core theories.[60] Wallace explicitly employs a number of psychoanalytic concepts and deliberately uses its vocabulary throughout *Infinite Jest* to a number of different, important ends. Some, for instance, are parodic and belong to the novel's satirical bite, with ETA resident child psychologist Dolores Rusk as the novel's most obvious example. Yet, for the most part, despite the tongue in cheek and playful attitudes with which many of the psychoanalytic ideas are broached, it becomes apparent over the course of the novel that Wallace privileges psychoanalytic discourse for a very precise reason. Specifically, it appears that *Infinite Jest* uses psychoanalysis in order to assume the unique perspective with which it is able to give expression to the basic moral questions Wallace wants to ask about contemporary society. In this sense, it must be emphasized that the psychoanalytic perspective is literally both a diagnostic and therapeutic viewpoint, and follows a logic that begins simply by pinpointing and examining the different forms of suffering one experiences in order to better understand and later treat them. By adopting this model throughout the novel within his wider moralist perspective, Wallace is able to set up a fruitful engagement with contemporary American suffering. He is able to address broader moral problems in a way that permits him to introduce new ways of understanding them (their origins, "symptoms" and so on), and from this basis, offer alternative ways of thinking about and alleviating them from the point of view of possible

[60] Boswell, "Too Much Fun For Anyone Mortal to Hope to Endure." Boswell, in fact, reads the novel in part as a "response" to several of Lacan's theories of the Self.

treatment or, to continue using Wallace's word for it, redemption.[61] By pursuing this kind of approach, the subsequent chapters will therefore look carefully at *Infinite Jest*'s psychoanalytic subtext and will address the novel and its critiques strictly in relation to how they are used to enact its narrative of redemption and explore the possibilities of concretely retrieving a "human" life in the future.

In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace creatively draws on several of the core tropes, typologies and metaphors that psychoanalytic discourse offers, and he takes a personal poetic license with them in order to creatively explore certain facets of their underlying assumptions and to dramatize some of their farther-reaching implications and "clinical" applications. In doing so, Wallace is able to key in on and clarify, through a psychoanalytic prism, the decisive roles that our surrounding cultural and historical contexts play in relation to our experience of them, the formation of our identities, and in terms of how we express our basic (irreducibly human) desires, needs and interests. These explorations gets carried out in a number of interesting ways through the novel, though it is most clearly evident and artistically developed in the figure of the infant, whose pivotal status in *Infinite Jest* is crucial to both Wallace's critiques of American culture (diagnosis) as well as his positive (therapeutic) vision. As such, my analysis will focus largely on the role played by the infant in *Infinite Jest*'s critiques and will, in

[61]Hirt also notes, that "Wallace compares the work of his ideal author with that of a therapist. In his opinion, a writer should analyse the symptoms of his culture's illness, find its repressed origins and then give advice for its cure. . ." Hirt, *The Iron Bars of Freedom,* 48.

particular, view the ways it helped to give form to Wallace's moral project and the execution of the novel's narrative of redemption and maturity.

Before directly addressing Wallace's use of the infant, it is important to briefly reconstruct certain relevant aspects of the psychoanalytic account in order to provide a theoretical context and highlight some of the important underlying assumptions that are involved in Wallace's metaphors and critiques. To begin with, the conventional account of the advent of the Self and our mental and psychic development begins with birth and inside the original relationship between the infant and the mother. According to the Freudian tradition Wallace is drawing on, this earliest infant-mother relationship is characterized by a kind of symbiotic unity, with the infant dependent on its mother's total care and, for all intents and purposes, experiencing her body as a continuation of its own --- remaining utterly dependent on her to satisfy its most basic and immediate needs.[62] This early infantile existence is, for Freud, "polymorphously perverse" and is a kind of unmediated submergence in pleasure and sensation where the infant, not even yet an individual Subject (a conscious "I"/"ego") is able to blissfully and unconsciously enjoy a constant experience of wholeness, care and full satisfaction.[63] The infant, whom Freud once also notably called, "His majesty the Baby!" remains in this pure state of total autoerotic self-absorption, attached to its mother, and with its life little more than a bundle of unconscious drives instinctually directed toward their fulfillment.[64] The infant remains

[62] Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism," in *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Angela Richards and trans. James Strachey (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 59-98.
[63] Ibid, 84.
[64] Ibid.

at this stage of development, firmly enclosed inside this experience, blissfully unaware and with "no need for the external world".[65] Even if we pause here, at this very preliminary stage of the infant's life, we can already find ourselves in a better position to address some of *Infinite Jest*'s rich imagery and leitmotifs of submergence. As well, we can better recognize some key aspects of Wallace's critiques of America's narcissism as infantile and marked by our simultaneous obsessions with, and dependencies on, our various forms of personal gratification --- be these drugs, entertainment, work, or so on. At many points, *Infinite Jest* makes its most explicit critiques of America's infantile regression by literalizing this psychic regression and depicting what, for Wallace, appears to be the literally infantile aspects of the everyday tendencies, experiences and fixations so many Americans embody.[66]

Infinite Jest does this in all three of its main narratives, making clear the identity between our own closed-off self-absorption and attachment to personal gratification with the kind of total private self-absorption and passive helplessness that is experienced in early infancy. For Wallace, we have devolved to essentially share the same kind of relationship to the world, one of "primary narcissism" (for Freud) that the infant has in this early stage with its mother. In other words, *Infinite Jest*'s critiques charge that our present relation to the world

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[65] Ibid.

[66] It is worth noting the humor in many of these critiques and to here acknowledge another curiously overlooked influence on Wallace's writing (in addition to CS Lewis and Tolstoy's, for instance) --- namely, Kafka's. A brief piece appeared a number of years after *Infinite Jest* in *Harpers* magazine, where Wallace discusses the effect of Kafka's unique humor and "anti-subtlety", which gets expressed through "some kind of radical literalization of truths we tend to treat as metaphorical." Wallace also, interestingly, alludes to Kafka's "harrowing spirituality" and religious concerns with the soul. David Foster Wallace, "Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness from Which Probably Not Enough Has Been Removed," in *Consider the Lobster* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2006), 60-66.

has, in precisely these ways, collapsed to comprise of little, if anything, more than a similar singleminded focus on the satisfaction of our basic infantile desires for pleasure and relief, security and shelter, and attention and reassurance. They also suggest that this new way of existing in the world is, too, marked by similar dependencies on whatever can, even to some small degree, begin to meet these basic needs and provide us with substitutes for the early infantile experiences of total security, gratification, and comfort. Marshall Boswell, in his reading of *Infinite Jest*, puts it as such: "nearly everyone in the significantly designated Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment is a grownup baby in diapers, crawling on all fours in search of something to fill that need for maternal plenitude. . .".[67] *Infinite Jest*, indeed, depicts this essentially infantile existence in a number of ways, ranging from the rather overt and provocative to far more subtle and nuanced critiques. These include everything from the aforementioned "Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment" and diapered Statue of Liberty to support groups dedicated to helping nurture our "Inner Infant", to criticisms of O.N.A.N.'s excessive TV watching and consumerism, as well in the many diverse varieties of self-absorbed narcissism that different characters in the novel exemplify. In addition to all this is the lethally entertaining video cartridge "Infinite Jest" which promises a pleasure so complete that it offers, at the total expense of the outer world and the collapse of the Self, a kind of return to this pure infantile immersion. As one of the novel's most theoretically developed leitmotifs, the cartridge teasingly alludes to these specific psychoanalytic representations of the infant and our literally

[67] Boswell, "Too Much Fun For Anyone Mortal to Hope to Endure," 131.

infantile desires, as it actually seeks to "restage" for its viewers a return to this mother-child relationship. The film, for instance, is set largely in a baby's crib and is shot from a "crib's-eye view", with innovative camera lens-work managing to simulate the "wobbly" and "milky blur" of the baby's visual perspective for the viewer (IJ, 939). For the majority of the film, the viewer is invited to look up, through the infant's blurry vision at its mother who, herself, spends the remainder of the film leaning over the baby/the viewer, repeatedly apologizing for having ever left it. The effects of this on the viewer are rumored to be so powerful and absorbing that it immediately brings them to a state of such total immersion ("like some drug-addicted newborn" (IJ, 507), that they are unable to tear themselves away from it and are "as if on some deep reptile-brain level pithed . . .[where] no other activity or connection could hold their attention. . ." (IJ, 548-9) and they eventually die, fully absorbed in their pleasure.

Apart from the significant role of the film "Infinite Jest" and its curious effects on its viewers, the infantile relation to the world that Wallace charges American culture with is in my view most fully represented in the figure of the addict who, as I earlier note, can be productively read as a stand-in for the everyday narcissistic and selfish American.[68] The addict's culmination of our everyday infantile relation to the world, our attitudes toward private gratification and our desires for total submergence, should serve to be especially revealing arraignments of certain major facets of contemporary American life. Wallace makes this

[68] It is worth emphasizing that although Wallace's explicit preoccupations are very specifically with American culture and with the pronounced ways narcissism finds expression inside it, one may also find the phenomenon occurring (albeit to lesser extents) on more general levels, even globally, today.

triangular connection between narcissists, infants and addicts in a number of suggestive ways and we can see it in *Infinite Jest*'s diverse depictions of addiction, the various claims drugs make on the addict, as well as in its descriptions of being high. The extent to which Wallace deliberately sought to reiterate the underlying identity between the addict, narcissist and infant is essential to understanding much of the novel's more pressing critiques and should not be overlooked. Though it is a point that has gone underdeveloped by other accounts, my analysis will affirm that one may read the novel with the everyday American narcissist in mind essentially anytime the addict is discussed, as both figures find common identity in the same regressed, infantile and isolated relation to the world --- the only significant difference being the addict's more extreme expression of it. As such, the novel goes to various pains to depict the addict's mindset as totally narcissistic, serious drug abuse as utterly individual and *lonely* --- in fact, characterizing it as the narcissistic activity *par excellence*.[69] Similarly, through its various and colorful characterizations of serious and active addiction, the novel continues to employ its explicitly infantile imagery and liken the characters' subjective experiences to ones of total self-

[69] In this respect, it should not be seen as a coincidence that Hal's marijuana use is always compulsively done alone in secret while hiding in the Enfield Tennis Academy or that Gately becomes a "totally taciturn withdrawn dead-like person. . .sitting for hours . . .real, like, interior." (IJ, 893). Though a number of examples may be called on to illustrate this, the solipsistic narcissism of drug abuse is put perhaps most definitively in the novel's depiction of desperate addicts who wait for a methadone clinic to open; who, standing together in a large group "do not congregate, rather [they] stand or lean along . . . [the] long walkway's railing, arms crossed, alone, brooding, solo acts, standoffish --- 50 or 60 people all managing to form a line on a narrow walkway waiting for the same small building to unlock its narrow front door. . .doing basically everything but truly congregating, wild for chemical relief . . ." and the promise of methadone (IJ,194).

absorption, making unambiguous connections between the narcissistic character of drug use and an essentially infantile state.[70]

We are now in a better position to articulate how Wallace's critiques suggest that the new conditions of contemporary American culture are behind the infantile and immature relation to the world we inhabit. Moreover, that these new conditions are what inhibit our own proper psychosocial development (maturity) and leave so many of those born within it in a seemingly perpetual state of self-absorbed infancy. In the novel's O.N.A.N. at least, it is this infantile narcissism that represents the source of the loneliness we suffer from. It is what proves to be responsible for the Self's unwillingness to move beyond her personal fixations and what has led not only to its isolation, but the various forms of addiction, depression, or helpless maladjustment suffered from. For Wallace, our narcissistic attitudes and our highly individualistic pursuits and priorities all stand in to encage the Self. They stymie its eventual hopes for the nourishing possibilities of connection and development, and thus bar it from the opportunities to meet its basic human needs and realize a mature, independent existence. It is worth emphasizing, in this vein, that *Infinite Jest* also repeatedly thematizes this lonely

[70] Though a number of examples similarly run throughout the text, consider for instance how Gately remembers the effects of the drug Talwin as "like floating in oil the exact same temperature as your body. . . ." and reflects on the "*womb warm buzz of a serious narcotic*." (IJ, emphasis mine). Or, even more overtly, how recovering addict Kate Gompert who, following an overdose, "lay fetal . . ." and "on the floor flushed red and all wet like when I was a newborn. . ." (IJ, 71). Also Joelle van Dyne, whose cocaine binge sent her "sliding down along the wall . . .uprightly fetal with chin on knees" into a "blue lacquered bathtub" (IJ, 235), which should call to mind the water imagery associated with the womb. Furthermore, cocaine and amphetamine users in the novel have their respective highs uniformly marked by a "nystagmic wobble" of the eye which Wallace suggests is the same "ocular wobble" and "neo-natal" "nystagmus" of the early infant (IJ, 939).

submergence as an imprisoning experience, and that the novel continually evokes the "cages" of our respectively self-absorbed pursuits (drugs, alcohol, entertainment, tennis) in relation to both prisons and the bars of the infant's crib.

To arrive at a more clarified understanding of this critique, it helps to return to where we left off in the traditional psychoanalytic account and continue with the infant's development and better illuminate several other essential moments in its path towards maturity. Following the first stages of infancy, the infant comes to a certain moment (a "primal psychic situation"[71]) where it begins to separate from its total experience of absorption and redirects its drives towards its Self. According to the classic psychoanalytic account, in this foundational moment of identification, the infant's identity as a Self comes into being. It deflects its drives and directs them toward its Self, at the same time inaugurating the very beginnings of its own psychic life.[72] Jacques Lacan's well-known account of this process, which Wallace self-consciously draws on in *Infinite Jest*, is referred to as the "mirror-stage" and designates the crucial moment when the infant comes to finally "recognize" its own Self and assume it as its own.[73] These initial moments, for both Freud and Lacan, represent the infant's first recognition of the world around it and the first experiences of separation and "autonomy" from the mother. It is followed by a traumatic stage of loss and frustration where its former experiences of wholeness and satisfaction get upset, but which, at the same time, ultimately proves to be the positive condition

[71] Sigmund Freud, "Instincts and their Vicissitudes," in *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis.* ed. Angela Richards, trans. James Strachey (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 136.
[72] Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction."
[73] Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function Of as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Ecrits*, ed. and trans. Bruce Fink, New York: Norton, 2006, 75-82.

from which the infant can begin to separate from its mother and enter into the world on its own. What is crucial to note with respect to the novel's particular use of the figure of the infant and its development is this extremely delicate and important state it enters immediately following the "mirror-stage". Where, as a new "I", the infant must begin to overcome the loss of its mother (and its immediate ties to her) and learn how to properly accommodate and connect to the world around it --- that is, properly *become* a Self.[74] A successful course of development (the eventual attainment of a stable psychic identity) depends thus on the infant beginning the individuation process and moving beyond the traumas of this loss to discover positive external sites in the world with which it can complete this separation and find positive bonds to usher it into the world.[75] The psychoanalytic account suggests that the ego develops specifically through these processes and that without successfully undergoing them, the infant will not be able, as a nascent "I", to ever properly come into its own, adapt to reality or continue to develop as a psychically sound or well-adjusted Self.[76]

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[74] For Freud this is the critical moment in psychological development where the infant begins to learn how to master and regulate its drives and find socially acceptable and proper means of sublimating and gratifying them (to properly develop a "reality principle" to manage its "pleasure-principle"). This also allows the infant to positively overcome the foundational loss of its mother, master its surroundings and begin properly to mature as an independent Self. Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction."

[75] These new bonds and sites of identification are the new positive sites that the infant directs its drives and desires into and learns how to sublimate and positively manage them. This is the key stage where its subjective development occurs and the infant begins to adjust to the world and undergo socialization.

[76] In particular, the dominant psychoanalytic accounts suggest that these initial adjustments lead to the infant's accommodation to the external world and are where it begins to learn to "give up its objects" and seek out replacements for them via different processes of substitution. The ego's character is eventually shaped through this process, beginning with the initial "loss" of the mother, which forces the ego to redirect its energies (both toward itself and the outside world). Important to keep in mind for *Infinite Jest*, for Lacan, the subject's desire emerges in relation to the loss of its mother, revolving around fulfilling this "lost" object in other socially acceptable ways. Cf. several of the essays in Lacan *Ecrits.*

In light of Wallace's critiques and use of psychoanalysis in *Infinite Jest*, this reconstructed account should offer a general --- although partial --- view of some of the most important and relevant dimensions of our early subjective development. To return to Wallace's critiques, we can therefore understand them to state quite simply that in today's American culture, something comes along the way to ultimately disturb this process of development and prevent it from properly unfolding --- in effect, blocking the process of *becoming a Self*. As the major psychoanalytic accounts have widely noted, when this development gets derailed in these early delicate stages, the nascent subject fails to move beyond the loss of its mother and, unable to positively overcome this traumatic experience, will remain psychically lodged at this early infantile stage.[77] The Self will thus fail to complete its proper development, and this interruption will leave deep unconscious traces of its earliest infantile attachments in its later experience of the world (e.g., the fixing the unconscious "bars of the crib" that will remain in the Self's psyche, keeping him later in life, unconsciously fixated on the earliest kinds of satisfaction he once enjoyed). These interruptions, Wallace is suggesting, are precisely what are responsible for our arrested development and infantile regression, and correspondingly, are what have set the grounds for the later experiences of loneliness we suffer from (not to mention

[77] See, in particular, the works I will be drawing from throughout the rest of the chapter by Julia Kristeva and D.W. Winnicott. In a proper sense, it is also worth briefly noting that according to Freud or Lacan, this individuation process is generally, to some degree, bound to fail at some point or another --- and for a number of reasons, at that. We are all, to various degrees, inevitable "maladjusted" in some way, according to the psychoanalytic account. The issue with the culture of narcissism and its negative influences on our development, is that is exacerbates the already complicated and tenuous process of development and threatens it with additional risks from a very early stage. For Wallace, in the novel, this process is obviously dealt with far more poetic license and critical emphasis placed on external cultural factors.

the various addictions, dependencies, and self-interested pursuits which Wallace so exhaustively depicts in the population of O.N.A.N., for instance).[78]

To better address the complicated relationship between the Self's development and its surrounding context, I will continue to mine the psychoanalytic accounts to which *Infinite Jest* is indebted, in particular, the views which hold that the disruption of the mother-child relation as well undermined processes of separation and development are what are ultimately responsible for the wide assortment of personal psychological ills we later suffer. These insights motivated Wallace to explore what could have gone wrong on the path toward proper maturity, to leave the Self scarred and trapped in a state of prolonged infancy. *Infinite Jest*'s critiques should thus similarly invite us to critically examine what particular aspects of American culture could have come to interfere in this process --- or, rather, where it failed to provide the minimal conditions in which our successful development ("becoming a human being") could come to unfold in the first place. These represent the major "diagnostic" thrust of the text and allow Wallace to concretely pinpoint several of the facets of everyday life that were seemingly responsible for creating this particular experience of loneliness and suffering, and later reinforcing it.

