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"One Never Knew": David Foster Wallace and the Aesthetics of Consumption

Jesse Ortiz
Bowdoin College, j.ortiz615@gmail.com

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“One Never Knew”:

David Foster Wallace and the Aesthetics of Consumption

An Honors Paper for the Department of English

By Jesse Ortiz

Bowdoin College, 2016

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…a commodious vicus of recirculation…

- James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*

Lean in.

- Sheryl Sandburg, COO of Facebook

0: Isn't It Ironic?

David Foster Wallace was practically a rock star of literary fiction. Wallace's reputation always precedes him, as his cultic following and widely-known suicide often frame the discussion of his work. The recent film *The End of the Tour* (2015), proves that the media can represent (and exploit) Wallace's life story without mentioning a single character from his fiction. I don't want to do that. By skirting over the details of his work – focusing on the length of *Infinite Jest*, for instance – we turn Wallace into a brand, and his work becomes a cultural commodity. In contrast, a close study of Wallace's writing reveals his own resistance to the commoditization of culture. To understand Wallace, we must delve into the tension between Wallace's criticism of and participation in consumer culture.

Wallace's fraught relationship with mass culture is, in a word, ironic. In his journalistic essays, Wallace describes experiences of rampant and unchecked consumerism, such as watching T.V. for hours on end, taking a luxury cruise, and attending a lobster festival. And yet, in each of these situations, Wallace takes a critical stance, revealing consumer culture as unnatural and self-absorbed. The ambivalence between Wallace's critique and indulgence is ironic. Moreover, Wallace writes in a trademark ironic tone. In his essays, short stories, and novels, Wallace's aggressive self-awareness often challenges, surprises, and amuses his readers. For example, "Good Old

Neon" is a story whose speaker insists on convincing his readers that every impression he ever tries to create for himself is fake. This speaker always remains at a distance, made inaccessible by the constant performance of the self-aware narration.

Wallace's writing style contradicts the serious claims he makes in his writing. In "E Unibus Pluram," Wallace attacks the self-referential irony that dominated television and much American postmodern fiction in the late twentieth century. He claims that "irony and ridicule are entertaining and effective, and…at the same time they are agents of great despair and stasis in the United States" (*SFT* 49). Allowing for no ambiguity, Wallace says, "make no mistake: irony tyrannizes us" (*SFT* 67). However, this statement contradicts itself –depicting irony as tyranny is definitively ironic! And yet, the irony of the statement demonstrates its truth. Words can't describe the detrimental effects of irony without being ironic themselves. It seems that we can't escape the power of irony.

Due to the danger of irony Wallace calls for artists to embrace "single entendre values" (*SFT* 81) in their work. But, what would these values even look like? I argue that, for art to undo the tyrannical irony of mass culture, it must attack the production of consumer pleasure. When Wallace says that "irony and ridicule are entertaining" (*SFT* 49), he recognizes that people in the late twentieth century U.S. consume media and pay for experiences because they desire pleasure.

Desire is a notoriously tricky thing to study. In *ugly feelings*, Sianne Ngai uses the term "desire" to denote that which is "associated with images of fluidity, slippage, and semantic multiplicity" (337). Scholars and artists explore desire exactly *because* it is so difficult to manage and contain. Queer Theory is the clearest example of this – an entire body of knowledge devoted to the complications of desire.

In criticizing irony, Wallace is questioning the demand (desire) for self-referential products. Why do we want to consume the self-referential media that dominates American TV? For Wallace to escape the self-reflexivity of consumer culture, he must engage with an aesthetics that can't be hollowed out by irony or commodified to produce pleasure. In order to achieve a "single-entendre value," Wallace creates uses language that resonates viscerally with readers, instead of getting lost at the symbolic level of irony. I would argue that this tone is disgust. By evoking disgust, Wallace demonstrates how consumer culture uses irony and pleasure to confuse and distract people. To undermine irony, Wallace must transcend the endless cycles of literary irony that reflect the consumerism of mass culture. Wallace's writing makes consumption disgusting. However, because this disgust illuminates the harmful dissonance of consumer culture, Wallace's writing achieves a redemptive bliss.

In this thesis, I will explore how Wallace uses an aesthetics of disgust to force readers to confront the effects of consumer pleasure. Beginning with several of his essays, I will lay out Wallace's ethical stance against irony and pleasure. In his essays, Wallace explores social rituals of late-capitalist culture that are driven by consumer pleasure. "E Unibus Pluram," "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again," and "Consider the Lobster" show how consumer culture controls people through self-referential systems of pleasure. With his ironic descriptions, Wallace recasts these consumer experiences as disgusting. In doing so, he demonstrates how ironic writing doesn't need to preclude meaning, as irony can produce visceral feelings that guide ethical behavior.

1: Guilty Pleasure: Consumption in the Essays

As I explain in the preceding section, David Foster Wallace has a problem with pleasure. But, despite his often extreme and urgent language, Wallace's writing is not completely fatalistic. "Both Flesh and Not: Federer as Religious Experience" suggests that it is possible to transcend the tyranny of irony by remaining critical and conscious within a self-referential system. In this essay, Wallace suggests that it is still possible, in late capitalist culture, to feel fulfilled by culture. This feeling is not as immediate as disgust, and requires one to understand the other people who share that culture.

Examining Wallace's essays sets up my discussion of *Infinite Jest*. The novel, I admit, is entertaining. The fun of *Infinite Jest* epitomizes the ironic contradiction that Wallace plays with in his essays. As Malcolm Boswell says, "The book itself is an 'infinite jest' – a seemingly endless source of readerly pleasure – yet it is also, paradoxically, both a diagnosis and a critique of the culture's addiction to pleasure" (119). I will show that Wallace uses an aesthetics of disgust to reveal the tension between consumer pleasure and empathic community. As a novel, *Infinite Jest* differs from Wallace's non-fiction by containing a panoply of characters. In constructing disabled and deformed characters, Wallace demonstrates how readerly disgust shapes our perception of other people. He immerses the reader in narratives that evoke disgust in order to challenge the easy accessibility of commodified aesthetics. Characters of *Infinite Jest* also demonstrate how aesthetic perfection can become disgusting. By playing with a reader's visceral reaction to characters, Wallace reveals how deeply unethical it is to regard people with disgust. In this revelation, he regards superficial people with disgust, producing an ironic conflict. The only way out of this ironic cycle of disgust is to

appreciate the inherit value of other people. *Infinite Jest* demonstrates that aesthetic pleasure should not determine who deserves empathy, attention, and love.

Many critics have used Wallace's essays to comment on his longer works. Adam Kelly says that within Wallace criticism, "for the most part the essay-interview nexus became an inescapable point of departure" (2009). In his seminal essay on the irony of television, Wallace captures the frustration of seeking authenticity in a culture of mass media. Published in 1993, "E Unibus Pluram" responds to decades of American TV culture. This essay has provided a foundation for David Foster Wallace scholarship. As Toon Staes says in "Wallace and Empathy: A Narrative Approach," "Early book-length studies see 'E Unibus Pluram' as a stepping stone, comparable to the influence 'The Literature of Exhaustion' had on the unfolding of John Barth's career" (25). Like Barth's essay, "E Unibus Pluram" calls for a new type of literature. In his essay, Barth claims that the aesthetic of high modernism is "exhausted," and should make way for a new (postmodern) literary aesthetic. In "E Unibus Pluram" Wallace claims that the self-consciousness of postmodernism is itself used up, and that writers should reconsider their relationship with literature. I claim that Wallace uses an aesthetics of disgust to challenge the slippery ironic pleasure of TV and postmodern literature.

"E Unibus Pluram" testifies to the power of mass culture. In 1944, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer published "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" to argue that capitalism controls and manipulates its consumers through the "culture industry" of mass media. They say, "Films, radio and magazines make up a system which is uniform and whole in every part" (1944). At the time Adorno and Horkheimer were writing, companies had begun to dominate Western culture by profiting

off of culture. The homogeneity of the culture industry has prevented individuals from asserting their autonomy and building communities outside of capitalist consumption.

Between the 1940s and the publication of "E Unibus Pluram," television began to dominate Western capitalist culture. In that span of time, society had widely become aware of the power of the culture industry, as mass culture became increasingly ubiquitous with the spread of radios and TV. While the culture industry was relatively new in the 40s, this novelty wore off by the 90s, as television became a part of everyday life. As more people watched more of the same things, television built its own culture and became an integral part of the Western experience. In "E Unibus Pluram," Wallace demonstrates how television came to dominate the modern American experience. He says, "Statisticians report that television is watched over six hours a day in the average American household" (*SFT* 22). This claim echoes Adorno and Horkheimer, who argue that "real life is becoming indistinguishable from the movies" (1944). If Americans spend several hours per day consuming television, televised images become an integral part of their conscious experience.

In "Simulacra and Simulation," Jean Baudrillard describes the unsettling reciprocal relationship between reality and simulation in the twentieth century. Writing in the 1980s, he says, "Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (1988). As TV replaces lived experiences, the portrayal of objects and events replaces whatever it portrays. Without a "real" signified, people in late capitalist cultures struggle to separate reality from its representation.

Adorno and Horkheimer distinguish between real life and media by explaining the artificiality of style. They say, "A style might be called artificial which is imposed from without on the refractory impulses of a form" (1944). The culture industry becomes the artificial counterpart of reality by stylizing life through the production and circulation of images. However, consumers internalize constructed forms as natural. Wallace argues that television had become powerful enough to define the norms of American culture. He says, "If we want to know what American normality is – what Americans want to regard as normal – we can trust television" (*SFT* 22). Because of the high rate of consumption and normalizing power of TV, Wallace believes that cultural critics must take the effects of television seriously.

Wallace looks to television to understand how his contemporary Americans engage with the world. In doing so, Wallace claims that people view television in order to fulfil their desires. He says, "Television, from the surface on down, is about desire" (*SFT* 22). However, there is something about this desire that Wallace finds superficial, unwholesome, and unfulfilling. As he says "desire is the sugar in human food" (*SFT* 22). By comparing the abstract, symbolic pleasure of television to a visceral desire for sugar, Wallace shows how the need to be stimulated, distracted and entertained comes from a fundamental urge for empathy and connection. When consumers seek fulfilment through superficial consumption, they become addicted to empty pleasure. Like sugar – which provides "empty" calories – TV can hook its consumers to a cycle of pleasure that TV can never fulfil.

By articulating the amount of time the average American spends watching TV, Wallace alienates his readers from their own habits. In this way, Wallace makes the

"normal" amount of TV consumption appear excessively unproductive. By comparing TV to sugar, Wallace depicts average TV viewing as a daily sugar binge. This makes the habitual action of TV appear not only unproductive but harmful and disgusting. By evoking disgust in his readers, Wallace forces them to consider their own participation in mass culture.

David Foster Wallace is the first to admit that "watching Television is pleasurable" (*SFT* 27). But how does TV achieve this pleasure? In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes discusses the experience of pleasurable reading. Barthes's book focuses on the pleasure of the written word, but I can apply his theories to other forms of media consumption. In his book, Barthes describes the pleasurable text as one that "contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading" (14). A pleasurable text, as a product of culture, is imbedded within systems of consumption and does not challenge or transcend those systems. These types of media work within the manipulative culture industry that Adorno and Horkheimer describe.

For Wallace, TV is a paradigm of pleasurable text. As he says, the "text" of television does not just come from culture, but also constructs what people consider normal. Wallace argues that TV creates a self-referential system. In Wallace's lifetime, TV has accumulated enough of its own signifiers to construct an artificial symbolic system that constantly gestures at itself. He claims that "Television used to point beyond itself" (*SFT* 33) at some objective other. Though Wallace doesn't explain how TV ever pointed "beyond itself," he shows that TV in the 90s has transcended the need to gesture outwards, and instead refers to its own signifiers.

To illustrate the self-referential mode of TV, Wallace discusses "*St. Elsewhere* episode 94, originally broadcast in 1988, aired on Boston's Channel 38 immediately following two back-to-back episodes of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*" (*SFT* 30-31). This episode ends with a character throwing her hat into air, as a reference Mary Tyler Moore. The actress who originally played Mary cameoed on that very episode of *St. Elsewhere*, further producing irony. Or consider *Seinfeld*, the most successful TV show of the 90s, which claimed to be "a show about nothing." Nothing, of course, except for its own signifiers, clearly enumerated by episode titles: "The Soup Nazi," "The Little Kicks," "The Contest." To use Baudrillard's terms, by the late twentieth century the "simulation" of T.V. transcended its referent to become "hyperreal," a simulacrum that precedes aesthetic production. Of course, *Seinfeld* and *St. Elsewhere* do point to things – such as cities, people, and current events – that exist beyond TV. However, the crux of *Seinfeld* is the regression of its aesthetic – everybody is always in on the joke, because the only context we need is the show.

TV points towards itself through self-referential images, which produces a second-degree pleasure. Not only does TV cohere with the broader consumer culture, but it also forms a bounded system within mass culture. This system produces pleasure through irony. As I've said, Wallace claims that "irony and ridicule are entertaining and effective, and that at the same time they are agents of a great despair and stasis in U.S. culture" (49). Televisual irony simultaneously overwhelms viewers with sensory experience and flatters them for watching TV. Because TV combines images with sound, "televisual irony works…with sights that undercut what's said" (*SFT* 35). By engaging multiple senses, TV can present its viewers with simultaneous conflicting messages. As

Wallace says, "Lovable warlocks on *Bewitched* and commercially Satanic heavy-metal videos on *Top Ten Countdown* run opposite airbrushed preachers decrying demonism in U.S. culture" (*SFT* 30). The juxtaposition of Bewitched and religion is ironic in the cultural logic that exists beyond mass media. However, witches and preachers appear perfectly natural alongside each other on TV.

By naturalizing irony, TV prevents deconstruction from subverting mass culture. The only way to reconcile the opposing messages of TV is to keep watching and subordinate "real world" logic to the power of irony. In this, TV becomes hyperreal, playing off of signifiers with no real meaning. By exploiting its audience's familiarity with TV, irony makes viewers feel like insiders, while preventing them seeing beyond TV's self-referential system. TV in the 90s reached an apex of power that the culture industry was only beginning to approach when Adorno and Horkheimer were writing in the 40s. Through television, mass media bame a fundamental part of American public and private life.

In "HYPERESTHESIA, or, The Sensual Logic of Late Capitalism," David Howes explains how sensory experiences overwhelm consumers in late capitalist societies. He says that "Consumer capitalism has…increasingly made it its business to engage as many senses as possible in its drive for product differentiation and the distraction/seduction of the consumer" (288). The intense sensory overload of late-capitalist consumerism allows businesses and brands to manipulate consumers. For example, Howes says that "when choosing between two similar food or beverage products, 81 percent of consumers would choose one they could both smell and see over one they could only see" (288). This

shows how producers can sway consumer decisions by engaging senses, rather than changing their product.

Capitalizing on sensory experience – such as offering a sample taste of food – may seem benign in moderation. However, at its extreme, producers can dominate consumers by flooding their senses. Howes refers to this overwhelming sensory experience as "*hyperesthesia*" (288). Hyperesthesia is an aesthetic experience where the consumer lacks agency. By engaging both hearing and sight, and providing many channels of entertainment, TV viewing often becomes hyperesthetic. In his criticisms of consumer culture, Howes demonstrates that pleasure is not something that individuals consciously achieve through aesthetic pursuits. Rather, hyperesthesia prevents consumers from achieving cultural and historical consciousness, turning them into the pawns of consumer capitalism.