[78] As an aside, it is worth noting that regression ought not imply a move backwards in time to an earlier, already passed stage of development but that it is an activation and expression of always present, unresolved unconscious conflicts which remain deeply buried in the psyche (the bars of the cage, of the crib). As Freud observed, the infantile past remains forever inside us and, as latent and unresolved, can always be regressed to if the external conditions stimulate it. Notably, this is also one of the sinister premises that the Quebecois separatist terrorists in the novel make in their plans for disseminating the fatal "Infinite Jest". They plan to simply make the lethally entertaining tape available for consumption without coercing or forcibly thrusting it on the American public --- instead, they are cynically wagering that by merely "dangling" the promise of total entertainment in front of the infantile and pleasure hungry American public, the tape will be watched, even in spite of recognizing the obvious dangers involved.

One of the most important psychoanalytic links that can help to clarify how the Self's subjective development gets determined by the crucial dynamic between its earliest experiences and its surrounding environment can be found in what post-Freudian British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott calls a "transitional space". For Winnicott, the delicate stage where the infant transitions from its dependency on the mother to its surrounding world must be preceded by a basic set of positive conditions and circumstances. These are what enable and encourage the infant to confidently separate from the mother and begin to creatively master its surroundings to overcome the anxieties and frustrations that her eventual "loss" generates.[79] These very early experiences, for Winnicott, determine the later courses of the infant's psychic growth and development. They represent the elementary experiences of play and creativity that bring it from its early attachment to the mother into a tentatively autonomous Selfhood, and necessarily depend on proper cultivation and engagement inside this "transitional space." This subjective "space" and these conditions are formed through the positive reinforcement the infant receives from its mother, as well as from its ability to locate something outside of the mother it can bind itself to and which can invite it to begin separating from her to positively engage with it.[80] This experience is essential for the infant's development of self-love and independence, to ensure that when it eventually is exposed to the world, it has some

[79] D.W. Winnicott, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena," in *Playing and Reality* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 1-34. These positive feelings derive from the love, attention and care that the infant receives from its mother. They are the source of its feelings of reliability, security and encouragement that, in turn, form the basis of the infant's initial sense of confidence and trust that it requires to separate and enter the world on its own.
[80] These, in particular, are what Winnicott termed "transitional objects." Ibid.

"confidence" and does not get entirely overwhelmed or incapacitated by its surroundings or the anxieties and trauma of "losing" its mother and being by itself.[81] However, what is essential to note is that Winnicott stresses that this intermediate transitional space is never guaranteed, that its emergence is always "potential" and conditional on the prior existence of nurturing supports, a positive environmental context and the earliest experiences of love and care. In their absence, this "transitional space" will fail to materialize altogether, and the infant will fail to acquire the necessary confidence and trust in the world that can encourage it to separate and mediate this passage into maturity and healthy Selfhood.[82] Without these basic minimal conditions to enable and nurture this passage, the infant will experience the outside world as hostile and unfamiliar (for Winnicott, "persecutory" and strange) and the infant will lack altogether any means of properly managing its surroundings and protecting itself from being swamped over by them.[83] Furthermore, he suggests that in response to this kind of overwhelming "persecutory" experience, the essentially helpless infant will typically continue to cling defensively to its mother for the needed support and security it craves. As such, it will later experience considerable difficulty in ever beginning to go out on its own and positively "play" and engage with the world around it (as an independent Self). Winnicott emphasized that the failure to realize this space leads to major early traumatic experiences that, very early on, are responsible for the Self's most deeply rooted fixations, later psychic weaknesses and

[81] Ibid.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid, 13.

the dependencies that persist later on in life.[84] In similar fashion, Wallace decries how contemporary American culture has been responsible for creating a damaging environment for subjective development that has, if not entirely eliminated the possibility for this transitional space to emerge, at the very least has come to trouble it and doom any hopes for full or stable psychic development and later maturity to unfold. The positive supports and, in particular, the inviting external world that are the minimal positive conditions that must be in place to ensure separation and the later successful development as a mature identity are, for Wallace, sorely lacking. In this case, the hostile and grossly self-interested aspects of contemporary America are what withhold or thwart the possibilities for a proper "transitional spaces" and are what, if we return to his interview with the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, are quite literally making it "distinctly hard to be [or ever *become*] a human being."[85]

Infinite Jest expresses this critique in a number of important passages, and if we consider the crucial role of the transitional space in subjective development and the antagonistic contemporary conditions in which it fails to materialize, we can better address the unfortunate fate the Self who is born into it meets. That is, we can begin to trace the stunted development of the lonely narcissistic Self to the immediate conditions into which he is born. *Infinite Jest*

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[84] In these cases, the psychoanalytic account suggests the infant will be left inadequately prepared or unwilling to enter the world and, remaining reluctantly attached to its mother and fixed in a difficult situation of passive attachment and helplessness, will likely be unable to successfully undergo further psychosocial development without intervention considerable help. For instance, Winnicott notes these difficulties to undergo proper development and states that without the transitional space "There is no possibility whatever for an infant to proceed from the pleasure principle to the reality principle or towards and beyond primary identification. . ." He notes that, "unless there is a good-enough mother [and surrounding social context]. . . [to] mak[e] active adaptation to the infant's needs . . ." then it will remain stuck as such and experience difficulties in later maturing in life. Ibid, 13.

[85] McCaffery, "An Interview With David Foster Wallace."

depicts the particular ways that O.N.A.N.'s self-absorbed, consumerist, and self-gratifying pleasure-obsessed environment are precisely what come to disfigure and damage its population from the outset. The novel illustrates this most explicitly, once more, with its infant tropes, again giving surreal and terrifying literal expression to these various psychoanalytic understandings of arrested development and regression, drawing graphic attention to the suffering and horrors they later give rise to. For example, consider the effects of O.N.A.N.'s uninhabitable toxic wasteland of the "Concavity" (the vast swaths of northern New England which, following the nation's "territorial reconfiguration", the US government carved out as garbage dumps for the country's excess waste, and which it later effectively relocated to Quebec. Perhaps more than anything, the "Concavity's" most terrible unanticipated catastrophes, apart from raising the ire of radical Quebecois terrorists, are the horrifying physical mutations that exposure to it caused throughout southern Quebec and northern New England. In particular, I refer to the grotesque physical disfigurements that were suffered by newborns, whose mothers were pregnant when the "Concavity" came into being. Babies were born with barely formed skulls, up to six eyes, misshapen and drooping faces and missing limbs and, most importantly, remained long after birth "*in many different stages of development* upon different parts of the body. . ." (IJ,779, emphasis mine). The "Concavity" also curiously produced a peculiar strain of "infantile giganticism", and widely circulating rumors abounded that abandoned infants in the region had eventually mutated to "the size of prehistoric beasts" in the toxic waste, only to begin "roaming the overfertilized east Concavity quadrants" (IJ, 573).

Amid the staggering amounts of aggregate waste and junk that America's disposable, excessively acquisitive consumerist culture has created, those born into it become not only grotesquely disfigured but remain *incomplete* and deprived of something essentially human (figured here, for instance, in the infant's missing limbs and skulls, the total absence of care and supports, and inabilities to mature and grow as proper human beings). The depictions of these horrifying mutated infants wandering through the wilderness of American waste can serve almost as a parable in *Infinite Jest,* allowing Wallace to directly gesture to the precise effects that our self-gratifying and voraciously entertainment-devouring attitudes have come to had on those who are born into and formed (and, of course, *de*formed) within it.

The other major casualty of America's toxic environment and self-absorption can be found in the grisly accounts of stillborn births who, together with the "feral infants", stand in as tragic archetypal figures for the underdeveloped and damaged infant inside each of us. This figure also appears at various points in the novel, for instance, with one of Ennet House's recovering addicts having discarded her deeply damaged newborn at the height of her addiction (IJ, 699). It is, however, most fully developed in the harrowing story another recovering crack addict offers at a Narcotics Anonymous meeting early on in the novel. In the meeting, the recovering addict openly discusses her former addictions and reflects on the incredibly ravenous abuse that carried through the duration of her pregnancy. Her addiction proved to be so powerful that even as her water broke and contractions began, "she'd been unable to tear herself away from the 'base pipe" (IJ, 376) and refused to bother going to a

delivery clinic, opting instead to continue freebasing through labor and continue her binge. She eventually delivered a horribly malformed stillborn infant, who was missing body parts, essential fluids, and lacking anything recognizably human about it. The infant had been "poisoned before it could grow a face or make any personal choices . . ." --- or, in other words, become a Self --- and it was "involuntarily toxified to death *somewhere along in its development toward becoming a boy. . .*" (IJ, 376, 378, emphasis mine). Like the "feral infant" born into the toxic wasteland of American culture, this example also clearly illustrates how those born into this environment get deprived and deeply damaged in a number of essential and far-reaching ways. It also similarly addresses how the mother's narcissistic self-absorption and the incredible pull that her own self-destructive pursuits have are what, ultimately, are responsible for literally "toxifying" her infant to death and preventing it from even "*becoming* a boy". They are what specifically prevented the emergence of what Winnicott literally called the "*good-enough* mother"[86] and a proper supportive context. More generally, they are what led to the catastrophic inability of the narcissistic Self to sacrifice her own self-interest, recognize her relationships to others (and their needs and dependencies), and understand the consequences of her own base self-interest.

These examples both represent *Infinite Jest*'s most savage and uncompromising criticisms of contemporary American life: that its narcissistic obsessions, desires for personal happiness and utter dependence on what can provide it (consumerism, entertainment, drugs,

[86] Winnicott, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena," 13.

and so on) have not only produced childish or immature mindsets, but has deeply damaged its population from birth. That is, they have created an environment that thwarts the Self's abilities to meet its basic needs for love, support, and connection. In both cases, it is clear that the conditions able to provide for these are either entirely absent or have become so deeply troubled by the dominant features of contemporary culture, whose toxic bloat (e.g. the consumerist wilderness of excess) and "persecutory" surroundings (singleminded pursuits of pleasure) make it extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible for the newborn Self to properly develop. Left to fend for himself in this environment, without having had his essential *human* needs met, the infant becomes the scarred and deprived Self who later in life remains "encaged" and tied down to whatever basic substitute for the lost mother he can readily find. For Wallace, it is a very short leap from this to the later experiences of loneliness and self-destructiveness that ensue from such a troubled relation to the world and the viciously circular and insulated states of mind that they imply.

A final way of understanding Wallace's critiques and this entrapping experience of infantile narcissism can be found in the remarkable work of psychoanalytic theorist Julia Kristeva. Her major theoretical contributions to psychoanalysis have importantly reinterpreted traditional understandings of the Subject's formation and carry considerable relevance to *Infinite Jest* and its moral interests in particular. Like Wallace, Kristeva's driving preoccupation is to understand the experience of estrangement in contemporary culture and many of her major investigations circulate around the intersections of nihilism, pathological

narcissism, and the subject's early experiences and development. In tune with Wallace's "cages" of lonely self-absorption and solipsism, her work centrally addresses the phenomenon of "narcissistic constriction,"[87] and similarly identifies a weakening of psychic life with the rise of narcissism and a secular, atomistic and progressively dehumanizing culture. She addresses the ways that the individual's relation to the world around him is damaged early on from the outside, and how his failure to properly connect with it represents the underlying source of the suffering and anomie that has so pervasively upset his experience in the late 20th century. Her thinking on these issues provides an immensely productive lens with which to understand the important critical dimensions at stake in the novel and the experience of loneliness, our current infantile dependencies and the self-destructive pursuits of addiction, entertainment and so on. Furthermore, her investigations are also especially interesting as she also directs them explicitly toward a practical clinical application (she is also a practicing psychoanalyst) and places them within her avowedly therapeutic aspirations to positively treat the suffering she diagnoses.

From a diagnostic and critical perspective, Kristeva understands our suffering to issue from the severed relation between the Self and the world around her, and she understands this to represent the fundamental expression that nihilism takes on today.[88] That is, she suggests that our suffering arises from the failure of the individual's internal psychic life (his drives and

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[87] Sara Beardsworth, *Julia Kristeva: Psychoanalysis and Modernity* (Albany: SUNY Press: 2004). Beardsworth's excellent and comprehensive overview of Kristeva's thought articulates her fundamental concern to be with salvaging the individual "remnant of freedom" in contemporary suffering from its "narcissistic constriction" and Beardsworth consistently emphasizes this core experience of "narcissistic constriction" today's Self in Kristeva's work.

[88] Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

affective life) to properly connect with and find proper expression in the world around him. This inability to adequately sublimate drives and discover sites of connection lead to excesses of drive finding misplaced and eventually destructive expression elsewhere (most commonly, for instance, in the "negative narcissism" that embodies aggressive drive displaced back onto the Self).[89] This manifests typically in confused experiences of isolation and disconnection, as well as various other negative forms of self-absorption that include, for instance, depression and an inability to affectively experience the world or positively identify with others. Interestingly enough, as a brief digression, her diagnoses of contemporary "narcissistic constriction" and her various descriptions of its subjective experience are identical to the withdrawn suffering of anhedonic depression that one of the novel's protagonists, Hal Incandenza, extensively narrates throughout the novel. For instance, Kristeva notes that the experience of melancholia is a kind of "blank activity" that "devitalizes" the Self into an almost affectless "anesthetized" state, and Hal's intense loneliness and disconnection, which are certainly prime examples of "negative narcissism" get expressed as "a kind of spiritual torpor in which one loses the ability to feel pleasure or attachment to things formerly important. . .a kind of emotional novocaine . . . its *deadness* is disconcerting . . .a kind of radical abstracting of everything, a hollowing out of stuff that used to have affective content. . . Everything becomes

[89] For Kristeva, this scenario leads to the inner psychic life of the drives getting blocked, misdirected and improperly channeled, and as they must "go somewhere" and find expression, their inability to connect with an external world and others is ultimately responsible for their rebounding back on the Self or their forced expression. These lodged and improperly sublimated drives lead, for Kristeva, to painful disorientation and confusion, and viciously lead, in attempts to escape the pain or deal with it, to self-destructive pursuits and patterns of behaviour (addiction, violence, self-mutilation) and broader social ills, when understood in a collective way, such as misogyny, xenophobia, homophobia, and so on.

an outline of the thing . . . the anhedonic becomes, in the lingo of Boston AA, *Unable to Identify*."[90]

Kristeva, like Wallace, importantly suggests that this experience of alienation in contemporary life begins very early on and is largely the function of the effects of the surrounding context on the very earliest moments of infancy. Her investigations, which have dramatically expanded contemporary psychoanalytic thought on the issue, address the crucial moments that the traditional account of Subject formation overlooks, highlighting the essential processes involved in its earliest moments.[91] Like Winnicott's account, she addresses the formative processes of separation and the infant's transition into the world but places her primary focus on the infant's exposure to otherness and the external world while it is still in a unity with its mother. She focuses on an understanding of the primordial experience of separation from the mother (her well-known term for it is "abjection") and in examining the earliest possibilities the infant develops for later connecting to the world around it. In particular, she addresses how the failures for this proper exposure and experience of connection and separation to occur are the result of the dominant underlying cultural conditions of narcissism (which, in short, fail to provide us the necessary resources to work through the

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[90] Also, "Hal himself hasn't had a bona fide intensity-of-interior-life-type emotion since he was tiny; he finds terms like joie and value to be like so many variables in rarefied equations, and he can manipulate them well enough to satisfy everyone but himself that he's in there, inside his own hull, as a human being--- but in fact he's far more robotic. . .[and the fact that people misunderstand and fail to recognize this] makes Hal feel the one thing he feels to the limit, lately: he is *lonely*" (IJ, 694).

[91] Kristeva reinterprets these earliest moments from the grounds of her basic contention, which suggests that in the early mother-infant symbiosis, the infant comes to experience its earliest exposure to the world outside it, undergo its foundational moments of separation, and become initially introduced to the earliest possibilities of connection. Beardsworth, *Julia Kristeva*.

loss of the mother). She suggests that these latter forces prevent these essential processes from occurring, and are what ultimately lead to the infant's failed processes of development, its inabilities to properly separate from its mother, and the later dependencies and experiences of constriction it experiences in the external world.[92] In particular, she suggests that in its earliest moments of development, in order to properly mature, the infant must be exposed to an "otherness" (what she terms the "imaginary" or "loving" father), which can allow it to compensate for the loss of the mother. For her, this "crucial moment of development" occurs when the infant projects itself outside of the mother-child interdependence and is able to locate something external to it, which it can later use to identify and bind itself to.[93] In other words, she suggests that these earliest moments provide the basis for how the Self's psychic life will come to take shape in relation to the world around it --- that this will come to bear on the trajectory of the Self's maturity and its eventual psychic formation. She, like Wallace and Winnicott, also suggests that things go wrong when this process gets interrupted: that, when this third term is withheld and the infant's natural and primordial "quest" for it gets denied, maturation will be disrupted. She suggests that the infant, like in Winnicott's account, will not be allowed to connect its drives with the outside world and will have them, objectless, kept

[92] Beardsworth, *Julia Kristeva*. Also, Kristeva, *Black Sun*.