When individuals are overwhelmed with images, they lack the time or focus to understand those images. In this way, the glut of television in the 1990s controlled its viewers through sensory experience. Experiencing the hyperesthesia of mass culture, TV consumers sought fulfilment in the superficial pleasures of images. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes provides a semiotic explanation for the construction of pleasure. He says that the pleasure of the text is "value shifted to the sumptuous rank of the signifier" (65). As Wallace explains in "E Unibus Pluram," TV uses images to create its own insular system of value. Through the self-reference that Wallace criticizes, the culture industry turns the aesthetic experience of watching TV into an end in itself.

Even the critics of television are caught within TV's self-reflexive system. Wallace points out that "younger Americans grew up as much with people's disdain for

TV as we did with TV itself" (*SFT* 27). This disdain didn't prevent younger Americans from watching TV, as many of them watch TV in order to ridicule it. Wallace says, "I'm not alone in having acquaintances I hate to watch TV with because they so clearly loathe it…and yet are just as clearly obsessed with it" (*SFT* 29). Wallace argues that nobody in 1990s America – whether "for" or "against" TV – could escape the influence of television. Wallace articulates the tyrannical power of TV when he says, "TV…has become able to capture and neutralize any attempt to change or even protest the attitudes of passive unease and cynicism TV requires of Audience" (*SFT* 50). By capturing and neutralizing discontent, TV absorbs its own subversion. This process echoes Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis of the culture industry. They wrote, "Anyone who resists can only survive by fitting in. Once his particular brand of deviation from the norm has been noted by the industry, he belongs to [the industry]" (1944). Because TV produces pleasure through irony, you don't have to be on the side of TV in order to enjoy it.

The oppressive irony of television demonstrates the slipperiness of pleasure and desire. The culture industry can control its consumers by responding to their actions, allowing mass culture to mirror their desires back onto consumers. This is why, for Wallace, TV is all about desire: televised images exploit the desires of its viewers to keep people watching. But if many of Wallace's friends despised TV, why did they keep watching? Is something about TV's irony irresistible to cynics? Desire is notoriously tricky to pin down, but capitalism doesn't differentiate between earnest corporate loyalty and tongue-in-cheek consumption. Irony allows TV to expand its market. If people desire content that undermines the logic of TV, that's exactly what TV will provide.

Wallace isn't satisfied with a televisual culture that perpetuates media consumption. As Toon Staes says, "It is an established fact in Wallace criticism that he – in his own words – sought to reinstate a 'meaningful connection' between literature and the outside world (*SFT* 33)" (24). Wallace wanted to break out of the meaningless cycles of media consumption to pursue some kind of higher good. This "higher good" is necessarily vague because Wallace can't write down the thing that exists beyond literature.

At the end of "E Unibus Pluram," Wallace envisions a future of writers who combat the self-reflexive irony of late twentieth-century popular culture. He says, "The next real literary "rebels" in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of '*anti*-rebels,'…who have the childish gall actually to endorse single-entendre values" (*SFT* 81). In this, Wallace suggests that it may be possible for literature to redeem the pleasure-driven culture of late capitalism. In his theory of a "blissful text," Barthes also posits a literature that exceeds pleasure. For Barthes, the text of bliss opposes the text of pleasure. He says that the blissful text "imposes a state of loss…discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions" (14). Rather than comforting consumers and cementing mass culture, the blissful text disrupts the conventions that allow for pleasurable consumption.

Barthes says that bliss is not part of a symbolic system, as "pleasure can be expressed in words, [but] bliss cannot" (21). Bliss cannot be articulated because it is what allows readers to understand the artificiality of aesthetic pleasure. As Barthes says, a blissful text "brings to a crisis [the reader's] relation with language" (14). A literature of bliss produces knowledge by forcing its readers to confront the artificiality of

communication. As Adorno and Horkheimer argue, all stylized forms are artificial, and aesthetics are consciously refined forms. A blissful literature draws attention to language to unhinge the system that allows it to exist. In calling for "single-entendre values," Wallace signals the need for a blissful text that transcends the ironic play of TV.

The end of "E Unibus Pluram" is pretty nebulous. What are the "single entendre values" that Wallace believes can save people from spiraling into an unfulfilling life of empty self-absorption? In "Our Aesthetic Categories," Sianne Ngai updates Adorno and Horkheimer's theory, stressing its relevance in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Ngai says that "the concept of 'aesthetic' has been transformed by the performance-driven, information-saturated and networked, hypercommodified world of late capitalism" (948). Ngai argues that aesthetic production drives capitalist expansion. She quotes Frederic Jameson as saying, "frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods…now assigns an increasingly structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation" (951). For Wallace, this "experimentation" tends to look like self-referentiality. When an artwork has no incentive to exist beyond its own consumption, it need not signal whatever "external reality" may exist beyond the culture industry. Moreover, when the same experimentation that defines avant-garde art fuels the expansion of the consumer culture, *any* kind of literature seems like a futile way to address the harm of a consumerist society.

Given the tyranny of irony, it can be tempting to understand Wallace as disregarding all aesthetic representations. However, Adorno warns against this impulse in *Aesthetic Theory*. He says, "It is claimed that the age of art is over; now it is a matter of realizing its truth content, which is facilely equated with art's social content: The verdict

is totalitarian" (251). Adorno recognizes that aesthetic representations are valuable when they "reach beyond" the individual. But, it's naïve and harmful to imagine that we can ever skip the art and go straight to the "beyond." As Adorno explains, art should lead its audience to grapple with and understand their cultural situation. He says, "Art does not stand in need of an aesthetics that will prescribe norms where it finds itself in difficulty, but rather of an aesthetics that will provide the capacity for reflection, *which art on its own is hardly able to achieve*" (251, emphasis added). Here, Adorno clearly notes the shortcoming of any kind of aesthetics, in that an artwork alone can't allow for an audience to reflect on the cultural context of the art. This is the problem with self-reflexive irony. When an image (or set of images on TV) portrays itself as the end-all be-all of cultural experience, it prevents viewers from understanding how that image relates to rest of culture. Hence, the totalitarianism of irony. However, eliminating aesthetics completely also prevents individual reflection, as art allows people to critique their surrounding world. So, what kind of art leads to valuable reflection? Given the ubiquity of the culture industry, can that art even exist?

For a blissful text to evoke a crisis with language, this text must force the reader to struggle with disorienting and unpleasant feelings. In *ugly feelings*, Ngai explores the "negative emotions" that literary criticism often ignores. In the Afterword to her book, Ngai considers the idiom of disgust, as opposed to the more-discussed idea of desire. She says, "Disgust is urgent and specific; desire can be ambivalent and vague" (337). Because of this, understanding disgust is crucial to addressing how people are motivated to act in the real world. Ngai says, "In fixing its object as 'intolerable,' disgust undeniably has been and will continue to be instrumentalized in oppressive and violent ways" (340).

Because disgust is so more visceral and less subtle than desire, Ngai claims that "disgust [diagnoses] the dilemma of social powerlessness" (353). Disgust is a single-entendre value. The unequivocal exclusion of the truly disgusting isn't cheeky or ironic, but real, ubiquitous, and harmful.

In "E Unibus Pluram," Wallace makes TV appear disgusting. Adults don't want to think of themselves as eating sugar for six hours every day – the metaphor that Wallace uses to describe the pleasure of TV. Wallace's other essays further exemplifly what I term his "aesthetics of disgust." In "A Supposedly Fun Thing That I'll Never Do Again," Wallace documents his first – and last – 7 Night Caribbean (7NC) cruise. With "Supposedly Fun Thing," Wallace portrays a self-reflexive system of pleasure that, at first, seems more real than TV. As Wallace says, TV (in the 90s) consists of "EM-propelled analog waves and ionized streams and rear-screen chemical reactions throwing off phosphenes in grids of dots" (*SFT* 24), rather than the material objects of a cruise ship. And yet, the experience of a luxury cruise mimics the self-reflexivity of TV.

Wallace's cruise actualizes the metaphorical gluttony of television. On the first page of "Supposedly Fun Thing," Wallace compares the sights of his cruise to sugar: "I have seen sucrose beaches and water a very bright blue" (*SFT* 256). This detail shows how Wallace's experiences on the cruise are, like TV, all about desire. The remainder of the essay demonstrates the real connection between food and pleasure, as his narrator often talks about what and how much he's eating. Wallace says, "I have had escargot, duck, Baked Alaska, salmon w/ fennel, a marzipan pelican, and an omelette made with what were alleged to be trace amounts of Etruscan truffle" (*SFT* 258). The food aboard the ship is always gourmet, representing the cruise's eagerness to provide its clients with

more than is necessary. Aboard the ship, gourmet cuisine helps form the hyperesthesia that occupies and distracts the passenger. Like TV, the cruise uses stylized aesthetic experiences such as classy food to overwhelm consumers with pleasure.

The food on Wallace's cruise must be exceptional because it lives up to a standard of luxury. Describing the conversation at his dining table, Wallace says, "I had never before been party to such a minute and exacting analysis of the food and service of a meal I was just at that moment eating" (*SFT* 272). By analyzing the meal, the people aboard the ship may appear to be asserting their autonomy in determining the quality of their food. However, Wallace makes clear that the cruise sets its own standards. He explains that the cruise companies use advertisements to construct a fantasy that they fulfill over the course of the cruise: "In the cruise brochure's ads, you are excused from doing the work of constructing the fantasy. The ads do it for you. The ads, therefore, don't flatter your adult agency, or even ignore it – they supplant it" (*SFT* 267). To return to Barthes's terms, the pleasure of the cruise "comes from culture and does not break with it" (14). The culture of the cruise is one that advertisers have constructed to manipulate consumers for financial gain. Wallace says, "Advertisements have certain formal, legal obligations to truthfulness, but these are broad enough to allow for a great deal of rhetorical maneuvering in the fulfillment of an advertisement's primary obligation, which is to serve the financial interest of its sponsor" (*SFT* 288). By pre-conditioning their clients to expect a certain experience, advertisements create a hyperreality for the Caribbean cruise. The hyperreal experience allows cruise companies to profit by preventing passengers from seeing beyond the constructed image of luxury.

As part of media culture, ads are immaterial. Advertisements exist in the same symbolic and aesthetic world as television. And yet, ads construct the material experience of being aboard a cruise ship. In "Supposedly Fun Thing," Wallace takes "E Unibus Pluram" one step further by showing how an immaterial culture can create "real" experiences. The luxury cruise ship, in meeting the standards that it sets through advertisements, creates a self-referential system that mirrors TV. Moreover, cruise companies often advertise on television. Both TV and luxury cruises are designed to profit off of consumers, and these systems work together to exploit consumer pleasure for financial gain.

In examining the construction of luxury, Wallace demonstrates how aesthetics alienate consumers from the material reality of their consumption. Wallace says, "There's never a chance to feel actual physical hunger on a Luxury Cruise" (*SFT* 335). The 7NC luxury cruise allows consumers to exchange money to have their physical needs fulfilled. Wallace describes the cruise's obsessive attention to detail: "It is everywhere…you look: evidence of a steely determination to indulge the passenger in ways that go far beyond any halfway-sane passenger's own expectations" (*SFT* 292). In particular, Wallace notices that the staff of the cruise is fixated with cleanliness. He says "mysterious invisible room-cleaning is in a way great, every true slob's fantasy, somebody materializing and deslobbing your room and then dematerializing – like having a mom without the guilt" (*SFT* 297). Having someone clean up after lets you avoid all the gross stuff of living. As Blakey Vermuele says in "The Terrible Master: David Foster Wallace and the Suffering of Consciousness," "Wallace has the courage to address this infantile wanting part in all of us" (114). The 7NC cruise is engineered to flatter its passengers'

internal infants. By depicting adult passengers as slobbering and helpless children, Wallace evokes disgust at pleasure-driven consumption.

The high tech "vacuum toilet" that Wallace describes in detail highlights how the cruise separates its customer's experiences from their objective realities. Wallace draws this connection explicitly when he says, "It's pretty hard not to see connections between the exhaust fan and the toilet's vacuums—an almost Final Solution-like eradication of animal wastes and odors–and the death-denial/-transcendence fantasies that the 7NC Luxury Megacruise is trying to enable" (*SFT* 305). As Wallace shows, luxury is as concerned with avoiding disgust as with fulfilling consumer desire. In its close attention to detail, the cruise hides the gross realities of mortal life (shit) and constructs a fantasy for passengers. This fantasy privileges pleasure and comfort above all else, creating a consumer culture that avoids disgust in favor of personal desire.

While Wallace enjoys the cruise's cleaning service, its fixation on cleanliness unsettles him. He says that "deep down, it's not *really* like having a mom. *Pace* the guilt and nagging, etc., a mom cleans up after you largely because she loves you" (298). As with advertising, the cruise ship's commitment to excellence is not so much about making the client happy as maximizing the company's profits. This realization stresses Wallace out. He asks, "if pampering and radical kindness don't seem motivated by strong affection…of what final and significant value is all this indulgence and cleaning?" (*SFT* 298). When a mother cleans for her children, she is bearing a burden that allows her children to grow. But, a luxury cruise intentionally blinds its passengers from things that might bother them – a bubble for those who can afford it.

Towards the end of "Supposedly Fun Thing," Wallace mocks the cruise ship by pointing out holes in the luxurious façade. His biggest complaint about this ship is that

> soda-pop is not free, not even at dinner: you have to order a Mr. Pibb from the [restaurant's] maddeningly E.S.L.-hampered cocktail waitress just like it was a fucking Slippery Nipple, and then you have to sign for it right there at the table, and they charge you—and they don't even have Mr. Pibb; they foist Dr Pepper on you with a maddeningly unapologetic shrug when any fool knows Dr Pepper is no substitute for Mr. Pibb, and it's an absolute goddamned travesty, or at any rate extremely dissatisfying indeed. (*SFT* 318)

This long, whiny, and ironic critique proves how the luxury of the cruise ship increases Wallace's tolerance for pleasure. Even though Wallace entered the cruise as a reporter, by the end he is as petty and near-sighted as any pleasure-minded consumer. This demonstrates how media and the service industry can absorb even the most mindful and critical person into an infantilizing cycle of consumption.

By identifying flaws in the luxury of the 7NC cruise, Wallace draws attention to the artifice of consumer pleasure. As Kiki Benzon says in "Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders," "Wallace's work mines the 'porousness of certain borders' by focusing on the anomalous elements of apparently continuous and coherent systems and amplifying these anomalies to the point where idiosyncrasy becomes the rule rather than the exception" (107). A luxury cruise is the prime example of the type of system Benzon describes. While the cruise is designed to produce pleasure, Wallace identifies holes in the luxury to suggest that no experience of aesthetic pleasure can be completely perfect. In this, the aesthetic experience is defined by its flaws.