[93] For Kristeva, this represents the earliest, preconscious and most basic "need" of the Self, its intrinsic belief in an external object and desire to invest itself in it, which can begin to open it up and enable a positive space for it to separate from its total absorption in the mother. For her, this external object first takes shape as the "imaginary" or "loving" father which provides the loving support that "gives meaning to what would be, without it, an unspeakable trauma" which is, like Winnicott's persecutory world, the excess affective experience that threatens to swamp the infant in the absence of love and support. Julia Kristeva, *This Incredible Need To Believe*, trans. Beverley Bie Brahic (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). She also writes that the loving father is the "life raft at the dawn of individuation" who "through his loving authority takes me from the engulfing container" of the mother. Ibid, 10.

lodged within its self and unable to become freed from inside its "narcissistic constriction."[94] Moreover, the infant, unable to locate something or someone positive outside of itself and its constricted relation to the world is, for Kristeva, passively abandoned to the undifferentiated maternal matrix or "chora" --- an environment that is inimical to the development of an individuated Self.

For Kristeva, as for Wallace, today's failures for this proper development to occur are the result of contemporary narcissistic culture, buttressed by its neoliberal and secular ideologies of the Self, the waning of authority and its correspondingly disengaged and consumerist worldviews.[95] These have kept the "loving father" from emerging and have barred the infant from properly moving beyond its anaclitic attachment to its mother, precluding it from locating an object, meaning or purpose (a "third-party") to identify with. In *Black Sun*, Kristeva repeatedly stresses that the cultural resources of contemporary society have failed to "insure a *compensating way out*" of this mute isolation and melancholia, and Beardsworth sums up Kristeva's central critical view by asserting that "narcissistic constriction is the foremost psychological symptom of the[se] failings of modern institutions and discourses to

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[94] Beardswoth notes, "the narcissistic constriction prevalent in western cultures is a matter, not only of the demise of the imaginary father, but of failings in separateness and connections with others that turn on the loss of loss." With "loss of loss" she refers to the lost ability to "lose" the mother and separate from her, which results in a melancholic attachment and the inability to connect with others, which depends on this originary loss. Beardsworth, *Julia Kristeva*, 96.

[95] She also writes, for instance, "The mirror and its narcissistic consolations seem to have replaced the encounter of beings and existence, as well as reverence for the peerless singular, in others and oneself" and that this "Nihilistic depression comes from the programmed decline of the singularity that is intelligence acting through love that slumbers within each of us. . ." Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 37, 41.

accommodate the [proper conditions for separation and]. . .connections with others."[96] These failures of contemporary life, which Wallace painstakingly exemplifies in his vision of O.N.A.N., deprive both the infant and the regressed infantile individual the opportunities to affectively connect to the world around her. They are what unambiguously stifle her desires to pursue something that can invite her to step outside of the "crib" and properly move out of the solipsistic "cage" and eventually proceed beyond her fixations to whatever basic mother-substitutes can satisfy her basic desires.

From here, if we situate Kristeva's thinking even more explicitly in relation to *Infinite Jest*, we can understand her critiques of contemporary society in the same terms as Wallace's. The current attitudes of contemporary culture have made it unprecedentedly difficult for the individual to form the vital bonds with the world around him, and this basic inability to connect with the world and others has led to the disconnection and intense experience of suffering, where the Self lacks anything outside of "the hot narrow imperatives of the Self" (IJ, 139) to direct his drives toward (something or someone to love, believe in, or deliver oneself over to).[97] Moreover, both clearly suggest that when we exist in the world in this infantile way, as

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[96] Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 10. Beardsworth, *Julia Kristeva*, 57. As Beardsworth also notes, Kristeva's work addresses how "Western cultures have typically failed the task of providing sites for making these transitions, and psychoanalysis encounters the outcome of this failure: the individual's struggle with the burden of reconnecting [his internal drives] and [culture, meaning] unaided by cultural resources. *Psychoanalysis is witness to the narcissistic constriction that shows up in these conditions: crises of love and self-orientation, and the weakening of the capacity for loss* [separation from the mother/the source of gratification]. These sites of suffering . . . simply overlooked in modern Western societies --- make up an unacknowledged suffering . . . each failing that Narcissus exhibits when he or she shows up in an infantile, regressive form . . ." Ibid, 116, emphasis mine.

[97] In *Tales of Love*, Kristeva writes "Without an object to love "Narcissus lives in another dimensions . . his anguish returns", and gets displaced. Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, 115-119. This should remind one of the

totally self-obsessed and only preoccupied with our own self-interest, we on the one hand deprive ourselves (and become deprived) of something essentially human and meaningful. On the other, we progressively lose the critical and independent faculties that can make us autonomous and mature human beings. Their critiques both aver that the extant narcissistic conditions of culture prevent these irreducibly human needs from finding positive expression, resulting in either their misappropriation by damaging self-destructive pursuits (drugs, violence, the thirst for power, xenophobia), or their consignment to a state of perpetual "objectless" unfulfillment (consumerism, passive entertainment, drugs once again). Wallace, for instance, writes that our obsession with television, though it could be just as easily replaced or accompanied by any other autoerotic pursuit, "begins to [altogether, stand in as a] substitute for something nourishing and needed, and the original genuine hunger [the drives, the human need to connect] --- less satisfied than bludgeoned --- subsides to a strange objectless unease. . .[underneath] some *strangely American, profoundly shallow, and eternally temporary reassurance*."[98] Importantly, both accounts stress that the world we find ourselves in today sustains and keeps in place this infantile and dependent relation to the world and continues to fail to accommodate the possibilities of connecting with the world or others --- and thus for *maturing*. Each points to how this disconnect can be seen in the increasingly rare forms of love and friendship (where one loves someone more than themselves, for Wallace), as well as

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loneliness that Wallace says, for instance, belongs to those who live without ever loving anything more than themselves. For Kristeva, this leads to the "introjection" of the mother/"maternal object" within the Self and this leads to its painful "reactivation" inside him and the Self "carrying" this object (mother) inside of it (as an unconscious attachment).

[98] Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction," 41.

in the erosion of religion, community, politics, and art as common forms of meaning one can sacrifice his individual self-interests to (for Kristeva). On the individual level, this leads to the "spiritual necrosis" or "death-in-life" Wallace understands in our solipsistic self-absorption and which Kristeva, in a noteworthy parallel, suggests represents the "death [that] lives a human life"and the "de-vitalization" of what makes us human.[99] Both Wallace and Kristeva, moreover, fear the potentially catastrophic effects for society. In this way, each remain especially wary about the accompanying ethical, political and socio-cultural troubles that issue from our currently atomized and spiritually desiccated experience of the world. Kristeva fears that it has led to the devolution into "dead-end secularized societies" which have "left the way clear for . . .violence and automation"[100] and *Infinite Jest*, once more, obviously gestures to the likelihood of a bleak collective fate with the apocalyptic threat of its fatal video cartridge.

Now that several of Wallace's critiques have been sufficiently explored in the novel, and the major theoretical underpinnings that informed them have been properly brought to the fore, we can turn to the concrete ways the novel imagines a possible response to them and to our current cultural situation. Wallace certainly did not take a nihilistic attitude to the problems of everyday life, nor did he believe in or advocate a kind of stoic resignation or hopelessness. On the contrary, as we will see in the following chapter, he passionately believed in the

[99] Kristeva writes "The psyche is one open system connected to another, and only under those conditions is it renewable. If it lives, your psyche is in love. If it is not in love, it is dead. 'Death lives a human life' Hegel said. This is true whenever we are not in love or in analysis." Kristeva, *Tales of Love,* 15.
[100] Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe,* 12.

possibilities for self-transformation and cultural change, and that these could, indeed, hold open the hope and real possibility for a kind of future salvation.

CHAPTER 4

Having outlined Wallace's critical diagnoses in the last chapter, we may now properly turn to the positive moral dimensions of *Infinite Jest* and, in particular, its views toward the possibilities for intervening and positively transforming our current forms of life. As the earlier account of Wallace's moral aims attempted to make clear, *Infinite Jest*'s critical dimensions work in a larger double gesture that ultimately place them in the service of his positive efforts to attend to and reverse-thrust the experiences of suffering they diagnose. Wallace's affirmative vision and narrative of redemption turn on these critical moments to mark the starting points from which we can discern possibilities of redemption and potential "ways out" of the cage of narcissism, the bars of the crib, and the spiritual coffin of death-in-life. Therefore, unlike several major interpretations of the novel, which narrowly view the infant in purely critical terms, my analysis instead examines the central affirmative gestures *Infinite Jest*'s use of it makes in its narrative of maturity and its attempts to imagine the possible kinds of redemptive labor able to salvage "what it means to be a fucking human being" today.

This redemptive vision is articulated primarily through the novel's AA narrative, which focuses on the struggles experienced by the addict in recovery and his attempts to refashion his life and overcome his addictions. In his personal life, Wallace was deeply fascinated by the apparent efficacy of AA and how it appeared to provide something able to rigorously

transform the lives of even the most ravaged and desperate "bottomed-out" addicts.[101] In particular, he was drawn to the ways AA seemed to provide both a logical and effective means for addicts to relinquish their formerly destructive, self-absorbed ways of life and, within the proper conditions, move beyond their enslaving attachments and the pain, isolation, and dependence they also brought. AA's compelling logic led him to explore its mechanics and the particular ways it worked over the mind of the addict. Moreover, it brought him to seriously consider how a number of important changes in the addict's surrounding conditions and a willingness to change could literally save and, in a word, *redeem* him from a lifestyle whose self-destructive pursuits swallowed and literally brought him to the brink of death.

Equally impressed by AA and its abilities to offer this kind of self-transformation, Wallace took it up in *Infinite Jest* and used it as a means of thinking about the broader possibilities of self-transformation for the similar kinds of attachments, addictions and obsessions that were becoming a dangerous part of our own everyday, increasingly self-absorbed existence. That is to say, *Infinite Jest* posits its understandings of sobriety and AA as offering an alternative kind of model for us to replace and *correct* the self-destructive and alienating lifestyle of our contemporary "culture of narcissism". The novel uses them to elaborate a therapeutic alternative for the suffering and loneliness our self-interested attitudes have brought about, and which have proven, for the addicts in the novel at least, to be utterly

[101] Miller, "The Salon Interview: David Foster Wallace." Several other recovery programs are present in the novel, including Narcotics Anonymous, Cocaine Anonymous, and so on. Though they are all formally similar and apply the same logic toward recovery, my analysis will follow Wallace and privilege AA.

devastating if not literally deadly. As Jon Baskin was right to note, AA stands in to offer a "cure" to our currently damaged "way of thinking."[102] If we return to the psychoanalytic context Wallace so heavily draws on, AA's therapeutic logic of recovery can be better read as proposing a way for the Self to work through its personal infantile attachments and overcome the psychic suffering that these relations and attitudes to the world cause. The following interpretation of the redemption narrative in AA thus will take the figure of the addict as a consummate expression of our contemporary narcissistic infantile relation to the world. It will explore how his own personal recovery and move to sobriety can be used as a general model for the larger options for self-transformation and positive growth (that is, maturity) beyond our own narcissistic suffering and similar, infantile experiences of "imprisonment."

This alternative, redemptive logic of recovery is thematized in *Infinite Jest* in two important ways, both of which explicitly continue to draw on and develop its psychoanalytic perspective.[103] The first, essentially re-stages the entire story of the Self's individuation and development from infancy. It offers, through the language of the addict's recovery (emergence as a new self) and eventual sobriety (maturity), a view of how the Self can be allowed to positively develop into a stable and mature identity if the proper supportive context is made

[102] Baskin, "Death Is Not the End."

[103] As my understanding of the AA narrative and Wallace's account of redemption thus remains steeped in the psychoanalytic account (which Wallace, notably, never diverges from), my analysis of the ways AA offers recovery for the addicts in the novel will continue to draw on its various theoretical assumptions as well. In particular, I will continue to view Wallace's positive attempts to "therapeutically" attend to the individual's suffering with AA in relation to Kristeva's theoretical approach, not only because her critiques are remarkably similar to his, but insofar as her understanding of treatment, proper maturity, and "connection" to the outside world also share a deep kinship with the heart of Wallace's affirmative moral project.

available and the appropriate conditions can coax him to mature. The second view offers a literal account of AA as staging a kind of practical and applied therapeutic intervention into the self-destructive and "bottomed-out" life of the addict, whose infantile self-absorption has brought him to the dire point where he either gets help to change or dies. In both cases, *Infinite Jest* explores how AA comes to offer this supportive context amid the barren and hostile surroundings of everyday life and, from here, positively transforms the various underlying conditions that can later encourage the Self to grow and allow for his proper recovery to unfold. As such, both of these narratives of recovery centrally explore how basic changes in the recovering addict's surroundings, together with the supportive reinforcement of others, can invite him to change his personal orientation to the world and ultimately open up the possibilities for personal renewal and maturity into a "less lonely" and redeemed life.

In a strange, haunting scene that takes place fairly late in the novel, Wallace offers a rather explicit parallel to connect AA's model of recovery with these broader prospects of maturing beyond our current infantile experience of the world, offering again a surreal, literalized vision of this process. At the height of his own struggle to give up marijuana, Hal leaves one night for a Narcotics Anonymous meeting, only to find out he was given wrong information and ends up as a result at a men's-help support group instead. Instead of finding himself among recovering, former addicts, he sits in on a meeting consisting of a number of lonely middle-aged men who each suffer from their own variation of a deep-seated and dysfunctional form of infantile passivity. As Hal quickly learns, the group is dedicated to offer

support for the wounded and neglected "Inner Infant" who, inside each of them, is "holding the bars of his crib" and crippling their lives (IJ, 802). Each member is there to positively attend to the others' "Inner Infants" and, by offering caring support and encouragement, tries to (re)create a surrogate, loving context for the original relationship the child has with its mother and father in its early psychic development.[104] The group's meetings are devoted to inviting each members' "Inner Infant" to come out of its tortuous passivity, to understand its "Mommy and Daddy" are "not coming", and that it can actively develop the self-love and confidence to climb out of its crib and independently "Meet those needs!" (IJ, 807). To Hal's bewilderment, as the meeting goes on, one of the men, the night's "speaker", begins physically enacting his infantile regression (clutching a teddy bear, lisping, and eventually crawling on all fours) as the remainder of the group starts chanting their love and support for him to embrace the world on his own.[105] The meeting, as bizarre and out of place as it may undeniably seem at first glance, interestingly represents one of the integral parts of the novel and should be understood in relation to the development of its underlying redemptive narrative of maturity, which I have been outlining. If we recall the earlier psychoanalytic account Wallace is informed by, it can specifically be read as a gesture to the ways we may begin to, in effect, make available and essentially re-create a functional transitional space for the "infant" inside us to eventually mature

[104] Each of the men are plagued by their inner infant, who is "looking out of the bars. . .crying for his Mommy and Daddy to come hold him and nurture him. . ." (IJ, 802).

[105] For instance, "By now various men in the group have started crying out to Kevin Bain that his Inner infant wasn't getting its needs met, that sitting there passively asking for nurture to get up and come to him wasn't getting the needs met, that Kevin owed it to his inner infant to come up with some sort of active way to meet the Infant's needs [for love and so on]. Somebody shouted out 'Honor that Infant! Somebody else called Meet Those Needs!'" (IJ, 802).

and enter the world properly as a Self.[106] For Wallace, AA ultimately "works" on its "newborn" and newly admitted members in precisely this way. It offers the conditions and proper space that, like the "Inner Infant" meetings or psychoanalytic therapy, is able to midwife the addict's passage toward recovery (the infantile passage to maturity) and create the positive conditions that can allow the Self to work through its narcissistic and infantile defenses (mother-substitutes and narcissistic self-obsession). In short, it comes to introduce for recovering addicts what Boston AA parlance calls a nurturing "In Here" in distinction to the nihilistic and toxic "Out There" of everyday life (IJ, 374).

My analysis will now attempt to reconstruct how *Infinite Jest* tells this story of maturity and redemption in AA, and will illustrate the difficult and fragile, yet still possible path to self-transformation it provides. To begin the story, it may be best to further reflect on Wallace's choice of addicts to represent the narcissistic "default setting" of everyday American life. Along with illustrating a culmination of our narcissistic self-absorption, it is also essential to note that the addict also, importantly, offers a clearer and more pronounced expression of the kinds of suffering that result from the isolation and pain these self-absorbed attitudes bring about. The addict has, indeed, as Wallace notes, "sort of bottomed out on the *Great American way of life*"[107] and it should be importantly noted that the addict's suffering seems

[106] In this sense, the meeting can be understood as (re)creating a therapeutic setting to positively restage the individual's psychic conflicts in order to, amid the appropriate supports and conditions, eventually work through and move beyond them (operating on the important psychoanalytic understandings of transference and "abreaction", which suggest that the Self can re-awaken buried traumas within positive settings --- e.g. analysis --- in order to master and overcome them).
[107] Strasser, "*Unwholesome Entertainment:* Interview With David Foster Wallace," emphasis mine.

to realize the potential destructiveness that our personal narcissistic lifestyles similarly imply. In this sense, the "bottomed out" addict in the novel starkly represents the tragic fate of the unbridled contemporary American lifestyle, offering a morbid object lesson in the very real dangers that a life delivered over to, and submerged within, self-gratification holds. Yet, at the same time, the addict's realization of this fate is also what makes him such a unique and pivotal figure. His tragic end also, as I have mentioned, possesses a fundamentally positive dimension --- one that, if the downward spiral of addiction does not lead to his death ("spiritual" or actual), brings him to inescapably confront the immediate prospects of real recovery and self-transformation. Wallace makes it expressly clear in the novel that the truly "bottomed-out" addict who enters recovery is one who has been so savagely damaged by the destruction her life has wrought, that she is at an endpoint where her only remaining options are literally to die or to enter recovery and work as hard as she can to survive.[108] In contrast to the oblivious and unself-conscious narcissist, the "bottomed-out" addict is so vital to Wallace because his totally self-absorbed life has caught up with him and the sheer violence incurred by his "bottoming out" causes him to separate and, if it does not kill him, inaugurates his self-consciousness and recovery.[109] Put differently, as it is more commonly understood in the context of AA, it is by

[108] The addict arrives in "serious trouble, because this Substance you thought was your one true friend, that you gave up all for, gladly. . .You see now that It's your enemy and your worst personal nightmare and the trouble It's gotten you into is undeniable and you still can't stop. . .You are, as they say, Finished. . . You are behind bars; you are in a cage and can see only bars in every direction. You are in the kind of a hell of a mess that either ends lives or turns them around. You are at a fork in the road that Boston AA calls your Bottom, though the term is misleading, because everybody here agrees it's more like someplace very high and unsupported: you're on the edge of something tall and leaning way out forward. . ." (IJ, 347).