Benzon emphasizes the importance of gaps within a self-reflexive system. She says that "self-referential systems generate energy and new information, illustrating that while systems might be odious in themselves, their 'pores' may be sites of creativity" (107). Wallace creates a new image of luxury cruises by depicting consumption as disgustingly petty. Wallace's complaint about Dr Pepper makes readers uncomfortable. It's disorienting to read someone articulate the logic that drives consumer culture. As in his discussion of TV, Wallace describes his feelings of consumerism to disassociate his readers from their own consumerist habits. Wallace's depiction of the cruise is not just uncomfortable but disgusting. Readers that see themselves in Wallace's narrator can hardly bear to look into the mirror he holds to consumerism. And yet this feeling of shame allows "Supposedly Fun Thing" to be more than a fun and glossy image of a luxury cruise.

It's hardly a stretch to think of television and cruise ships as constructed fantasies. TV viewers know that a production company created the images on their screen, and passengers understand that cruises exist to please them. With "Consider the Lobster," Wallace takes on a more subtle cultural criticism. This essay documents Wallace's trip to a lobster festival in Maine. Besides recounting his experience, Wallace deconstructs how we understand the meaning of "lobster." He begins by defining lobster taxonomically, as "a marine crustacean of the family Homaridae, characterized by five pairs of jointed legs, the first pair terminating in large pincerish claws used for subduing prey" (*CL* 237). Wallace also examines the cultural significance of the lobster, challenging its high-class status by tracing the historical associations of lobster. Wallace says, "Up until sometime in the 1800s, though, lobster was literally low-class food, eaten only by the poor and

institutionalized" (*CL* 237). He follows this with the modern perspective on lobster to show how the meaning over lobster has evolved: "Now, of course, lobster is posh, a delicacy, only a step or two down from caviar…In the US pop-food imagination, lobster is now the seafood analog to steak" (*CL* 238). Wallace uses historical information to show that our intuitive associations with lobster are not intrinsic to the animal itself.

By articulating the biological and historical context of lobster, Wallace makes eating lobster seem pretty disgusting. He chooses his language intentionally to disassociate his readers from their preconception of delicious lobster – who wants to eat a "crustacean" with "large pincerish claws"? Wallace also evokes disgust by framing lobster as the cuisine of "the poor and institutionalized." Would modern-day foodies want to eat the fast food and processed junk that many low-income people eat in the twenty-first century?

After describing the history and biology of lobsters, Wallace questions the ethics of consuming the animal. Wallace argues that lobsters feel pain, and that, when people reveal discomfort at cooking lobster, those people are acknowledging that lobsters feel pain. He says that, when thrown into a pot of boiling water, "the lobster acts as if it's in terrible pain, causing some cooks to leave the kitchen altogether and to take one of those little lightweight plastic oven timers with them into another room and wait until the whole process is over" (*CL* 248). This image acknowledges the disgust that many people feel while cooking lobster. Cooking a lobster evokes a visceral reaction that makes people physically leave their kitchens. Clearly, there is something to boiling lobsters that doesn't feel right.

Laying out the ethical question that guides his essay, Wallace asks, "Is it all right to boil a sentient creature alive just for our gustatory pleasure?" (*CL* 243). Although lobster consumers think of their meal as exquisite and sophisticated, eating a lobster requires us to achieve pleasure at the expense of another living being. As on the Caribbean cruise, luxury produces the value of eating lobster. By deconstructing a practice that many consider luxurious, Wallace recasts "gustatory pleasure" as disgusting.

Recognizing that the perception of lobster has changed over time, Wallace wonders how the norms of consumption will change in the future: "Is it not possible that future generations will regard our own present agribusiness and eating practices in much the same way we now view Nero's entertainments or Mengele's experiments?" (*CL* 253). By raising this question, Wallace makes his readers to feel complicit in perpetuating a questionable practice. Wallace imagines a future where eating lobster is perceived the way eugenics was perceived in 2003. By doing so, Wallace uses the reader's visceral reaction to unethical behavior to suggest that our current practices could (and maybe should) evoke similar disgust.

Wallace's discussion of lobster consumption recalls *The Pleasure of the Text*. The image, feel, and taste of lobster creates an aesthetic experience that is associated with delicacy. Eating lobster – like a pleasurable text – aligns with existing cultural norms. In questioning the morality of consuming lobster, Wallace aims to disrupt the cultural conventions that many take for granted. Wallace's inquiry forces his readers to consider the ways that we establish meaning. Many people have been conditioned to boil lobster despite their feelings of disgust. In "Consider the Lobster," Wallace draws attention to those unarticulated feelings. Once again, he is focusing on the "pores" in a system of

consumer pleasure. By doing so, he encourages his readers to critique their own consumption.

At the end of "Consider the Lobster," Wallace asks whether a true connoisseur would care about something beyond the thing's aesthetic pleasure. He asks "isn't being extra aware and attentive and thoughtful about one's food and its overall context part of what distinguishes a real gourmet? Or is all the gourmet's extra attention and sensibility just supposed to be aesthetic, gustatory?" (*CL* 254). By evoking disgust in deconstructing the cultural context of lobster, Wallace demonstrates the slipperiness of aesthetic pleasure. When you consider the lobster, you realize that eating it is pretty gross.

In "E Unibus Pluram," "Supposedly Fun Thing," and "Consider the Lobster," Wallace tears apart consumer culture. Given the disgust that Wallace evokes in his discussion of consumerism, is there any positive way to engage with culture? Actually, yes. By discussing the beauty of tennis, Wallace demonstrates how caring about others can redeem the self-absorption of consumer pleasure.

Published in 2006, Wallace's article "Both Flesh and Not: Federer as Religious Experience" explores the inarticulable experience of watching Roger Federer play tennis. In his early essays, Wallace is a devoted iconoclast. His writing deconstructs the images that people take for granted to reveal how TV, cruise ships, and lobster festivals exploit consumer desire. Iconoclasts teach people to be disgusted by the images that control them. But iconoclasm can only go so far, and can even contradict its own ends. As Baudrillard says in "Simulacra and Simulation," "iconoclasts, who are often accused of despising and denying images, were in fact the ones who accorded them their actual worth" (1988). To avoid fetishizing the very images that he attacks, Wallace must replace

the harmful image with something else. However, for Wallace that "something else" can never be just aesthetic pleasure. As he says in an interview, fiction must make information "contextual," not merely convey information (Stivers 1996). Text can only lead to bliss by gesturing towards a broader context.

In "Federer as Religious Experience," Wallace demonstrates the impossibility of writing the ineffable. He says, "You…have to come at the aesthetic stuff obliquely, or talk around it" (2006). Wallace doesn't want to capture his experience, but rather testify that it happened. By doing so, Wallace suggests that there *is* something real – not merely symbolic – that he experienced.

Wallace's deep connection to Federer comes from his knowledge of the tennis and connection to other tennis enthusiasts. Demonstrating his tennis knowledge, Wallace describes how modern tennis has come to be dominated by "power baseline" technique that favors strength over nuance. Despite this, Federer has achieved greatness by infinitely refining his touch, proving the limitations of brute force in tennis. As Wallace says "The generic power-baseline game is not boring…But it is somewhat static and limited…The player who's shown this to be true is Roger Federer. And he's shown it from within the modern game" (2006). Federer's technique is not merely finesse, as he combines his nuance with the power that has come to be standard in modern tennis. Wallace says that "The *within* is what's important here…With Federer, it's not either/or" (2006). By combining strength with strategic genius, Federer pushes beyond the stasis of brute force. In this, he "exposed the limits, and possibilities, of men's tennis as it's now played" (2006). Before he can transcend tennis, Federer must take the game on its own terms. Wallace argues that Federer can "see, or create, gaps and angles for winners that

no one else can envision" (2006). This insight can only come out of a careful, intelligent mind attuned to both the interior structures of tennis and the potential for its revision.

Wallace also achieves a powerful connection to Federer by connecting to other tennis fans. He says, "The specific thesis here is that if you've never seen the young man play live, and then do, in person, on the sacred grass of Wimbledon…then you are apt to have what one of the tournament's press bus drivers describes as a 'bloody near-religious experience'" (2006). The bus driver is not an afterthought but the center of Wallace's experience. In their writing, journalists don't typically acknowledge people who drive their buses. Journalists see bus drivers as part of the functional machinery of competitive tennis. And yet, Wallace makes sure to mention his driver. By doing so, Wallace focuses on the "pores" of a system of competitive tennis that worships high-profile players and corporate sponsors. In a footnote to the last paragraph of Wallace's article, we see how much the bus driver's comment framed Wallace's experience. After seeing Federer play, Wallace recalls "the earnest way the press bus driver promised just this experience. Because there is one" (2006). Because Wallace trusted the bus driver's testimony, his knowledge of tennis allowed him to reach a transcendent level of tennis fandom.

Like Federer, Wallace both engages with and resists the conventions of his craft. As I've discussed, Wallace disparages self-reflexive irony, while his own writing is fundamentally ironic. By examining Federer's playing style, Wallace suggests how his readers can reconcile the contradiction of Wallace's ironic writing. Wallace claims that Federer combines power and finesse to show how thoughtful strategy exceeds brute force. As Wallace says, "just to see, close up, power and aggression made vulnerable to beauty is to feel inspired and (in a fleeting, mortal way) reconciled" (2006). While the

secret to Federer's genius remains elusive, it's enough for Wallace to witness and confess the bliss of watching Federer. In depicting his experience, Wallace hopes that his readers can have the same trust for him that Wallace had for the press bus driver.

Irony is to Wallace as power is to Federer. For Wallace, irony has become the easy and standard way for literature and media to produce pleasure. However, Wallace wants his readers to experience something that requires more attention and thought than irony, but provides a much greater reward. By contrasting the standard, brutal tennis method with Federer's finely-tuned style, Wallace shows that the tennis community was wrong in predicting "power baseline" as the final stage of tennis strategy. Similarly, Wallace refuses to let self-reflexive irony dominate literature.

In his essays, Wallace criticizes irony while being ironic himself. By doing so, he suggests that irony can help awaken readers, but also insists that literature must aim to exceed self-referentiality. As a work of literature, *Infinite Jest* falls into the very patterns that Wallace detests in late capitalist culture. As Timothy Aubry says in "Selfless Cravings: Addiction and Recovery in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*," "Wallace treats the excesses of postmodern culture as concomitant with larger trends in contemporary American society, namely, narcissism, self-indulgence, and an addiction to the ephemeral pleasures of popular entertainment" (206). To cure American culture of self-absorbed irony, *Infinite Jest* binges on the very techniques that Wallace opposes.

Wallace awakens his readers by evoking disgust. In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace illustrates characters and settings – such as drug addicts and dumpsters – that readers would typically consider disgusting. Meanwhile, Wallace casts conventional beauty in a grotesque light, as when Joelle van Dyne claims to be so beautiful that she's deformed. In

this way, Wallace uses aesthetics to reveal the unequivocal nature of disgust. This realization allows readers to build a relationship with culture that they couldn't achieve within the pleasure of self-reflexive irony.

Infinite Jest demonstrates the need to build community in order to achieve a blissful connection with culture. After all, culture and knowledge can't exist without the faith that leads to intersubjectivity. As Wallace says in his (very) short story, "A Radically Condensed History of Postindustrial Life": "One never knew, after all, now did one now did one now did one" (*BI* 0).

2: Who's There?

0. The Belly of the Beast: Entering *Infinite Jest*

I will use Wallace's discussion of self-reflexive irony to approach *Infinite Jest*. First, I acknowledge that the novel is unrelentingly ironic. Starting from the title, the narrative plays with the signifiers of classic literature, politics, mass media, math, corporate culture, and various other discourses. In abrupt shifts between narratives, settings, and perspective, *Infinite Jest* mimics the televisual aesthetic that Wallace challenges in "E Unibus Pluram." Wallace also uses conventional literary irony, through various jargon, self-reference, and disdain for literary convention. Wallace's critics have discussed the apparent tension between Wallace's rejection of irony and the content of *Infinite Jest*. As Catherine Nichols says in "Dialogizing Postmodern Carnival," "In a

seeming contradiction, Wallace uses irony, metafiction, and polyphonic intertextuality" (14) throughout the novel, contradicting his own stated ethos.

Although the irony of *Infinite Jest* seems to reject the ethos of Wallace's essays, the novel does something different than Wallace's non-fiction writing. *Infinite Jest* can illustrate the problems of consumer culture by creating a world where self-reflexive irony dominates every facet of life. For Wallace to make art that does something more than produce pleasure, he must demonstrate how harmful and empty it is to privilege individual pleasure. To do this, Wallace creates characters that suffer from the afflictions of irony and consumer pleasure. *Infinite Jest* is full of characters with various addictions and compulsions that come from pursuing pleasure and perfection. Characters are marked and defined by the substances, images or ideas that they consume. Wallace's characters allow readers to distance themselves from their own consumer habits. By evoking feelings of disgust for these characters, Wallace undoes the irony of consumer culture to cast self-centered pleasure as a "single-entendre" problem.

Many characters in *Infinite Jest* pursue idealized images of themselves. However, the narrative of *Infinite Jest* depicts this idealization as deformity. The students at E.T.A., who are training to be star tennis players, are often described as monstrously lopsided or animalistic. Joelle van Dyne, who claims to have a perfect appearance, wears a veil to hide the "deformity" of her beauty. James Incandenza makes a film that is so flawlessly pleasurable that it kills anyone who watches it. By testing the limits of aesthetic perfection, *Infinite Jest* ponders whether anyone would *want* consumer pleasure to reach the logical end of constant entertainment.

Characters in *Infinite Jest* define themselves through their consumer choices. Because of this, they are more like products than people – they are what they eat. When talking to Michael Pemulis, Hal Incandenza sums up consumerist ideology by saying, "Some vital part of my like personhood would die without something to ingest. That is your view" (1066). While Michael, a habitual drug-user, seems okay with defining himself by consumption, Hal insists that he exists as a person, not just a product. The second paragraph of the novel consists of Hal narrating. He says, "I am in here" (3). This often-quoted line points in two directions simultaneously. In one sense, Hal is asserting his existence: "*I am* in here." In the other, Hal is locating himself as contained within the text: "I am *in here*." This ironic wordplay raises a question. Conley Wouters cites Stephen Burn as saying that "many of Infinite Jest's most commonly discussed themes all derive from the timeless question of Hamlet's opening line: 'Who's there?' (Reader's Guide 40)" (169). Who *is* there? Is there more to being a person than being a consumer?

Wallace uses literature to build community as well as produce pleasure. Admittedly, *Infinite Jest* is a very funny book. However, for Wallace to redirect the ethical attention of his readers, he evokes disgust at the excessive consumption of drugs, food, entertainment, and other "Substances." The pleasurable irony of *Infinite Jest* engages readers, but Wallace uses ironic techniques to pursue an ethical agenda. In forcing readers to recognize their visceral disgust, Wallace anchors his writing in something more solid than irony. By doing so, he makes readers vulnerable and aware of their own participation in unethical consumption. In exploiting the visceral disgust of his readers, Wallace engenders the "single-entendre" values that lead people to trust and respect others.

Wallace's characters embody the weakness to pleasure that consumer culture requires. This chapter will examine particular characters to show how they navigate a world that prioritizes aesthetic pleasure. Through these characters, the narrative challenges conventional notions of beauty by making idealistic characters appear disgusting. The characters that most aggressively pursue aesthetic perfection appear the most deformed. Meanwhile, characters with physical disabilities or drug addictions – who would appear dirty or deformed outside of the novel – are not disgusted by others, but work hard to have faith in other people.