[109] As an aside, Wallace's use of this experience of "bottoming out" also implicitly expresses one of the novel's major critiques which asserts that we are currently so self-absorbed and oblivious that we appear

hitting bottom that the addict becomes finally "conscious" and self-aware of his life (the full and painful consequences of it), and therefore motivated to begin to change his ways. In this regard, consistent with the specific submergence/self-awareness trope that Wallace works with throughout the novel, it is worth stressing that the final binge which sends its protagonist Don Gately into recovery, ends with him waking up (coming to consciousness) on the shore of the Atlantic Ocean, literally beached and as if spat up from the earlier submersion and unconsciousness his total "womb-like" high had held him in (IJ, 980-1).

This experience of "bottoming out" thus represents an essential moment because it is what, in a number of ways, sets the story of recovery and redemption properly in motion. Though some have interpreted it along the lines of a "death/rebirth" cycle, if we continue with the psychoanalytic account and attend to several suggestive details in Wallace's depictions of the final "bottoms" several characters experience in the novel, we can instead get a proper and more developed understanding of his view of recovery and redemption *as* maturity and AA as specifically offering the conditions and context that can, indeed, allow the Self to achieve it and grow.[110] In particular, several key details and this consciousness/unconsciousness dualism, signal that "bottoming out" is a formative moment of maturity for the addict that, unlike

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to require a violent and disastrous force to separate us from our closed-off and unconscious worlds in order to arrive at a point where we can begin to seriously reevaluate our current lifestyles and priorities. The absorbed addict should, too, also naturally evoke the "fish in water" imagery consistent in the novel.

[110] Boswell, "Too Much Fun For Anyone Mortal to Hope to Endure." Boswell also notes Lacan here, but he interprets the "overdoses" in the novel in line with the "death/Mother cosmology" Wallace in a self-consciously tongue in cheek way himself alludes to throughout the novel. This provides an interesting alternate reading of "bottoming out" and entering recovery (the "death" of the addict and "rebirth" of the sober Self), though death/rebirth can also, figuratively apply to the "death" of the preconscious infantile life with the "birth" of the conscious and awake Subject/"I".

metaphors of death/rebirth, is supposed to represent his transition from full-on addiction (dependence and unselfconscious) into a "new" conscious (self-aware) and tentatively independent one. As Wallace's critiques made clear, the addict (and today's self-interested narcissist, by extension) exists in an essentially womblike and early newborn stage, and it is with the violent "bottoming out" that the most tragically self-destructive reach a moment that separates them from this relationship and initiates their turn to sobriety. If we return to psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's "mirror-stage" or Freud's "primal psychic situation" we may be reminded of how the infant's early development involves a similar essential moment in which it transitions from its preconscious symbiotic relation to the mother (full submergence and satisfaction) and similarly matures into a state of consciousness and identity as an individual Self/"I". In this moment, the infant "sees its reflection" and, in doing so, "recognizes" itself and assumes this new identity and relation to the world as its own in the process. If we follow Lacan's mirror-stage and look at the conspicuous role mirrors play in both Gately and Joelle's respective "bottoms", it becomes fairly apparent what Wallace wants to suggest by staging their awakening to sobriety in the same way the Self passes from self-absorbed infancy into conscious independence as an "I". In the moments leading up to Joelle's overdose, her reflection in her friend Molly's bathroom mirror is involved at various points to foreshadow the ultimate moment when her suicidal cocaine overdose hits its peak: where, mustering the strength for what is to be her last voluntary act before blacking out and waking up in an emergency room, she struggles to pull herself out of Molly's bathtub, to "pul[l]her face up to

face the unclean medicine-cabinet mirror" (IJ, 240) and catch a glimpse of her reflection. Similarly, at the peak of his already incredible final binge, "the last thing Gately saw was an Oriental bearing down with the held square [mirror] and he looked into the square and saw clearly a reflection of his own big square pale head with its eyes closing as the floor finally pounced." (IJ, 981), from which he is to later awake, as already mentioned, shored up on the coast from the tide of the Atlantic. In each example, mirrors make their decisive appearance at the very climax of the high that ends in their respective entrance to recovery. These carefully plotted moments in the novel represent the precise transitions that Gately and Joelle make from their "preconscious" immersion in their Self and self-gratification toward a conscious identity that has been released from its submergence and dependencies into tentative autonomy.[111]

Importantly then, both Joelle and Gately, as well as the other recovering addicts in the novel, find themselves, post-"bottom", immediately enrolled in a halfway house and within respective recovery programs. AA, as such, is there at the very beginning for the addict, in her extremely vulnerable state of early withdrawal, to protect her from either losing her mind, immediately relapsing, or simply dying in withdrawal's painful throes. If we are to read AA as offering the different, positive conditions and resources in which the Self's recovery/maturity can unfold --- in effect, creating a "transitional space" --- it is essential to note the immediacy

[111] The imagery that suggests that each of them are proceeding from an infantile experience into a self-conscious one is also importantly underscored by the water/womb imagery used in each example, where we have Joelle raising herself out of a bathtub before seeing her reflection, and Gately being washed up by the Atlantic shortly after. Also, consider Kate Gompert's overdose which, I have already noted, left her lying " fetal . . ." and "on the floor flushed red and all wet like when I was a newborn. . ." (IJ, 71).

with which it enters onto the scene for its "newborn" recovering addicts (IJ, 71), and to highlight the vital role it plays at this decisive moment. As we have seen in the infant's development, once it finds itself secure in its new supportive environment, it may be properly nurtured and eventually encouraged to "come out of itself" and begin its process of growth. AA comes to its defenseless "newborn" recovering addicts to offer precisely this kind of support. At this helpless stage, it aims to preserve their urges to eventually recover (survive, end their suffering, become sober) and allow them to eventually acquire the perspective, confidence and will necessary to commit to the difficult paths recovery holds open.

Ennet House is this primary "In Here" and AA support context for the novel's recovering addicts. It is the halfway house which mediates this essential transition and where the novel's recovering addicts enter immediately after giving up their Substance and, in principle, are allowed to stay until they are capable of (re)entering and becoming reintegrated into society on their own. The house works by enforcing its own particular system of rules, which it demands its residents all abide by. These new regulations, together with the various guidelines, wisdom and perspective that AA's Steps, catchphrases and philosophy offer, represent the different constellation of values and background conditions that form the alternative logic and positive space inside which recovery/maturity can be successfully initiated. The implementation of these new, alternate rules and guidelines seek to radically transform the background environment that the recovering addict suddenly finds himself within. Through the new relation to the world and subjective orientation it enables for its recovering addicts, Ennet

House aims to correspondingly transform the poisonous attitudes and relations that its recovering addicts had known and been formerly held by for so long. In effect, they bring into being a system of rules and surroundings for the recovering addict, which carefully conform, more or less, to the exact opposite of the conditions and views of the destructive "Out There" that had brought her to AA in the first place.[112]

In the novel, Ennet House is also significant in that it takes in all kinds of residents, and its motley crew of recovering addicts of all assorted stripes and colours, importantly highlight the totally egalitarian and non-exclusionary vision this model of AA holds toward the possibilities of recovery. Moreover, it also underscores Wallace's own positive views that anyone, despite the wretchedness or perceived intractability of their suffering is still capable of discovering the possibilities for redemption. It implies that these general opportunities for positive self-transformation lie not in breaking into some inaccessible sphere of psychic trauma or through something like total social revolution, but rather in undertaking a number of key changes in the basic surroundings, personal attitudes and relationships that our suffering lives are informed and organized by. Ennet House was thus founded on the principal belief its legendary anonymous founder held, that *anyone* "no matter how broad the trail of slime they dragged in behind them, deserve[s] the same chance at sobriety" (IJ, 138) and that even the most hopeless cases remain viable candidates for change inside the proper conditions. What this founding principle makes apparent is one of the other, most important features of recovery

[112] For instance, the novel depicts AA as: "this unromantic, unhip, clichéd . . .thing --- so unlikely and unpromising, so much the *inverse*" of what they'd come to be (IJ 350).

and AA, which asserts that although sobriety may be a "gift", it is by no means guaranteed nor can it be achieved passively or through the desire to get better alone. Recovery, like subjective maturity, is only a possibility and personal growth remains something to be properly attained and actualized amid the proper surroundings and supports. Furthermore, the path always remains tenuous at best, constantly menaced by possibilities of relapse and various other dangers.[113] Recovery is thus similarly contingent on the active relation between the environment and the Self, and relies on the Self's positive engagement and ability to stay on track within these new conditions. This long and arduous road to recovery (maturity) is dramatized especially poignantly in *Infinite Jest*'s ending as we will see, and draws attention to the tremendous demands that the ongoing struggle and sacrifices involved in recovery entail. As the novel puts it, for AA to effectively "work" on the recovering addict in his early, vulnerable stages, he must carefully remain faithful to its guidelines and actively participate within it, staying vigilant to his efforts and each step forward he takes, always mindful of AA's infamous motto: "Progress Not Perfection."[114]

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[113] As such, *Infinite Jest* makes clear that AA does not by any means offer a miracle cure but, rather, provides the supportive context and offers the appropriate conditions that can begin to make the possibility of recovery available for the addict. Wallace's views towards transforming our own lives and redeeming our loneliness, similarly have it, by extension, that incredible amounts of mental and emotional work (sacrifice, vulnerability, and so on) are required in order for it to even become possible in the first place.

[114] This should also evoke the important point that, for Wallace, sobriety (maturity) also represents something not simply attained and forever enjoyed, but something that demands a continual effort to hold on to and uphold. For instance, the older and long sober members of Gately's AA group "invite Gately to see the coincidence of long-term contented sobriety and rabidly tireless AA Activity as not a coincidence at all." (IJ, 355).

At this point, at the very beginning of recovery, like the infant in Winnicott's account of its earliest stages, the "newborn" recovering addict must be adequately primed in its new surroundings to take its very first steps toward sobriety and undertake proper development. The first thing AA thus proposes, banal and obvious as it may seem, is that the addict must truly desire his own recovery and possess a total willingness to work toward it. What is important is that, in the novel's account, this desire manifest in a form of utterly total self-surrender" and come from a desire to change so absolute that the addict be ready to admit his powerlessness and submit himself over to the authority of AA and its logic (IJ, 359-351).[115] Though it is never made explicit in the novel, the essential Christian and spiritual underpinnings of AA's philosophy are important to note in relation to Wallace's vision of redemption which attempts to reappropriate and reimagine classic Christian understandings of salvation and grace. In this "self-surrender" of the recovering addict to the "benevolent authority" of AA, it thus asks for the outright sacrifice of his "will" as well as the release of the former (private, self-interested) attitudes he formerly held during his past life of active addiction. *Infinite Jest*'s AA teaches its recovering addicts that, like our narcissistic self-absorption, the "disease" is located in the mind and it cautions them that, moreover, once it "makes its command headquarters" there, it will come to dominate the addict's thinking from there on --- as one of Boston AA's most telling mantras simply suggests: "my best thinking got me here" (IJ, 1026: fn 145). In the novel, it becomes clear that this not only represents initially the most important thing for

[115] This, in Boston AA speak, is "The Gift of Desperation [where the addict is] willing to go to any excruciating lengths to stay straight" (IJ, 353).

recovery to occur, but that this sacrifice (of the "diseased" or "sick" will to AA (IJ, 357)) is an absolutely unconditional and necessary step to be taken.[116] AA emphasizes that recovery cannot be carried out independently and that it certainly cannot be achieved through the efforts of one's own "diseased" will. These latter attempts, Wallace suggests, prove only to be a recipe for disaster and lead inevitably to further ruin, as they preserve fully intact in the addict's mind the core of the excessively narcissistic thinking that had brought her into AA in the first place. As we will see, for Wallace, this ends up keeping the addict or narcissist dependent and inward, closing off her possibilities to achieve connection and openness, which the efforts to successfully give up drugs, retain sobriety and reclaim independence all crucially rely on.

Unsurprisingly, this first major act of self-sacrifice proves to be one of the most difficult things for recovering addicts to do. In O.N.A.N.'s incredibly narcissistic world, the general failure to show "the great personal courage to let yourself appear weak" (IJ, 204) and forfeit this personal mindset is unsurprisingly, for the most part, the underlying source of the frequent relapses and failures which recovering addicts frequently experience. AA instructs its members that "most Substance-addicted people are also addicted to thinking, meaning they have a compulsive and unhealthy relationship with their own thinking. . .[and] that 99% of compulsive thinkers' thinking is about themselves." (IJ, 203). The object of AA, thus is to help the addict disengage himself from the more pernicious aspects of narcissism, and to move beyond it to

[116] As Wallace notes of its importance for any hope for recovery, "Though it can't be conventionally enforced, this, Boston AA's real root axiom, is almost classically authoritarian . .." and ultimately must be followed for real recovery to occur (IJ, 374).

discover a willingness and resources with which to carry on living without a compulsively self-oriented attitude to the world. The recently sober Gately rapidly snaps to this fact and, knowing full-well the pathological narcissism and self-absorption the addict's mind possesses, watches as one new AA member after the other stubbornly cleaves to their former diseased way of relating to the world and dooms their hopes for recovery. For instance, still fresh in his stint at AA, Gately has "already watched dozens come through here and leave early and go back Out There and then go to jail or die" (IJ, 273).[117] In fact, Gately comes quickly to recognize that, for those who refuse to give up their "illusion of autonomy", admit vulnerability and forfeit their perceived control over the world, "[they] end up kicking [*themselves*] out. . ." (IJ, 357):

> these cocky [arrogant, narcissistic] new guys drift back Out There. . .to drinking 24/7/365, to not-living, behind bars, undead, back in the Disease's cage all over again. The Crocodiles [Gately's AA group] talk about how they can't count the number of guys that've Come In for a while and drifted away and gone back Out There and died, or not gotten to die. (IJ, 355).

In other words, what Wallace wants to make abundantly clear is that at the very beginning, Boston AA and its programme of recovery is "very sensitive to the presence of ego" (IJ, 367). He makes it an essential point that, for its truly "bottomed" members, it is only with this last barrier properly broken down that the obstacles to recovery can be finally cleared and allow for it to proceed. We see this in the novel, for instance, with the former crack addict who gave birth to the disfigured stillborn child, who, finally coming to terms with her life,

[117] These are the stubborn addicts in the novel, whom many of their fellow addicts speculate have not yet been "fortunate" enough to have reached the utter desolation of their "bottom" and truly face the need to change. Like the lonely and infantile narcissists of O.N.A.N., they remain consigned to the chemically and narcissistically enslaving death-in-life and circular pain of addiction, dependence and isolation that is basically guaranteed by their continued narcissism and continued abuse.

accepts responsibility and admits her weaknesses and willingness to go any length to recover. She is, crucially, presented at this stage as "*truly new, ready*: all her [narcissistic] defenses have been burned away. Smooth-skinned and steadily pinker, at the podium, her eyes squeezed tight, she looks like she's the one that's the infant" (IJ, 378, emphasis mine), who is ready to properly *mature*, be attended to and allowed to undertake the early efforts toward growth, a "new" life and redemption.

Once this stage has been met, the next thing AA actively does is to systematically break down and clear away as best it can any traces of these former narcissistic attitudes. Or, put differently, Wallace's AA makes it clear that recovery (redemption) begins with the destruction and purging of the remnants of the mindset that had brought upon its suffering --- the "diseased" overly narcissistic, self-gratifying, entitled, appetitive, and individualistic way of thinking that had formed the bars of the crib, the cage of addiction, and the constriction of narcissism alike. At one point midway through the novel, Gately significantly refers to this crucial process as a kind of "deprogramming" (IJ, 369). Musing on the apparent form that this aspect of recovery takes, in contrast to popular perceptions of AA as "brainwashing", Gately offers a particularly revealing insight into how recovery actually works. For one, his view implies that instead of inculcating and duping its members into believing and merely parroting what it tells them, AA initially carries out an opposite function. It actually *undoes* the problematic and dangerous self-interested ways of thinking --- the ones which, in reality, have proven (for the addicts in the novel at least) to be the dogmatic and utterly enslaving ones.

Secondly, this understanding also, in effect, posits that, far from being natural, intrinsically rational or fixed in our minds, the excessive self-interested attitudes (and their destructive consequences) are to a major degree the result of a kind of "programming". One that, moreover, prescribes certain relations to the world and orchestrates our behaviour and dispositions within it in particular, interested ways (i.e., as we have seen, in the earlier analysis of the historical context in the ways our "Culture of Narcissism" and current neoliberal ideologies have come to "program" our psychic needs of satisfaction and understandings in certain ways).

In this way, AA importantly begins its "deprogramming" by teaching its members that their problems are neither as isolated nor as exceptional as they like to think. It aims to make perfectly clear to each individual addict how "completely nonunique and unalone they were" (IJ, 503) in their suffering, addiction and progressive descent, and it seeks to unseat the narcissistic assumptions and the inner hold they have on the Self --- that is, to undermine the false "classic addict's claim of special uniqueness" and the "secret unspoken belief that way deep down they are different from everyone else" (IJ, 475, 205). In doing so, it takes aim at the casual arrogance, callous selfishness and basic obliviousness to the rest of the world that had been the hallmarks of their addicted (infantile) personality. It tries to replace them by inviting the addict to find a positive and healthy space to sacrifice these deeply narcissistic attitudes and to adopt, in their place, the old-fashioned, tried and true AA values of "patience, tolerance, self-discipline, restraint" and compassion which the indulgent "Culture of

Narcissism" had left little to no room for (IJ, 271).[118] Most importantly, what occurs in this process, as the recovering addict begins to feel less unique and progressively gives up his special claims and sense of entitlement, is that he begins to turn away from his Self and open toward others. This withdrawal from the Self has the recovering addict beginning to properly apprehend otherness and, in a more sensitive and attentive fashion, recognize and identify with his fellow recovering addicts and the common and identical experiences of pain they share with him. For example, Gately admits that when he first attended AA meetings,

> "for like the first sixty days or so I couldn't hear shit. I didn't hear nothing. I'd just sit there and Compare, I'd go to myself, like, 'I never rolled a car,' '*I* never lost a wife' . . . Gene would tell me to just keep coming for a while and [as AA continues "deprogramming"] sooner or later I'd start to be able to both listen and hear . . . after a while I started to really *hear*. It turns out --- and this is just for me, maybe — but it turned out hearing the speaker means like all of a sudden hearing how fucking similar the way he felt and the way I felt were, Out There, at the Bottom, before we each Came In" (IJ, 365).

After Gately sacrifices this distancing, comparing and isolated "*I*", he finds experiences of vulnerability and pain that he can immediately identify with, understand and, most importantly, *share*. Through this experience of identification, a revelatory and deeply powerful unifying force emerges, one that, from its shared basis in empathy and common experience, gives rise to the formation of strong common bonds and the beginnings of commonly felt desires to get better. These are the "nourishing, redeeming" experiences of being "less alone inside" that Wallace clarified were the basic forces that could begin to countenance the

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[118] As earlier mentioned, *Infinite Jest* makes a point of noting that it is no coincidence that one of the most immediate markers of long-term sobriety and an improved quality of life among recovered addicts is the immediate result of the outright reversal of their former attitudes. This is testified to by the long-sober members continued willingness "to be so disgustingly humble, kind, helpful, tactful, cheerful, nonjudgmental, tidy, energetic, sanguine, modest, generous, fair, orderly" and so on, that not even a lingering resemblance to their former suffering addicted Selves and infantile, narcissistic dispositions remain intact (IJ, 357).

isolation and suffering we experience, and what can form the basis for an empathetic and sensitive worldview and mature, empathetic relationships. In the novel, he expresses how this experience of existential nourishment unfolds, noting:

> The newcomers who abandon common sense [the "default setting" of an atomized self-interested narcissism] and resolve to Hang In and keep coming and then find their cages all of a sudden open, mysteriously, after a while, [they] share this sense of deep shock. . .And so this unites them, nervously, this tentative assemblage of possible glimmers of something like hope (IJ, 350).[119]

In AA meetings, the "initial hopelessness unites every soul in [its] broad, cold salad bar'd hall. . ." (IJ, 349). This "deep shock" brings its members closer together, encouraging them to open themselves up and to ground what has become their *new* sober identities around their newly recognized common bonds, shared experiences and identical desires to recover together. This essential experience is also highlighted in another of the novel's more interesting points of intersection between the AA and tennis narrative, where Hal offers a similar reflection on the rare moments of genuine togetherness inside the lonely, narcissistic and competitive environment of the tennis academy. After a rough set of drills, he discusses with younger students how the competition, fatigue and non-stop pressures they endure may be understood to be, in spite of their physical and emotional tolls, a deeply powerful and unifying force. For Hal, their ability to share and collectively give voice to their common experiences of suffering

[119] Moreover, "this, at root, is what unites Boston AA: it turns out this same resigned, miserable, brainwash-and-exploit-me-if-that's-what-it-takes-type desperation has been the jumping off place for just about every AA you meet, it emerges, once you've actually gotten it up to stop darting in and out of the big meetings and start walking up with your wet hand out and trying to actually personally meet some Boston AA's" (IJ, 349).

and fatigue is a means of overcoming their loneliness *together*, proving similarly to be a moving and redemptive experience:

> "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. . .So how can we also be together? How can we be friends?. . . notice the instant group-cohesion that formed itself around all the pissing and moaning down there why don't you. . .The suffering unites us. They want to let us sit around and bitch. Together. After a bad PM 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. . .we get together and bitch, all of a sudden we're giving something group expression. A community voice. Community . . ." (IJ, 113-14).

In both scenarios, the Self is able to move beyond her isolated and private experience of suffering and is given "the gift" of being able to, through the power of mutual recognition and identification, recognize her experience of pain and desperation as no longer exclusively personal or secret. This, as Hal suggests, is healing and positive and lets the Self better identify and name her pain, make it manageable and, most of all, discover an empowering source of support and hope, among others, to overcome it.

This shared experience, for Wallace, lets the recovering addict, for one, feel less alone inside and begin to ameliorate his experience of isolation. Secondly, it is also the source of what Wallace understands to be the profoundly revitalizing experiences that derive from connection and a sense of belongingness. The recovering addict discovers that without the former psychic impediments to connection (narcissism) and his unconscious fixations (on his own gratification, security, etc.), his formerly lodged drives and innate desires for connection get set free and are allowed to find positive sites of identification --- ones that can recuperate and productively pick them back up. This kind of positive identification is intuitive and it comes

naturally to the Self who has moved beyond his unconscious obstacles and has begun to open and turn herself toward others. This is something that Wallace wants to make clear, and he depicts it with *Infinite Jest*'s successfully recovering addicts, who crave these connections and typically form these basic identifications and new relationships easily, "without trying" (IJ, 354).[120] The incredible salutary force of these experiences may moreover, clarify why, for instance, all AA meetings in the novel are inviting and inclusive and are all mainly "speaker meetings" consisting of recovering addicts listening to one another share their experiences and welcoming others to do the same.[121] They consist of unembellished stories of pain and misery, frustration and anger, as well as earnest admissions of the newfound strength and hope they are beginning to find in AA. Notably, the meetings encourage speakers to completely remove the "I" behind the story (IJ, 365) and maximize the opportunities for their listeners to empathize and identify with their experiences and, in return, reciprocate with their own. These provide the empowering and positive experiences from which the addict comes to learn that, "this goofy slapdash anarchic system of low-rent gatherings and corny slogans and saccharin grins and hideous coffee . . .[actually] turns out to be the very loyal friend he thought he'd had and

[120] As the addict's identification and basic empathy, once the special claim to "uniqueness" is gone, essentially "isn't very hard to do, here. Because if you sit up front and listen hard, all the speakers' stories of decline and fall and surrender are basically alike, and you're your own" (IJ, 354).

[121] For instance, "almost all Boston Groups' meetings are speaker meetings. That means that at the meetings there are recovering alcoholic speakers who stand up in front of everybody at an amplified podium and share their experience, strength, and hope." Furthermore, "Everybody in the audience is aiming for total empathy with the speaker; that way they'll be able to receive the AA message he's here to carry" (IJ, 343-4).

then lost" (IJ, 350). In this way, AA's togetherness and mutual reinforcement become the secret source of the support and love

that enable the addict to leave his addictions behind and develop the personal strength to get sober and go back, recovered, "Out There".[122]

If we return for the moment to Kristeva and her understandings of individual suffering (as disconnection), it is worth stressing that her positive and therapeutic account asserts precisely how these same experiences of common identification, positive support and connectedness can in fact be redeeming --- that they can offer, for her, a kind of "compensatory way out" for one's isolated suffering.[123] For her, these enable the individual to successfully "mourn" the loss of the mother (as represented in *Infinite Jest* with the addict's overcoming the loss of drugs) and begin to discover, among other things, new means of communicating pain, connecting to the world, and reconciling with positive external sites of identification (her "imaginary father", for instance).[124] She writes, for instance, of the possibilities of the "miraculous. . .mutation" that the suffering individual may realize in this discovery of a "new amatory world",[125] or through the formation of a "connected open-system" (which we can see exemplified in AA). This is what provides for the opportunities of

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[122] Once arriving at this point of recovery and having begun to develop this new self, for Gately, "Going back to ingesting Substances had become his biggest fear. . . this is a major psychic turn-around. He tells the newer residents . . .he'll now go to literally Any Lengths to stay clean." (IJ, 463).
[123] Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 10.
[124] This, for her, is what can help to re-route the formerly vexed inner life whose disassociation is the underlying cause of the Self's suffering and release its drives into affirmative channels. See Kristeva, *Black Sun* and Kristeva, *Tales of Love*.
[125] Ibid, 207, 259.

maturity and can rework and rehabilitate "on a higher [more mature] level. . .the [formerly infantile] relationship of the I with the Other".[126] For her, we can begin to re-emerge in the world on newer and more stable grounds and have an experience of "renewal, our *rebirth*" and reconstitute our Selves and overcome our suffering through the formation of new positive and supportive bonds with others.[127] In doing so, we may restore confidence and faith in the Self's capacities for self and interpersonal love and later stoke the "psychic renewal, intellectual innovation, and even physical change"[128] that can ultimately lead toward treatment, maturity and a "redeemed" experience.

As the recovering addict embraces these new, nourishing opportunities to open to the experience of identification and support (however clichéd or sentimental or risky they may have seemed to them) and finds the new strength they provides, she becomes equipped to take the next necessary step toward forging an independent, sober/mature identity. This next necessary phase also requires another major change in the Self's relation to the world. It is one AA also unconditionally affirms for recovery to properly occur, and which Wallace and Kristeva both adamantly assert is an essential component for any meaningful and lasting form of maturity, "survival" and redemption to be attained for us today. This change lies in our experience of *faith* and in overturning the contemporary, congenital lack of belief in something outside of the Self. For Wallace and Kristeva what needs to be rehabilitated and properly treated is our

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[126] Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, 15-16.
[127] In fact, therapy in general for Kristeva is supposed to work through the narcissistic attachments, inabilities to overcome the loss of the mother, and the various other barriers to connection. Ibid.
[128] Julia Kristeva, *In the Beginning Was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Columbia University Press: New York, 1987), 5.

intrinsic need to "deliver ourselves over to something" as Wallace put it. We need to redirect this misappropriated need from our own personal gratification and self-interest and discover something positive and capable of offering external support and meaning, to pull us out from our self-interested and closed off world. This decisive subjective transformation is carried out in a number of ways through AA and is explicitly stressed by two of its twelve steps, which ask recovering addicts to believe in a Higher Power that can "restore us to sanity" and then to consciously surrender to it.[129] Both Wallace and Kristeva assert that belief belongs to the core nature of human experience and is an integral part of a psychically healthy relation to the world. Wallace, for instance, claims rather unambiguously that belief is one of the things that distinguishes us from "a *dead man*" and is what can help to recover us from the spiritual "death-in-life" of a totally self-absorbed existence, or from what Kristeva sees as the "sullen atheism" of our lonely "narcissistic constriction."[130] This notion of unbelief should not be strictly understood in traditionally religious terms. For Wallace, belief implies something far more general --- "believing in something bigger than you is not a choice. You either do or you're a

[129] The second and third steps of AA are, respectively: to believe in a Power greater than ourselves "to restore us to sanity"; and to consciously turn one's will and lives over to the care of "God as we understood him". Alcoholics Anonymous, "The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous," *Service Material From the General Service Office*. (AA World Services Inc.) May 9, 2002. Accessed June 11, 2010. www.aa.orglang/en/en_pdfs/smf-121_en.pdf.

[130] Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 5, and Strasser, " *Unwholesome Entertainment:* Interview With David Foster Wallace." In Wallace's terms, this addresses our basic and irreducibly human and spiritual will to "give ourselves away" or Kristeva's "incredible need to believe" and bind ourselves to something in the world. Wallace and Kristeva alike both assert that it is something that belongs to the Self even from its earliest infancy as a basic and intuitive human "understanding" that there is something to which the Self can submit its immediate Self to and direct itself over towards. As Wallace has Hal muse in *Infinite Jest* "American experience seems to suggest that people are virtually unlimited in their need to give themselves away, on various levels." (IJ,53). Also, Cf. Kristeva, *This Incredible Need To Believe*.

walking dead man, just going through the motions. . .I absolutely believe in something, even though I don't know what it is . . ."[131] What was so problematic for him (and represented the core of our spiritual ills) was that the major objects of belief in contemporary America had collapsed into little more than self-worship, the desire for pleasure, success, money, entertainment, and so on. This is what led him to view American life as spiritually pubescent, and served as the basis for his conviction that, in order to address our experience of suffering, we must begin to believe again in something that exists beyond and outside of the immediate purview of Self: whether this be an Other, some meaningful end or object, or a Higher Power. The mark of difficult but real maturity, for Wallace, as he mentions elsewhere is this ability to consciously deliver oneself over to something that, unlike our dominant objects of worship (pleasure, money, power, intelligence, and beauty) will not "eat you alive."[132] Thus, what are essential for recovery/maturity among the recovering addicts in *Infinite Jest* (and gets carried out via AA's programme) is the recuperation of this ability to believe, and the positive and active practice of self-submission to a positive transcendent "Power" that exists beyond the immediate sphere of the Self and self- gratification. AA makes it clear that recovery and a transition from constricted self-absorption and dependency relies on this ability to find meaning and support outside of the Self; something to, as it were, pull the recovering addict out of her Self and allow her to open and submit her will, immediate personal interests and compulsions

[131] Ibid. In *This Is Water* he also says "there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship." Wallace, *This Is Water*, 98-101.
[132] Ibid, 90.

to it.[133] *Infinite Jest* thus posits AA as something capable of successfully restoring this bludgeoned possibility for belief and self-sacrifice, and its community serves to encourage the addict to take the active risks of opening himself up and trustingly taking a leap of faith to submit to a positively construed "Higher Power" for the support, sustenance, and direction it can provide.[134] As such, one of AA's "major selling points" is that "you get to choose your own God. You get to make up your own understanding of God or a Higher Power or Whom-/Whatever" (IJ, 443) to deliver yourself over to. Significantly, this ability to "choose what you give yourself away to", represents, for many, a profound and revitalizing source of relief and freedom, as it singlehandedly rehabilitates the notion of belief for them and is thus capable of resuscitating the long mutilated or ignored needs to believe they had disavowed and carried hidden within them.[135] Wallace makes it evident that this kind of submission and affirmation of faith in a "Higher Power" is something that is tremendously liberating, stabilizing, and above all, vitally redeeming for the disbelieving and "sick" Self and his experience of suffering. It gets

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[133] The sentiment is notably echoed in the other narratives in the text by both of the major voices of critique in the novel, German coach Schtitt and Quebecois terrorist Marathe. Schtitt instructs his budding students that belief and devotion to an external meaning is the key to developing as an athlete and overcoming American narcissistic obsessions of instant gratification (IJ, 83). Marathe, critiquing American ideology, similarly notes that without something external to guide or provide meaning that, "in such a case your temple is self and sentiment. . . you are a fanatic of desire, a slave to your individual subjective narrow self's sentiments; a citizen of nothing. You are by yourself and alone, kneeling to yourself. . . the slave who believes he is free. The most pathetic of bondage. . ." (IJ, 108).

[134] In fact, to return to the developmental account of the infant's maturity, Wallace's account can be said as taking AA's "God as we understand him" to play precisely the same role for the recovering addict overcoming his dependence precisely as Kristeva's "loving father" plays in the infant's earliest moments as it prepares to separate from the Mother, connect to the outside world, and later mature in a stable fashion.

[135] For example, in the novel, many addicts discover a "Loving, Forgiving, Nurturing-Type God" in AA, replacing the punitive and stern understanding they were raised with (IJ, 443), and others are allowed to positively refashion their "Higher Power" in other constructive ways to help regain the positive tincture of spirituality in their lives.

testified to by Gately, who, despite a rough first few weeks of skepticism toward the idea of a "Higher Power", found that, because he remained active and "minimally open and willing to persistently ask [it] to remove the agonizing desire", eventually this desire to take drugs "mysteriously, magically" disappeared until "weeks went by . . .and he still didn't feel anything like his old need to get high. He was, in a way, *Free*. It was the first time he'd been out of this kind of mental cage since he was maybe ten." (IJ, 466-8).