In the next section I will examine deformity in *Infinite Jest*. The novel's narrative is split mostly between Enfield Tennis Academy (E.T.A.), an upscale boarding school, and Ennet House, a halfway house down the hill from E.T.A. Generally, these places remain separated, and the members of these institutions embody the difference between the two settings. At E.T.A., the students are constantly working to transform their bodies into tennis machines. Meanwhile, the people at Ennet House are often tattooed, unhealthy, or otherwise marked by substance abuse. The novel demonstrates that in their pursuit of perfection, the tennis players are as deformed as the marginalized people of Ennet house.

By juxtaposing the characters of Joelle van Dyne and Mario Incandenza, I can analyze the tension between E.T.A. and Ennet House. Joelle and Mario navigate between E.T.A. and Ennet to undermine the social and aesthetic hierarchy that these two places represent. In claiming to be beautiful and deformed at the same time, Joelle challenges how people understand and measure beauty. Joelle doesn't just attack visual ideals, but *undoes* beauty – she "de-forms" herself. Joelle is compelled to hide her "beauty" because

it disgusts her. Conversely, Mario Incandenza is disabled and deformed in many different ways, but embodies selfless empathy. Mario demonstrates how aesthetic pleasure isn't aligned with human connection. As I will discuss later, the substance addicts at E.T.A. overcome their dependence on pleasure by identifying themselves with others. *Infinite Jest* reveals how the idea of deformity can only exist in contrast to a "normal" – and superior – aesthetic. Because of this hierarchy of aesthetics, many characters invest their self-worth in the image they project to other people.

After looking at deformity, I will examine the Incandenza family to understand how self-centeredness impedes empathy. Avril and James, mother and father of the Incandenza family, both try to embody selflessness in order to connect with their children. However, because these parents both try to reach their children through superficial means, these attempts backfire horribly and divide the family. Avril fashions herself into a mother who always appears as supportive and open as she possibly can, and James creates the most entertaining work of art that has ever existed. Both parents produce images for their children to consume. However, Orin and Hal easily see through Avril's constructed façade, and James's film ends up being so pleasurable that it kills anyone watching it. *Infinite Jest* shows that the pursuits of Avril and James are not only fruitless, but cruel, self-defeating, and disgusting. Avril and James demonstrate that even well-constructed images fail to build empathy if they are designed to produce pleasure. This reflects the futility of consumer culture, which avoids the serious needs of consumers by ironizing its own triviality.

In the final section of this chapter, I discuss how Don Gately to understand how he went from seeking pleasure through drugs to investing his self-worth in other people.

Along with other characters addicted to drugs, Gately reached a point in his consumption that forced him to "Come In" to recovery. Everyone living in Ennet represents the broken promise of pleasure, as excessive drug use leads to horrible psychic and physical pain. Gately is able to connect to others by regularly attending Alcoholics Anonymous, where he hears the stories of other addicts. Through AA, addicts can embody more than the desire for their substance, as they all share their perspectives and help others overcome their addictions. AA works for Gately because he follows the lessons of the program, even if he doesn't quite believe them. By embodying ethical behavior, Gately actively rejects consumer pleasure and turns to a "Higher Power." By demonstrating his faith in the "Higher Power" that guides AA, Gately learns to free himself from the tyranny of pleasure.

1. De-formed: Undoing Aesthetic Pleasure

In *Infinite Jest*, the bodies of various characters demonstrate the conflict between value and form. Through the players at E.T.A., Wallace shows how the pursuit of physical perfection can make a body seem abnormal and deformed. Conversely, Mario Incandenza demonstrates how a conventionally "deformed" exterior may hide – or possibly enable – a perfect interior character. The narrative of *Infinite Jest* splits into two main settings, E.T.A. and Ennet House. This setup allows Wallace to contrast the hyper-visible and conventionally attractive residents of E.T.A. with the drug addicts at Ennet House. The narrative of the novel also presents deformity in the unconventional structure of the text itself. Narrative deformity allows Wallace to expose the relationship between characters and their representation, suggesting that a reader's perception of a "deformed"

character depends on the character's depiction in the text. Through his narrative experiments, Wallace reveals the constructed nature of deformity. This instructs readers to notice the "waste" of the text, and care about the characters – and people – that society considers superfluous.

Those living at Ennet are not represented in mainstream media or the upper-class discourse of E.T.A. The worlds of E.T.A. and Ennet House are physically and socially separated, but often overlap through the narrative of *Infinite Jest*. As living conduits, Mario Incandenza and Joelle van Dyne navigate between E.T.A. and Ennet. By passing between these disparate spaces, these characters complicate the relationship between aesthetics and value. With his physical abnormalities but empathetic heart, Mario challenges the connection between aesthetic refinement and strength of character. Veiling her face at all times, Joelle van Dyne refuses to disclose the "truth" of her visual beauty. By hiding herself, Joelle attacks mainstream standards of beauty. Joelle is always committed to hiding herself, and this demonstrates her own disgust at her "beauty." By associating her appearance with disgust, Joelle undoes the existing relationship between value and aesthetic pleasure – she is *de-formed*.

E.T.A. is designed to turn its students into excellent tennis players and thus models of physical success. As Jim Troeltsch remarks, "It's no accident they say you Eat, Sleep, Breathe tennis here" (117). The children at E.T.A. are meant to embody the beauty of professional tennis. Yet, investigating the players up close reveals how this pursuit for aesthetic perfection leads to deformity. When describing the appearance of the students at E.T.A., the narrator notes that "most of the E.T.A. upperclassmen have these vivid shoe-and-shirt tans that give them the classic look of bodies hastily assembled from different

bodies' parts, especially when you throw in the heavily muscled legs and usually shallow chests and the two arms of different sizes" (100). By virtue of their sport, tennis players develop one side of their bodies more than the other. To engineer the perfect tennis player, these children's bodies become asymmetrical and abnormal.

Often, the closer we examine individuals at E.T.A., the more these characters betray abnormality. In "Dialogizing Postmodern Carnival: David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*," Catherine Nichols mentions the deformities of Hal and Orin, the two Incandenza brothers who've succeeded in competitive sports. Nichols says, "Hal…has a distended forearm from training for professional tennis; and Orin, a professional football player, has an unusually large knee from repetitive punting" (5). Nichols highlights the irony of these deformities: "Both Hal and Orin acquired these deformities in pursuit of perfection that will ultimately transform them into closed, tangible objects of consumable entertainment" (5). The deformities of Hal and Orin reveal that is impossible to be both exceptional and ordinary. As the two brothers work to become consumable objects, they must reconfigure their bodies and become grotesquely abnormal.

Hal and Orin deform their bodies in pursuit of physical greatness. However, the middle Incandenza brother, Mario, was born with many physical deformities. The narrator describes Mario as having "withered-looking and bradyauxetic arms…not so much club feet as like *block* feet…lordosis in his lower spine" and various other "lifelong character-building physical challenges" (313). The narrative portrays Mario's infantile body as "spiderishly clinging, tiny and unobtrusive" in Avril's womb (313). By comparing Mario to a spider, the narrative suggests that Mario is frail but fiercely

resourceful – both dependent on and independent of others. The spider imagery also suggests that Mario is superficially disgusting, a pest that nobody would want around.

Mario's body prevents him from pursuing the athletic excellence that his brothers achieve. Despite his physical inferiority to his brothers, Mario's lack of ability doesn't concern him. According to the narrator, "Mario will be the only one of the Incandenza children not wildly successful as a professional athlete. No one who knows Mario could imagine this fact would ever occur to him" (155). Because he doesn't invest his self-worth in physical success, Mario doesn't see himself in terms of his flaws and lack of athleticism.