At this point, drawing on the strength and support from his fellow recovering addicts and guided by his "Higher Power" and the benign authority of AA, the addict has undergone the elementary stages of self-transfiguration. He has been "freed him from his cage" and brought to the point where he is able to (re)enter the world (back "Out There"), where he can learn how, in a non- totally self-absorbed way, to properly adjust to his surroundings. Like the infant, in its parallel moment of development, the sober self comes to form his new (sober/mature) identity in the process and mature as a new Self (for instance, developing the ability to defer and manage his urges in positive and productive ways). This stage is also decisive for the recovering addict: his recovery is constantly threatened by the possibility of relapse (or even death) if he doesn't find the opportunities or necessary supports with which he can properly adjust. Therefore, for the recovering addict to remain on the path to sobriety, he must actively accommodate to his surroundings and continue to personally work through the

loss of his Substance.[136] In Wallace's AA, this phase is exemplified in the recovering addict's frustrating efforts to learn how to spend his newfound, sober time so that he might re-assimilate into society and everyday life. He finds ways to do this through AA: it has its recovering addicts cautiously disciplining and cultivating their newly sober identities, literally "A Day at a Time", emphasizing the supportive roles others can play, and encouraging the Self to discover new bonds and means of support to overcome his former reliance on Substances to get through the day. AA helps to reinforce the new non-narcissistic relation to the world, and serves as the basis from which she can begin to acquire those dispositions that that Wallace believes go a long way in ensuring continued sobriety, stability and maturity. Hence, the unending mundane tasks and ritualized activities the recovering addict must exhaustingly partake in and which serve to both support him and keep him in check. For instance, in Wallace's Ennet House, the recovering addicts accomplish this transformation through nonstop activity and by learning to be and *live* together all the time. For instance, they all follow the exhortations of longer-sober members to "Stay Active!" and each of the recovering addicts in the Ennet House fill their waking time attending meetings, speaking with sponsors, carrying out household chores, working at menial "humility jobs" (IJ, 361) and praying multiple times a day and "Getting In Touch" with their feelings and "Higher Power" (IJ, 446, 442)). A veteran AA member and graduate of Ennet House colorfully refers to this as "Starving the Spider" of

[136] With the psychoanalytic, developmental parallel, this is when the infant begins to find acceptable substitutes and suitable ways of "mourning" the loss of its mother and learns to positively channel its drives --- for Freud and Lacan in the child's learning how to master the trauma of the loss of the mother. Kristeva interprets it primarily as a process of "mourning" whereas Winnicott, in distinction, understands it as the infant's "creative play". Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* and Kristeva, *Black Sun.*

addiction, and it is ultimately through this constant work and activity, within an affirmative context, that the Self gets correspondingly re-formed and encouraged to grow into a more open, attentive, other-directed and conscientious individual.

What must also be noted at this stage of early sobriety (or "creative play" for Winnicott) are the particular ways that his supportive context also comes to nurture and develop the burgeoning agency and mature self-consciousness that have emerged from his earlier sacrifices and newfound openness and trust. AA encourages this nascent mature experience of freedom and, as a rule, holds emphatically sacrosanct the "utter autonomy of the individual member" (IJ, 356) and the huge role individual choice plays in the recovering addict's subjective development as a sober Self.[137] For Wallace's recovering addicts, the growing Self discovers here the resolution with which he can individually and "consciously" confront the world and all of its myriad frustrations, uncertainties and difficulties without shying away from them or retreating to those former supports (drugs, alcohol, etc.) he had once so desperately clung to.[138]

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[137] This is what should also singularly distinguish AA from being "brainwashing" or "cult-like" (IJ,) and also importantly is what distinguishes AA from other entirely dogmatic alternatives. For instance, Wallace contrasts AA with the AFR, which instead of permitting free involvement within it, eliminate all individual agency in favour of the cause of a liberated Quebec. He also voices his reservations outside of the novel toward typically reactionary and overzealous Right-wing and neoconservative groups that under the rhetoric of freedom are deeply dogmatic, crypto-"fascist" and eliminate the individual liberty, democratic possibilities, etc. Cf. Hirt, *The Iron Bars of Freedom* and David Foster Wallace, "Up Simba!" in *Consider the Lobster* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2006).

[138] Wallace powerfully illustrates this particular transformation with Gately and Joelle in *Infinite Jest*. for example, after a few weeks in AA, Joelle comes to experience this deeper sense of freedom offered by recovery. It comes as a revelation to her and she admits that she suddenly feels confident for the first time in her life about recovery (having suffered many failed attempts before trying AA). She realizes now that, in AA, "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. I can do this. . .I can." (IJ, 860).

The addict's recovery signals the move from the illusory understanding of "freedom" as narrow self-gratification to a proper consciousness of others, such that the Self now takes into account the consequences of her actions on others, the experiences she shares with them, and what these new relationships mean. Banal as it may seem, this morally enlightened perspective is what fundamentally distinguishes a mature worldview from an infantile one. It is what appears to allow the individual to overcome the "impulsive pursuit of want" in the "confusion of permissions" and prevent her from yielding completely to the ultimately self-destructive, enslaving impulses of self-interest --- which, as the novel's critiques continually affirm, are not really choices at all. As Wallace critically reminds us in the commencement address collected in *This is Water*, true freedom and the mature ability to choose is "what the real, no bullshit value of your liberal arts education is supposed to be about."[139] Yet this freedom, as we have seen among the novel's recovering addicts, is something that crucially only emerges after investing the personal effort, taking the meaningful risks and making the painful personal sacrifices to something beyond the Self ("now they've got you, and you're free" (IJ, 351)). It is arrived at only once we have relinquished our self-interest and former individual (infantile, narcissistic) relations to the world and have properly turned toward our surroundings and others with a sensitivity and consciousness of them. In other words, it is,

> The really important kind of freedom [that] involves attention and awareness and discipline, and being able truly to care about *other people and to sacrifice for them over and over* in myriad petty, unsexy ways every day. . .That is real freedom. That is being *educated* [mature], and understanding how to think. The alternative is unconsciousness [immaturity], the default setting, the rat race . . . a blind certainty, a

[139] Wallace, *This Is Water*, 60.

close-mindedness that amounts to an imprisonment so total that the prisoner doesn't even know he's locked up.[140]

This kind of freedom points toward the possibilities of opening to different kinds of experiences and relationships that are predicated on a shared and intimate sense of vulnerability, mutual support and interdependence. It embodies the mature perspective that is re-oriented around otherness, connection, and a consciousness of each other. It aims to take our lonely, self-absorbed existences and open them up to the kinds of experiences that can allow us to, fundamentally, feel "less alone inside" and rediscover the genuine capacities of joy, happiness, and connection which had gone starved for so long. In short, it is the way to access the "whole new unique interior spiritual castle" (IJ, 365) of a new, redeemed life.

The novel's various depictions of this positive vision of redemption *qua* maturity offers us two practical understandings of how this redemption/maturity may actually find expression in our day-to-day lives. First, on the level of the individual and his new mature, "free" experience of the world, and second, by providing a glimpse at a wider, collective form of maturity, where our dominant cultural and socio-political attitudes may find the resources and inspiration to orient around a more socially and politically progressive worldview. The recovered addict and Ennet House both offer, in this way, concrete expressions of Wallace's positive moral aspirations. They offer glimpses of alternatives to our current ways of life; ones that, however

[140] Ibid, emphasis mine. Wallace also, consistent with the same tropes he uses in *Infinite Jest* importantly describes this ability to choose and reflect, maturely as "How to keep from going through your comfortable, prosperous, respectable adult life dead, unconscious, a slave to your head and to your natural default setting of being uniquely, completely, imperially alone day in and day out." Ibid, 60.

partial or insubstantial as they may initially seem, nonetheless offer significant underlying changes to our basic assumptions and attitudes, and make available the redemptive experiences that can encourage more sensitive and mature outlooks to flourish. They represent, in other words, the ultimate, positive ethical and political conclusions that come out from *Infinite Jest*'s moral perspective and can help to illuminate, to some degree, what a "less lonely" and non-narcissistic --- which is to say, more *human* --- life can look like.

As we have seen, this first view of maturity and redemption on the personal level would be realized in the successful embrace of a worldview that is less narcissistic and selfish and thus more empathetic and sensitive to others (and otherness). This is the modest, albeit nevertheless real and practical vision of redemption, where people, on the whole, are not as allergic to one another and as wary of connection; where we come to develop the discerning capacities and faculties to properly recognize each other, the vulnerabilities and needs of others, as well as the basic and intuitively human needs we all share for sustained and substantive interaction, respect and care. This experience is what Wallace believes would arise when the individual's priorities are changed from the "hot narrow imperatives of the Self" (IJ, 139), and as they begin, instead, to be reformulated around the presence of others, the consciousness of something more meaningful, and an understanding of one's relationship and responsibilities to his surroundings. It is, simply put, the basic ethical aim that Wallace wrote toward with *Infinite Jest* and, as we have seen in some of his interviews and other writings, is

what comprises the moral stance he so passionately expressed and aspired to uphold throughout his life.

The acquisition of this new mature perspective and moral consciousness is poignantly illustrated in a number of ways in the novel. As we have observed among its recovering addicts, they begin to see the world differently as they sacrifice their self-interest and narcissistic preoccupations --- they become, as Wallace wrote, "weirdly *unblinded*" (IJ, 351). Many of them admit to how, suddenly in the light of sobriety, they are able for the first time in their lives to fully realize certain things about themselves and their lives. They are able to register the different kinds of insensitivities and small cruelties that belonged to their former attitudes and lifestyles. In particular, they are able to awaken to the various forms of suffering and pain that they had been obliviously inflicting on others (and themselves) in their former "default settings" of self-absorption.[141] This begins to find expression, perhaps with the most pathos, in the various otherwise unremarkable passages where we have Gately registering his newfound and total disgust and disappointment toward the most mundane acts of selfish

[141] In the various passages where anonymous recovering addicts speak at AA meetings, it is crucial to note that they all share stories about their experiences of "unblinding" and how have begun to suddenly confront the world as sober people, recognizing all sorts of things about themselves and their past lives they had been "blind" to. In this respect, these speeches also function importantly as expressions of the newly attained mature perspective, with each different recovering addict coming to admit to how he or she woke up to the ways their former self-absorption and lack of interest in anything beyond getting high were responsible for tearing apart their families and closest relationships, losing them their jobs and homes and ultimately destroying their lives. They also underscore a point about Wallace's positive understanding of maturity --- that part of a mature personal relation to the world unavoidably involves the continued awareness --- however painful --- of the mistakes one's past life led to. This, together with a new, vigilant self-awareness to stop from repeating old patterns of behaviour a re essential. Many of Gately's reflections on staying straight and his constant, painful awareness of the suffering and cruelties of his former life all speak to this part of the new subjective experience of maturity.

unkindness, cruelty or inflated self-regard that others continue to blindly exhibit --- the little acts that, from his new mature perspective, come to take on larger proportions and a new, powerful moral significance. Even seeing a brand new AA member do something as insignificant as "putting a cigarette out against the wood-grain plastic tabletop", Gately uncomfortably "can already see the ragged black burn-divot that's formed . . ." and palpably experience "*the rankness*" of it "which would never have struck [Gately] one way or the other, before . . ." (IJ, 364, emphasis mine). This tiny, new experience, which Gately would have never had before, represents the important change and the essence of what Wallace's moral vision of redemption is supposed to look like once it has been achieved. Redemption thus finds expression through this new way of life and, as we can see with Gately, it is attained in and through the smallest, most mundane and seemingly insignificant acts of true sympathy, kindness and generosity which he learns to carry out as a new Self. Many of the novel's recovering addicts, however unseemly they may appear on first blush, thus embody this new kind spirit and, in doing so, present us with a powerful and realized model of ethical maturity and self-consciousness that *Infinite Jest*, in turn, wants to propose for contemporary Americans to aspire to.

From this basis, we can also see how this positive, redemptive transformation also unfolds on broader, collective levels if we translate the kinds of change Wallace proposes into concrete political and socio-cultural terms. As my preceding analysis has implied, Wallace's moral critiques against narcissism and self-absorption should also simultaneously be read as

political critiques about the present forms of organization, political rationality, and socio-cultural priorities that privilege and underwrite our current conception of Self and lonely forms of life. His critiques therefore also intend to communicate his serious moral disquiet toward the darker consequences our present political and cultural priorities are beginning to hold for us. Apart from its apocalyptic plot, *Infinite Jest* makes these criticisms fairly evident in its depictions of the erosion of our traditional concepts of democracy and liberty. For instance, with the collective dispossession of our human desires to connect and their later misappropriation by dominant narcissistic and consumerist discourses, as well as the accelerating dehumanization of contemporary culture. By drawing attention to these alternatives to our "default" status quo and reminding readers of the basic experiences of connectedness, Wallace is at the same time drawing attention to the vital roles played in this regard by the political and socio-cultural context. Thus, Wallace's critiques and positive moral vision can be said to communicate a desire for an American culture that can realign its present attitudes, forms of organization and dominant ideologies in order to, like Ennet House, make available mutual recognition, positive interaction and common bonds ---- for something akin to a socio-cultural "transitional space" for political maturity to be enacted.

From this basis, although it remains fairly subtle throughout *Infinite Jest*, Wallace also promotes with Ennet House, a corresponding vision of redemption. It is one of "political maturity", from the increasing political apathy, self-interest and cynicism that plagues contemporary political life. Like his narrative of personal redemption, he is also interested in

the possibilities of whether the anonymous American, submerged in his personal desire, can be positively transformed from "a citizen of nothing" (IJ, 108) into an engaged member of a recovered public life. He wants to similarly investigate how we can begin to overturn the cynicism and indifference that dominate our political culture, undermine the social bonds of community, and prohibit for so many the opportunities for positive and sustained socio-political and community involvement. In his later, more politically engaged journalism, he more explicitly develops his views on the topic and writes about the status of citizenship and the possibilities for attaining a form of "political maturity" which he essentially conceives to be its defining feature. In a brief but remarkable digression he makes in an essay published a few years after *Infinite Jest*, he alludes to what proper citizenship should mean and embody (a "Democratic Spirit"), he notes:

> A Democratic Spirit is one that combines rigor and humility, i.e., passionate conviction plus a sedulous respect for the convictions of others . . .This kind of stuff is advanced US citizenship . . .A true Democratic Spirit is up there with religious faith and emotional maturity and all those other top-of-the-Maslow-Pyramid-type qualities that people spend their whole lives working on. A Democratic Spirit's consitutent rigor and humility and self-honesty are, in fact, so hard to maintain on certain issues that it's almost irresistibly tempting to fall in with some established dogmatic camp [immaturity] and to follow that camp's line on the issue . . .[142]

This vision of maturity should of course be familiar now --- a kind of individual consciousness freed from uncritical dogmatism or passive indifference and inspired by a renewed will and sense of personal obligation to others and the community.[143] By taking

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[142] David Foster Wallace, "Authority and American Usage," in *Consider the Lobster* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2006), 72.

[143] One that is similarly marked at its core by a proper respect toward others, the sacrifice of self-interest and immediate gratification, and active efforts to engage with others with a mutual recognition of both similarities and differences.

critical aim at what has battered the status of citizenship and proper democracy and beginning to undo the obstacles that have kept our immaturity in place (our "infantile" attitudes, the dogmatic and toxic "illusions of autonomy" and "idolatry of uniqueness"), Wallace seems to be suggesting that we can also "therapeutically" treat today's alienated and disconnected political culture and rehabilitate the similarly "nourishing, redeeming" spirit that is an indispensable part of redemption, proper democracy, and an ethically enlightened future. By paying careful attention to the allegorical side of Ennet House and certain aspects of the novel's redemptive narrative, we can see, latent inside of it, a similarly positive vision for a "saved" O.N.A.N. (or United States) and the attainment of a correspondingly mature and progressive political citizenry.[144] Wallace perhaps expresses this sentiment most fittingly in *Infinite Jest* with Coach Gerhardt Schtitt, who teaches his students early in the novel that they can productively cultivate a kind of self-discipline and learn how to sacrifice their immediate self-interest for a higher purpose and shared, binding experience. He teaches them that this kind of training is, ultimately and in reality, both a moral and a political education; something that will teach them

[144] Practically speaking, Wallace implicitly seems to be proposing that we can start to do this by first critically attending to several of the features that define the political landscape --- in particular, several of the assumptions of today's reigning neoliberalism, which enforce "a normative social fabric of self-interest" and deeply impoverish our current political culture in many deep-seated ways. In doing so, Wallace's aspirations would hope to re-awaken aspirations of justice and freedom, or understandings of selfhood and common benefit, which derive instead from more community-oriented positions and theoretical perspectives organized around shared experiences (e.g. suffering), commonly articulated goals (e.g., getting better), and the possibilities of realizing a more communally minded and progressive future.

one day "*how to learn to be a good American* during a time, boys, when America isn't good to its own Self" (IJ, 119, emphasis mine).[145]

To finally conclude this reconstructed account of Wallace's moral vision of redemption in *Infinite Jest*, which presents AA and its logic as a model for overcoming our self-destructive immaturity and redeeming our suffering, it is perhaps most appropriate to investigate how it examines the nascent status of this maturity once it has been attained. We will now consider the novel's peculiar and deliberately enigmatic ending in relation to last point. We will foreground the tacit continuity of the novel's conclusion with its underlying moral narrative, despite many claims about the ending's incoherence.

[145] This latter view may invite us to also read Wallace's moral vision of redemption as inscribed not only along a traditional literary and ethical lineage (conforming to Dostoevsky's passionate moralism) but as also following a simultaneous political one. As a narrative of political maturity and education, *Infinite Jest* may in this very particular sense, be understood to serve in part as another "figurative rewriting" and contemporary reimagining of another canonical text and positive moral vision --- namely, the classic Kantian understanding of Enlightenment. Kant notably begins his defining essay "What Is Enlightenment?" by explicitly asserting that "Enlightenment is man's emergence from his *self-imposed* minority" (also occasionally translated as *immaturity*) and that it is the movement from a blind slavery to the passions into a free and self-legislating (literally *auto-nomous*) form of being. Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" in *Practical Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1996), 11-22.

CHAPTER 5

Unfortunately, many critics and reviewers incorrectly bemoan the lack of a major conflict and narrative climax at the end of *Infinite Jest*. They are fairly quick to point out the ways Wallace gleefully frustrates narrative expectations and topples conventions, brings the narrative to a halt and even taunts readers with its absence.[146] While on the surface and, perhaps, on the level of plot, the novel may appear to do this and withhold a "proper" ending, it remains shortsighted to overlook the intricately developed last quarter of the novel and to see it as merely ending with a hostile gesture or as a digressive departure, entirely inconsequential to the preceding 700 or so pages. A number of key factors betray these views to be fairly superficial and misguided. If we, instead, approach the novel's last quarter more cautiously and consider it in relation to its overall vested moral engagements and Wallace's desires to illuminate the possibilities for redeeming the suffering loneliness of contemporary life, we can begin to very quickly discern an underlying coherence that indeed runs from the very first pages of the text until the last ones. In particular, this consistency becomes even more noticeable if we pay close attention to the significant thematic development and underlying progression of the novel's major themes of maturity, self-transformation and "salvation" through these thousand-plus pages. As I note earlier, this moral engagement provides a key to the novel's

[146] Consider again Michio Kakutani's review that says Wallace leaves "the reader...suspended in midair and reeling from the random muchness of detail. . ." (Kakutani "Infinite Jest"), Cryer's aforementioned Newsday review (Cryer, "Infinite Jest") which notes the "disappointingly inconclusive ending [which] sputters to a halt with a sigh of fatigue," or David Kiepen for the Los Angeles Times, who ended his review by stating "finishing *Infinite Jest*, one feels less played with than toyed with. . ." David Kiepen *Los Angeles Times* February 1996, Reprinted July 31, 2010. Accessed July 31, 2010. http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/jacketcopy/2010/07/archive-review-david-foster-wallaces-infinite-jest.html.

unorthodox and occasionally disorienting structural organization, and it may be instructively called upon at this time to point toward its "hidden" logic. Moreover, Wallace's moral aims should also allow us to appreciate as an integral part of the novel's underlying coherence, a proper narrative climax and a remarkable denouement beneath the surface of its last 200 pages. In the same way Wallace eschewed the idea of purely negative critique and set to consciously align his critical side with his positive views, he took pains to place his formal experimentations and aesthetic idiosyncrasies in the service of something that in his view was ultimately "liberating" and stemmed from a deeper moral impulse.[147] *Infinite Jest*'s narrative organization and ending must thus be read as wedded to his positive moral vision and understood to play a significant role in its execution in a number of essential ways. For one, the novel's unconventional structuring and apparent "absences" (of resolution, narrative linearity, plot climax, etc.) can be understood to deliberately destabilize many traditional narrative assumptions and subvert many of the exhausted narrative devices that the conventional moralist has in his artillery. These emerge as part of Wallace's attempts to re-tell otherwise the story of redemption and breathe new life into the traditional moral concerns that had gone stale or forgotten in his postmodern literary context. Wallace does this with the aim of awakening new interpretive possibilities and forms of imaginative engagement for the reader. As I contend that the novel may be read under its own idiosyncratic surface, in an almost classical mode as a traditional *bildungsroman*, the last quarter of *Infinite Jest* best fulfils this traditional narrative

[147] McCaffery, "An Interview With David Foster Wallace."

logic --- albeit in its own unconventional way and on its own terms. Corresponding to the mechanics of the *bildungsroman*, *Infinite Jest*'s ending brings the maturing Self to a final conflict where all the psychological and moral growth he has undergone through his journeys get finally put to the test, where he must, on his own, respond to the new difficulties and mounting pressures he comes to face in the world. Wallace stages this final drama in *Infinite Jest*'s ending with both Hal and Gately and he uses each to explore the newly redeemed and "recognizably human" Self's painful struggles to hang onto his hard-won redemption and maturity.

This narrative climax plays out in the parallel crises each character experiences toward the very end of their respective narratives: both Hal and Gately receive serious and unexpected challenges to their newfound sobriety and are suddenly faced with the immense challenges of retaining it amid terrible new pressures. Near the end of the novel, Gately gets shot after rescuing a fellow resident of Ennet House from an angry and drunk crew of French Canadian toughs, and the majority of his narrative continues with him, hospitalized, attempting to recover from the gunshot wound he took to his shoulder. The major source of the narrative tension, however, arises later in his stoic efforts as a recovering painkiller addict to courageously refuse proper treatment and forego receiving his former drug of choice, Demerol, as he fears that even the slightest taste of it would send him irrevocably back into full-on addiction. The end of his narrative is thus comprised of his attempts to withstand the incredible pain of the wound for the sake of retaining his sobriety, and to hold at bay the growing unconscious urges to relieve

the increasingly unbearable experience with Demerol. The novel's tennis narrative ends similarly with Hal, who has recently given up marijuana, struggling not to lose his mind as he begins to experience the "indescribably wretched and bereft" pain (IJ, 800) of withdrawal. At the same time, he stoically tries to endure it while fighting off pressures from his best friend to relieve his anguish by experimenting with the mysterious drug DMZ and its promise of a total affective submergence.[148] If we read these struggles together, and think about them in line with Wallace's moral vision, a number of crucial insights emerge. For one, each character's struggle signals the identical experience of the "hero" trying to prevent the loss of his new maturity, and that it ultimately represents his desperate fight for his life. As such, much of *Infinite Jest*'s last quarter, which admittedly fails to significantly advance or bring together the novel's plots in any notable or expected way, instead seeks to explore the two major experiences Gately and Hal have at the very end of their narratives, and carefully examine the drama involved in their attempts to hang onto their sobriety and lives.

As such, the novel gets deep inside their respective experiences and plays one off of the other, highlighting the significantly different ways each comes to handle their painful struggle and tries to affirm and retain their new Selves. These contrasts are decisive in the novel's ending, as they are what appear to underscore the different prospects each hold toward

[148] In an interesting choice of words, Wallace once described Hal's friend, Michael Pemulis, to an interviewer as one of the novel's "Antichrists". Caleb Crain, "The Great Postmodern Uncertainty That We Live In" September 14, 2008. http://www.steamthing.com/2008/09/the-great-postm.html Accessed June 11, 2010. The quotation is from exchanges with Wallace which didn't make it into the originally published interview: Caleb Crain, "Approaching Infinity" *The Boston Globe* October 26, 2003. http://www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/2003/10/26/approaching_infinity/. Accessed June 11, 2010.

surviving as mature and recovered Selves. That is, they illuminate the different ways they attempt to keep from losing their maturity and falling back into either a totally isolated or an immature and *infantile* "death-in-life". That Gately's hospitalization and Hal's experience of withdrawal represent, in many ways, a final battle against a kind of return to an infantile state is also necessary to understanding the novel's underlying thematic continuity and Wallace's positive moral view in relation to it. For instance, consistent with the infantile imagery developed throughout the novel, these final conflicts represent Gately and Hal as at a figurative stage in their nascent maturity --- where they have each developed from submerged "infants" into delicate mature Selves, where each begin undergoing the painful processes of existing in the world on their own without their "mother"/supports (Demerol for Gately, marijuana for Hal). We can see fairly quickly the ways Wallace depicts these precarious struggles as ones against regressions to an infantile state. For instance, Gately's gunshot leaves him bedridden in a hospital bed that is both referred to as a crib and is frequently rendered crib-like, while Hal spends the novel's end immobile, lying on his back and studying the ceiling in the same way Gately does in his makeshift crib. Each experiences similar troubles speaking and communicating (Gately can only "mew and grunt" with a tube down his throat (IJ, 858) and Hal's increasing isolation leaves him experiencing similarly "horrific" feelings of muteness and inabilities to communicate (IJ, 1063: fn 321). Both have visitors lean over their field of vision to speak with them (restaging the leitmotif of the mother leaning over the crib), and the two, finally, even begin to physically resemble infants, as Gately is incontinent, drooling with his

tongue stuck out, and has his eyes wobbling like a baby's. Hal, meanwhile, begins to produce huge amounts of saliva himself (as one of the major side effects of marijuana withdrawal) and starts to develop an involuntary infantile "rictus" across his face.[149] In this way, each of their struggles are set up as an internal battle around whether or not in the face of their increasingly unbearable pain, they will emerge triumphant and mature or will ultimately yield to their base, infantile cravings and submit to the increasingly attractive promise of the full maternal relief they are offered.[150]

Throughout these last 200 pages, Wallace depicts these struggles as major spiritual and existential crises of faith, attending to the same experiences of uncertainty, fear and frustration they share as their pain escalates and as they try to battle their unconscious desires to escape it all. Gately comes to be seized by a resentful and "total bitter impotent Job-type rage" (IJ, 895) for instance, and Hal, becoming ever more dissociated and devoid of emotion, blankly reflects on the "crushing cumulative aspect" of his life (IJ, 895) while in between panic attacks he cynically considers the meaninglessness and absurdity of his continued existence.[151] In the dark pallor of their pain, each progressively comes to forget the suffering of their past lives.

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[149] A contorted grin and grimace which, to briefly return to the psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan appears to embody the infant's pure experience of "jouissance" which is the undifferentiated experience of pleasure/pain. Cf. Lacan, *Ecrits*.

[150] During Gately's struggles, he importantly comes to experience powerful unconscious reminders that Demerol offers "the taste . . .[he] had loved, [had] *come to love like a mother's warm hand. . .*" (IJ, 887, emphasis mine).

[151] "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. . .To what purpose? . . ." (IJ, 900). Also see Hirt, *The Iron Bars of Freedom* with respect to Hal's existential "despair" in the specific sense Kierkegaard uses the term.

They lose sight of what their new lives have tangibly begun to offer them, and they start to lose confidence in whether a redeemed life of sobriety can justify their current suffering or prove to be more desirable than the seductive promise of a complete, yet --- as they both well know --- ultimately destructive and *fatal* form of relief. Much of the remainder of the novel unfolds with their abject suffering, tortured attempts to negotiate these crises, and with their struggles to find the resources that can pull them through and let them continue the strenuous and difficult burdens of a sober (mature and independent) existence.

However, *Infinite Jest* ends abruptly during these struggles and does so, infuriatingly for many, without a note of either finality or closure, leaving the respective fates of both Gately and Hal deliberately ambiguous for readers to speculate on (to say nothing of the larger fate of the American people who, by the novel's end, face the imminent threat of the deadly "Infinite Jest" cartridge).[152] What is so immediately compelling about this remarkable "non-ending", despite what other reviewers may suggest otherwise, is that it seems strikingly to gesture to the centrality and ultimate importance that this basic struggle holds *in itself*. It confirms fairly overtly its final precedence over the "story" and various plots of the book, and suggests that the arduous battle for redemption and for the life of the *soul* is really, to the discerning reader

[152] In fact, as a brief aside, these find a kind of "absent" resolution in the text and patient rereadings of the novel, especially of its first chapter (the novel's temporal end), will disclose through a number of connections and slight hints also offered throughout, an apparently airtight and coherent plot buried inside the novel. Several different interpretations of the novel's "missing" ending do in fact exist, though the most compelling and fully comprehensive one which fully takes on and accounts for all of its seemingly disparate loose ends and plot twists, may be found in Aaron Swartz, "What Happens at the End of *Infinite Jest*." *Aaron Swartz's Raw Thought* September 16, 2009. Accessed January 31, 2010 http://www.aaronsw.com/weblog/ijend.

of *Infinite Jest*, what the novel is literally in the end all about. It takes much of the thematic concerns and theoretical preoccupations that had until then been percolating under the novel's surface, and brings them directly to the fore, culminating in its "non-climax" where the issues of belief and love, identification and connection, empathy and maturation are most explicitly and substantively put into dialogue and where Wallace executes his final vision of redemption and puts it to the test. Furthermore, the open ending, however infuriating it may seem, raises far more productive, personal and deep questions about the novel's central issues and the possibilities of salvation. Rather than provide any definitive answer or sweeping proclamations, it ends by inviting readers instead to more carefully and thoughtfully reflect on the ending personally and to fill in its gaps and think its incompleteness and questions through.

Most importantly, *Infinite Jest*'s unconventional ending also reveals a number of essential facets about Wallace's positive moral vision, and my interpretation of Wallace's moralism will tease out several important points and potential answers to these "incomplete" gaps. In particular, the ending foregrounds the views we have already noted about the viability that something like AA has as an extended model for treating contemporary alienation, and it also demonstrates the alternative kind of Self we can aspire to in distinction to our dominant self-destructive and narcissistic "default settings". This gets expressed in the key differences Wallace emphasizes between Gately and Hal's parallel struggles, which disclose some of the underlying features and personal steps Wallace wants to subtly intone are necessary for any lasting measure of redemption to ever be achieved. If, at this point, we are able to

comprehensively bring together Wallace's central critiques, the psychoanalytic discourses of subjective development, and then reconsider the positive roles AA plays in the recovery of its addicts, we will observe how Gately and Hal's different experiences come together at the end of the novel to provide Wallace's final view of how we can begin to take up the "burdens" of sobriety.

In particular, *Infinite Jest*'s contrast between Gately and Hal's attempts to endure their struggles make clear a number of central things that suggest that Gately, through his particular experiences in AA, is far better equipped to deal with the pain and stands a far likelier chance at continuing to live a somewhat stable, day to day life of active and content sobriety. This points toward the absolutely central difference between Hal and Gately's experience, as unlike Gately, Hal chooses to give up marijuana and embark on a life of sobriety while remaining entirely in his old form of life, inside the context of his tennis academy, and by electing to carry out his painful efforts of recovery alone and with his past addiction and pain kept, for the most part, entirely in secret. The novel, as has been illustrated, figures sobriety at various points as a moment of maturation, signaling the passage of the submerged, "fetal" and "newborn" Self into self-consciousness and tentative independence. From the psychoanalytic perspective, we can appreciate how the surrounding context plays a critical role in these earliest experiences and our basic subjective formation, influencing the ultimate course and direction our growth and later life will take. In this regard, we can see how Hal's failure to follow through with recovery or actively pursue any other external form of support (recall his

one horribly awry attempt which did not lead to any repeated tries) seals his fate. He is, in essence, delivered right into the hostile and antagonistic environment of the tennis academy, which *Infinite Jest* repeatedly uses to exemplify the corrosive narcissism and especially pernicious American attitude of competitive individualism.[153] In this critical stage he enters unprepared and unprotected, without anything to properly mediate his re-entrance, and is left to the forces responsible for his earlier experiences of loneliness, hiddenness and self-absorption. Much like the feral and stillborn infants in the novel's O.N.A.N., Hal emerges alone into the toxic and atomizing environment around him, and his "development" gets clearly undermined, causing him to suffer even more dearly as a result. His sad end thus appears to draw attention to the dominant psychoanalytic views that without the proper positive requirements to facilitate separation and enable connection and social bonding, the recovering/maturing Self will lack the basic resources and strength to mature, find eventual stability and proper self-relation. He will remain barred from fully realizing what, for Wallace, remains vitally human inside of him and from allowing it to develop and properly grow. Hal's floundering attempts to manage by himself sober and deal with the pains of withdrawal in this *persecutory* self-interested environment ultimately signal the need for the Self to find the keys to his own redemption outside of his own head and among others.

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[153] Wallace at various points addresses how tennis can be a lonely pursuit and how it is the individualistic sport *par excellence*. Especially in relation to ETA's "philosophy" which is purely focussed on the Self and teaches tennis as a game of self-control and self-mastery, where, even, the opponent is presented as little more than an occasion for the Self to face its Self and own limits (IJ, 84). Moreover, as already mentioned, Hal suggests that in the tennis academy "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." (IJ, 112).

Although his narrative does end midway through this struggle, its final outcome is nonetheless hinted at if we return to the beginning of *Infinite Jest*. As the narrative's proper temporal end (occurring some months after the rest of the novel), it can be used to help here to retroactively clarify what may have ended up happening to Hal. As such, the novel curiously begins with Hal experiencing a total inability to communicate during an interview with a prospective university; an experience that gets disastrously worse as it is suddenly interrupted by what appears to be a convulsive seizure resulting in Hal's hospitalization (one that is, significantly, revealed to be a repeat visit for Hal within a short period of time).[154] If we reread this opening chapter after the end of the novel, it appears to suggest two likely outcomes to the terrible struggle his narrative abruptly finishes on.[155] One possibility is that Hal had, in fact, eventually yielded and "relapsed", deciding to take (or be given) the DMZ and that he has come to suffer some seriously damaging and lasting side effects from its incredible potency. A second possibility is that the beginning/end implies that Hal tried to continue enduring his struggle on his own, but was unable to properly handle it by himself for long. That is, his painful struggle and personal withdrawal, which gets foreshadowed earlier in his withdrawal to a "figurant",[156] brings his already dangerous slide into isolation to such an intense degree that he

[154] Which also imply that his struggles with sobriety, in fact, took a disastrous turn for the worse (IJ, 12) also, consider (IJ, 1-17).
[155] Though Wallace, of course, has written it so that a number of other competing interpretations may also be plausible.
[156] "Figurants" are the extras in the background of films and television shows, which *Infinite Jest* develops late in the novel as an important leitmotif to address the mute estrangement from everyday life experienced by Hal. They are described as . "sort of human furniture. . .these surreally mute background presences . . .completely trapped and encaged . . . in his mute peripheral status" (IJ, 834).

crosses some basic threshold and irreversibly loses the ability to meaningfully connect with the outside world (as he literally becomes unable to make sense or communicate meaningfully and, in this interview, producing only growls and "subanimalistic noises and sounds" (IJ, 14)).[157] Either of these two possible endings to his doomed struggle to be sober, the lapse into addiction or the slide into a solipsistic "hell for one" of negative self-absorption (IJ, 696), ultimately signify for Wallace, once again, the kinds of "death-in-life" that he fears will continue to loom over our heads should we not seriously rethink our current worldviews and priorities.

Hal's narrative thus provides a final coda to negatively affirm the vital role a positive transitional space is capable of playing, as it depicts the horrible fate that its absence portends for the newly "maturing" Self. In this sense, his unfortunate end instructively allows us to see how Gately, who has undergone recovery in AA, is by contrast poised to endure his similar crisis and appears better able to resist his similar pains and temptations for relief. As the preceding analysis has attempted to make clear, the alternate logic of AA, its particular values and emphasis on self-sacrifice, belief, and openness as well as its ability to foster the renewing experiences of connection and identification with others, serve to create a makeshift positive alternative context --- an "In Here" whose alternate conditions emerge to provide a tentative, therapeutic corrective to the disordered and destructive "Out There" which Hal and most of

[157]As a noteworthy aside, this latter outcome recalls Kristeva's theorizations of serious depression, where the blank activity, disconnection and inability to communicate overdetermine the experience of the depressed subject. Kristeva, *Black Sun.* Moreover, it leads to a state where the depressed Self experiences something akin to what Wallace describes Hal's final experiences as like: "some combination of invisibility and being buried alive. . .[feeling] like being strangled somewhere deeper inside you than your neck." (IJ, 833).

O.N.A.N.'s infantile population are lost to. Thus, Gately's last efforts to resist the pull of Demerol powerfully illustrate how AA's logic, eschewal of the dangerous dominant narcissistic worldview, and its positive forms of reinforcement and shared bonds have come to arm him with a distinct and powerful set of resources with which he can try and control his urges and manage the new pains that threaten to tear his new (mature) identity apart.

As the previous chapter demonstrated, AA allows its vulnerable "newborn" members to successfully reconnect to the world around them and re-orient to the world (and others) in ways that permit them to give affirmative expression to their long denied, intrinsically human needs and desires. Moreover, it encourages them to use these profound "redeeming, nourishing" experiences as a means of tapping into a powerful new source of subjective self-assurance and stability. It forms the appropriate context in which the "newborn" can then sacrifice his earlier attachments and pure self-interest and find in their place common sites of meaning and commitments to replace them. With these and the new wisdom of AA as his basis, we see Gately able to take up a new relation to his suffering and come to face the pains and uncertainties of his sober struggle in crucial ways that Hal, or the majority of O.N.A.N.'s mutated or stillborn infants, for that matter, could not. He comes to handle his crisis --- as undoubtedly despair-filled, enraged and uncertain it is --- with a remarkable measure of both forbearance and preparation.[158]

[158] It is also worth noting how *Infinite Jest* depicts Gately's struggle as viscerally and emphatically more painful than Hal's, which invites one to believe that the logic of AA is capable of preparing the Self to confront even more palpably painful experiences than the terrible pain felt by Hal.

Following Gately's hospitalization, the remainder of his struggle, in distinction to Hal's, follows his conscious attempts to keep his faith and continue drawing on the various experiences and guidance he internalized from AA. That is, to accept his vulnerabilities, realize his experience of pain is neither as private nor withdrawn as he thinks, and consciously remember the desirability of sobriety and his new relationships with others. Moreover, he uses it to recognize the existence and positive value of something more important than his immediate experience and his desires for relief --- namely, the possibility of a future. The moving passages where Gately recalls his first experiences of withdrawal and begins to call upon all his newfound psychic resources to abide the pain a second at a time and embrace this "excruciatingly alive" (IJ,) experience are powerful testaments to the new subjective attitudes and mature relation to the world he has acquired and begun to inhabit in AA. They comprise a large chunk of the latter half of his narrative as his pain worsens, provide a remarkable display of the efficacy of this new mature thinking, and demonstrate the extent to which it can profoundly transform one's sense of Self and relation to the world.[159]

Together with this new perspective and mature relation to pain, it is of course important to continue highlighting the crucial thing underlying it and responsible for sustaining Gately's ability to endure his struggle --- his new openness and his formation of positive bonds with others. These are the product of the vital loving supports, existential anchoring and active reinforcement AA is able to provide and which are made possible through its "deprogramming"

[159] In particular, see (IJ, 859-863) for a remarkable narration of Gately's experience and this new mature perspective.

of our narcissistic self-absorption and general indifference to others. The importance of these major changes becomes even more pronounced if we consider their absence in Hal's experience, as Hal remained deprived of even the most basic supportive experiences of connection and continued to consciously withdraw from opportunities to connect. By contrast, while hospitalized, Gately receives visits from his fellow group members from AA and residents from Ennet House who offer him solace, guidance and support and keep him updated on what he has been missing in his absence. Though Gately does not consciously admit it (and even at times denies it to himself), he is receptive to them, and the encouragement and fortitude he derives from these connections and the positive identification with his pain, are all revealed to be absolutely vital in his ability to bear the intense pain without the help of Demerol.[160] These visits are also not just a boon to his ability to handle the pain, but serve as reminders of the incredible strides he has begun to make toward sobriety and the new person he has dramatically become. They, in turn, provide another major motivating force for him to keep going and continue keeping his urges to take Demerol fully in check. For instance, when Gately is visited by Joelle, he feels complete reassurance in her presence (she "makes him feel good all over again" (IJ, 884)) and he even dreams about recovering and being able to share the memories of his terrible experience with her, joking about it and even envisioning a happy

[160] The stabilizing and intrinsically nourishing forces these bonds provide are displayed especially poignantly in the galvanizing experiences of "renewal" (to use Kristeva's term) that the hospitalized and pained Gately receives through his new relationships with Joelle, his sponsor Francis and the head of the Ennet House, Pat Montesian. Uncoincidentally, these three represent the strongest supportive relationships Gately has made since becoming sober and are the three characters that have been the most vital to his recovery and the formation of his new mature identity since entering AA.

possible future together.[161] Moreover, these new "amatory" bonds which Gately nurtured in AA (to invoke Kristeva's term again) also prove to offer more than emotional and psychological strength, as they also comprise his new identity and, however seemingly mundane, confer a sense of meaning and purpose that had been utterly absent in his life beforehand. His supervisory role in the Ennet House, his responsibilities to others and positive involvement in their lives thereby appear to offer Gately (again, unlike Hal) a number of equally strong reasons and emotional motivations to continue to soldier through his pain and retain his sobriety.[162] His newfound concern not only demonstrates the deep, unselfish care he has come to develop and feel toward them. It also exemplifies the positive values they have come to give his life and the considerable ways that these relationships, conscious obligations and dependencies represent an integral part of his new, unselfish and mature life.

The remainder of his narrative consists largely of internal monologues, dreams, and recollections of his former life, which continue to reenact in different ways the tortured conflicts between his unconscious desires and his conscious efforts to tame them and assert control. This continues as his pain gets so bad that "every pulse [becomes] an assault on his right side" (IJ, 816) and he wants to "cry like a small child" (IJ, 818) and he has trouble remaining conscious amid the "mind-bending sheet[s] of pain" running down his side (IJ, 823). This

[161] For example, "If Gately got out of this, he decided, he was going to take the Knievel picture off his wall and mount it and give it to Joelle, and they'd laugh, and she'd call him Don or The Bimster, etc." (IJ, 861) also (IJ, 863).

[162] For instance, he even begins to worry about the members of the Ennet House in his absence, at one point even admitting to feeling "a sudden rush of anxiety over the issue of who's cooking the House supper in his absence. . ." (IJ, 826), and worries over what is transpiring in the House without him.

culminates in the point where his entire mental energy becomes harnessed to a concentrated focal point where his "only conscious concern was Asking For Help to refuse Demerol" and he tries to bear each individual second as it passes (IJ, 973)). Despite the painful extent of these struggles (he begins hallucinating, dreaming about death, and praying for relief), he nevertheless manages to persevere and continues to stick it out through the novel's end. Frustratingly though, just as we see with Hal's narrative, Gately's also suddenly ends before we can find out "what ever happens". He loses consciousness for a final time, and the last pages of the novel continue with the flashbacks that had begun to haunt him from his former life of crime and addiction. Though Wallace leaves it deliberately uncertain, what is essential to note, (I would even suggest irrespective of where Gately's struggle leads, though I contend he ultimately recovers without the help of the Demerol) is the seemingly undeniable thing *Infinite Jest* foregrounds, especially in relation to Hal. That is, the fact that Gately is able to *survive* as a mature, redeemed and "human" Self primarily because of his new supports, experiences of connection, and the new positive non-narcissistic outlook and relation to the world that he was able to form in his new, alternate "therapeutic" context.[163] It would importantly, not require much imaginative effort to speculate on what Gately's fate would have looked like had he switched places with Hal, and had he woke up beached on the Atlantic only to opt out of AA and return alone to his former life of crime, struggling with the labors of sobriety and the pains

[163] There are very few and always very ambiguous allusions to what may have happened to Gately in the first chapter, hinting at what may have transpired between the end of his narrative and the novel's proper temporal end. Some important indications point to the increasing pain eventually breaking down Gately's will, or that his doctor injects him with Demerol while he is unconscious. Yet, I affirm that Gately is able to pull through without the Demerol.

of withdrawal without proper supports and while retaining the same pernicious attitudes he so fully embodied in his former life of crime and addiction. Likewise, an alternate ending should be evident if Hal had in fact followed through with AA (or was able to find the first meeting he so desperately, yet unsuccessfully sought out). With the possibilities to foster openness, transcend his estranged relation to the world and discover the spiritually and psychologically renewing and stabilizing forces of positive identification, connection and faith, it appears indubitable that his efforts would have realized a considerably different end than that of his feeble resignation.

What this ultimately reveals, by the very ending of the novel (and in lieu of narrative closure), is that through the various changes made by the new context of AA and the conditions it offers, Gately is able to handle the distinct and perhaps interminable struggles and insecurities that are part and parcel of being and, importantly, *remaining* a sober/mature, truly free and self-conscious Self in the world.[164] For Wallace, the struggles met by a triumphant Gately represent, in part, the newfound kinds of pressures and demands that are made on the mature Self once he has appropriately and completely entered into the world on his own. That is, they represent the host of obligations and frustrations that require the ongoing willingness and patience, as well as the mature ability to sacrifice one's own immediate and personal self-interest for them. Elsewhere, Wallace stresses this fact: that maturity involves an ongoing

[164] Or, put differently, the contrasts between Hal and Gately in the ending serve to highlight the particular ways Wallace wanted to suggest AA's "therapeutic" logic works. They are able to illustrate how its processes and positive modifications in his surroundings and to his attitudes make Gately far better suited to a "new" life once he is "freed" from his "narcissistic cage" and has properly entered the world.

personal dedication and disciplined outlook, demanding immense work, self-sacrifice and vigilance. To return briefly to his commencement address in *This Is Water*, he describes the experience of upholding it emphatically as: "unimaginably hard to do . . .to stay conscious and alive *in the adult world* day in and day out. Which means yet another grand cliché turns out to be true: your education [maturity] really *IS* the job of a lifetime."[165] Gately thus begins his "lifetime" job with his recovery, and we can see that he is able, at the very end, to completely embody a fully mature attitude --- one that may be "excruciatingly alive" but is nevertheless *adult* and *human* and able to survive in a redeemed future.

[165] Wallace, *This Is Water*, 135-136.

CONCLUSION

Like all good moral fiction, *Infinite Jest* is a serious critical and ethical exploration into everyday life --- in particular, a searching look into the very conditions of (and, as we have seen, for) existence in our lonely and self-interested, nihilistic and disordered, cynical late twentieth century. Like the very best and rarest kinds of moral fiction, *Infinite Jest* is also far more than this. It offers an attempt to engage with the most "artistically real" and fundamental dimensions of literature, which is to say that it aims to provide a proper look at "what it means to be a human being" and to attend to the kinds of suffering that, more than anything, have come to define this experience. It is a fulfillment of the "morally passionate, passionately moral" spirit that intends to go beyond mere critique or disinterested depiction of the present, and it is a novel committed to offering its readers something more than a mere articulation or aestheticization of a sense of moral disappointment in the present. *Infinite Jest*, rather, aims to encourage critical reflection on the conditions of the present and, moreover, from this basis attempt to undertake the extremely delicate and cumbersome task of offering a positive vision of change.

The novel executes its narrative of redemption in its own distinctive way, conveying its vision of it as the attainment of maturity from a self-absorbed, infantile relation to the world. Although the novel presents this moral vision allegorically, if we can extrapolate from it, we can conclusively understand some of the broader implications of Wallace's moral vision and even discern some of the therapeutic applicability it offers to our own experiences of loneliness.

Infinite Jest is simply, as Wallace liked to say, about the possibilities of continuing to live in the future, and it is by critically pointing to some of the changes that need to be made in the present, in our personal relationships and cultural worldviews, that it formulates several modest proposals that can allow us to seriously think about doing so.[166] *Infinite Jest* suggests that it is by recuperating the possibilities of connection and (re)enabling the basic experiences that define what it is to be a Self that we can properly begin to live positive, human lives again. The tangible, everyday applications of this proposal should not be understated or viewed merely as the purely speculative fancy of an optimistic or amibitious literary imagination. If we return to the harmony between Wallace's views and Julia Kristeva's clinical and theoretical investigations of "narcissistic constriction," Wallace's "therapeutic" vision appears to, in fact, offer some viable recommendations for treating the experience of estrangement we experience today.[167] For the lonely, infantile American who starves these essential experiences, *Infinite Jest* thus appears to suggest that we can start to positively work toward nourishing them by learning how to transform several of the aspects of our lives that have foreclosed the

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[166] For instance, he has said elsewhere that ". . .these are decisions that are going to have to be made inside us as individuals about what we're going to give ourselves away to, and what we are . . .I guess my point is right now, I guess in the next fifteen or twenty years are going to be a very scary and sort of very exciting time where we're going to have to reevaluate our relationship to fun and pleasure and entertainment . . . *we're gonna have to forge some kind of attitude toward it that's going to let us live . . .*" Strasser, "Interview With David Foster Wallace" (emphasis, mine).

[167] As we have seen, Wallace's account is one that is sensitive to the actual possibilities of providing the isolated, disconnected Self the experiences and reinforcement that can invite her to work through her various unconscious attachments and psychic conflicts ("narcissistic constriction" for Kristeva, "cages" for Wallace) and find sites of recuperating and positively sublimating the newly dislodged internal life of its drives. For Wallace, like Kristeva, this therapeutic experience is arrived at in the alternative, positive transformed space that something like AA (or analysis, for the latter) can provide. It can be enacted via the positive reinforcements and encouragement that accommodate the Self and invite her to affirmatively overcome her defenses by opening up to and taking on the possibilities of the psychically "renewing" and salutary experiences of connection and identification she finds within these new conditions.

possibilities for them. Through the novel's AA narrative, we have seen Wallace propose that this process may concretely unfold if we are willing to undertake the laborious work of unseating our deeply ingrained narcissistic assumptions and self-interested dispositions to the world ("illusions of autonomy") and willingly open them up to the possibilities of identifying with others and allowing the simple yet profoundly renewing and human experiences of connection play out. In so doing, it suggests that we may be able to overcome some of the most enduring and resilient barriers to a proper awareness of others and openness, and thereby set the conditions to realize a "less lonely" and disconnected existence. Through this, as he shows us with his many recovering addicts, we may begin to undergo the dramatic kinds of positive self-transformation that even the most unlikely candidates for change appear to achieve. That is, we may begin in this way to develop the sturdy bonds and interpersonal connections that can hold alive within them that liberating and vitally human force Wallace so passionately believed was able to be both our saving grace and our inspiration for living morally sensitive, emotionally richer and ultimately redeemed lives. It is by attaining this new self-conscious and ethically enlightened existence that the novel ends, with its redeemed hero Gately, who ultimately suggests to us that we, too, as lonely and self-absorbed as we may be, can also achieve a proper moral awakening and consciousness of the world and, in so doing, discover the possibilities for a mature existence and a happier, better life.[168]

[168] As my analysis has argued, AA represents a model for these kinds of changes, able to enter into the present context and enable inside it an alternative set of conditions to positively attend to what has made the Self's experience of the world lonely, self-destructive and "immature". However, it should be clear that AA does not hold an exclusive ability to do this and it should be understood as a stand-in for any similar

Since its publication, *Infinite Jest* has had a unique and longstanding resonance with American culture and with its generation of readers in particular, one significantly unlike many other novels published in the last twenty-five years. Given this and Wallace's uncanny prescience --- *Infinite Jest* is set in what would be 2009 --- it appears to be worth paying heed to some of his warnings about the direction our current culture is leading us along. In entirely practical terms, the novel's moral force and resonance can be said to derive its powerful critical authority from its uncanny prescience. But that would ignore the incredible ways that it has also been able to equip us with new vocabularies and perspectives (or creatively reimagined older ones) with which we can also begin to think about solutions to the deep-seated problems we find ourselves in the middle of. Like the finest moral art, *Infinite Jest* does just this, by enlarging the imaginative scope of possibility in how we think about our current experience of the world, by magnifying the otherwise ignored suffering we feel, and by illuminating the paths we may pursue toward changing it and improving our lives. While *Infinite Jest* and Wallace may not programmatically set out to literally instruct us on how to live a "righteous" or properly moral life (it was clearly never Wallace's intention to do so), it nonetheless offers us a profound understanding of what something like this redemption may look like and how we can actually begin to think about seizing it. Apart from its satire, frequently breathtaking prose or even Wallace's posthumous cache as a "voice of a

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body able to similarly provide an alternate, "therapeutic" set of rules, norms and values. In everyday life, Wallace was sanguine about the possibilities of a progressive view of religion as a viable candidate (as he was a churchgoing man) and he also saw solace in progressive politics as well, of course, in art and literature.

generation", this is the real wellspring of *Infinite Jest*'s enduring importance. It is the source of its singular ability to successfully, in no small feat, allow us to discover ways of being personally reminded of just what it means "to be a fucking human being" again. This is the passionately moral, morally passionate heart that Wallace captures and expresses in the novel and uses to articulate his positive moral vision. It is what, above all, attempts to offer us readers the beginnings of workable and concrete answers (simple or modest as they may be) to the very basic questions that, if we remember, Wallace stressed should be *the* starting points that drive both the artist and the work of art. That is, the essential questions: "What does it mean to be a fucking human being?" How "can these capacities be made to thrive?" and what are the possibilities for continuing to be properly *human* in this world today and tomorrow?

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