The very-disabled Mario Incandenza betrays the kindest and most earnest personality of *Infinite Jest*. Barry Loach is a coach at E.T.A., and his backstory illustrates Mario's selflessness. According to the narrator, Loach had a "spiritually despondent brother [who] basically challenges Barry Loach to not shower or change clothes for a while and make himself look homeless…and to stand out in front of the Park Street T-station…and…simply ask passersby to touch him" (969). For a while, Loach is completely unsuccessful. Nobody who passes such a dirty man in metro Boston wants to make physical contact. The people who passed Loach were disgusted by Loach's appearance – if they noticed him at all. However, when Mario was traveling alone and encountered Loach, Mario "extended his clawlike hand and touched and heartily shaken Loach's own fuliginous hand, which led through a convoluted but kind of heartwarming and faith-reaffirming series of circumstances to B. Loach" (971). In this anecdote Mario was unafraid to touch a dirty and decrepit-looking man, illustrating how Mario challenges the standards of beauty that dictate most people's desires. Mario is not disgusted by

Loach, and trusts Loach's earnest appeal for human connection. Although he may have looked like a clinging spider in Avril's womb, Mario is not merely a parasite, but spreads love to others. Unlike the rest of the passersby, Mario takes Loach on his word, interpreting his plea as a "single-entendre value."

In "Good Faith and Sincerity: Sartrean Virtues of Self-Becoming in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*," Allard den Dulk explains how Mario recognizes that selfhood exists beyond one's individual image. den Dulk says, "Mario's existence seems to be based on the intuitive awareness that the self is something that comes into being outside himself, not in some immanent, private sphere, but in what transcends his consciousness: in the world and through his actions" (212-213). This "intuitive awareness" comes across when Mario can't understand why other people are so embarrassed or sarcastic when talking about what he considers "real": "The older Mario gets, the more confused he gets about the fact that everyone at E.T.A. over the age of about Kent Blott finds stuff that's really real uncomfortable and they get embarrassed" (592). Mario doesn't relate to the dismissive, ironic attitude that others take on serious topics. He feels "like there's some rule that real stuff can only get mentioned if everybody rolls their eyes or laughs in a way that isn't happy" (592). Mario's earnestness sets him apart from the other residents of E.T.A., who constantly tease each other and make ironic jokes. Moreover, Mario senses that people with ironic attitudes are actually those most afflicted by the "real stuff" of earnest emotions. In this way, Mario rejects the immediate joy and safety of irony, and understands the deeper feelings of those around him.

In *Understanding David Foster Wallace,* Malcolm Boswell claims that Mario's lack of embarrassment makes Mario the most redemptive character in *Infinite Jest*.

Boswell says, "Mario…is the one truly human figure in the novel, the one character who is not only in 'some basic interior way forever infantile' but also unembarrassed about representing all that is 'unavoidably sentimental and naïve" (158). As we can see from the Barry Loach story, Mario willingly believes what people say, rather than suspecting ulterior motives or manipulating others through irony. Mario's faith in other people prevents him from relating to irony.

We can see how Mario transcends the ironic defensive mechanisms of E.T.A. when he travels to Ennet House. Describing Mario's walk around the city, the narrative borrows Mario's perspective to comment on "Ennet House, where the Headmistress has a disability…and had twice invited Mario in during the day for a Caffeine-Free Millenial Fizzy" (591). We can presume that it is because of Mario's friendly but vulnerable appearance that Pat (Ennet's manager) welcomes him into the house. However, despite his willingness to visit Ennet, the narrative (reflecting Mario's interiority) retains the vocabulary of E.T.A, referring to Pat as a "headmistress." This narrative strategy reveals how Mario bridges the gap between E.T.A. and Ennet.

By going from E.T.A. to Ennet, Mario transforms from exceptionally deformed to normal. Mario notes happily that at Ennet "nobody notices anybody else or comments on a disability… and once he heard somebody say God with a straight face and nobody looked at them or looked down or smiled in any sort of way where you could tell they were worried inside" (591). To recover from substance addiction, the residents of Ennet must reject the attitude that makes students at E.T.A. roll their eyes at "real stuff." By illustrating Mario's trip to Ennet, the narrative makes the "unhip irony" of E.T.A. seem foreign, harmful and even inhuman. This allows readers to reflect on the ways that they

use irony to avoid appearing vulnerable. By separating E.T.A.'s ironic mode from the straight-faced openness of Ennet House, *Infinite Jest* makes irony seem constructed, unhealthy, and disgusting. Conversely, the narrative portrays Ennet House as an honest and productive environment rather than merely a dirty halfway house.

Through Mario, Hal eventually rejects the superficiality of life at E.T.A. We can see how Mario and Hal approach irony in their attitude towards James's filmography: "*Wave Bye-Bye to the Bureaucrat* remains Mario's favorite of all their late father's entertainments, possibly because of its unhip earnestness" (689). Hip irony doesn't appeal to Mario, because he understands how irony allows people to deflect away from their real emotions. Regarding *Wave Bye-Bye to the Bureaucrat*, we see how Hal admires Mario's earnestness despite Hal's own ironic tendencies. "Though to Mario he always maintains it's basically goo, Hal secretly likes it, too, the cartridge" (689). Hal's dismissive attitude reveals his inability to feel vulnerable and admit his earnest emotions.

Hal's affection for *Wave Bye-Bye to the Bureaucrat* hints at a deeper desire for earnestness, which we see in Hal's admiration of Mario's purity. After we learn about Mario's disabilities, the narratives says, "Hal almost idealizes Mario, secretly" (316). Hal often speaks to Mario in a sarcastic or dismissive way, as when Mario asks Hal about God and Hal says "I'll say God seems to have a kind of laid back management style I'm not crazy about" (40). Hal's own nickname for Mario is somewhat tongue-in-cheek, masking Hal's devotional respect for Mario. The narrative says, "Mario floats, for Hal. He calls him Booboo but fears his opinion more than probably anybody except their Moms's" (316). Hal can begin a personal transformation and recovery from marijuana addiction only when he asks for Mario's help. Mario influences Hal to look beyond

himself and the insular life of training at E.T.A. According to den Dulk, "From the moment of his confession and call for help to Mario, Hal opens up and acknowledges the importance of the other in judging and becoming who you are" (219). Through Mario, Hal escapes the self-conscious irony that plagues E.T.A., and decides to quit smoking marijuana.

Mario is the most redemptive character at E.T.A. – he literally saves Hal from substance abuse. Mario can guide his brother spiritually because Mario transcends the superficiality of E.T.A. Rather than pursuing the singular goal of tennis mastery and physical perfection, Mario embodies difference through his various disabilities. These disabilities make Mario welcome in Ennet House, a space that values earnestness and community over the irony and self-centeredness that drive E.T.A. By connecting with a disheveled-looking Barry Loach and the residents of Ennet House, Mario proves that he isn't disgusted by someone's appearance, and values the humanity that manifests itself in a dirty or abnormal exterior. In this way, Mario doesn't just ignore aesthetic signifiers, but understands that people who don't fit into an ideal deserve trust and validation.

While Mario brings earnestness to E.T.A., Joelle brings some of the superficiality of E.T.A. to Ennet House. Originally Orin's girlfriend and James's favorite actor to use in his work, Joelle ends up in Ennet after attempting suicide by binging on freebase cocaine. Joelle once occupied the Incandenza's world, but she was never completely comfortable with their superficial hospitality. While dating Orin and visiting his family, Joelle quickly felt the artificiality of Avril's affected politeness. At Joelle's first Thanksgiving with the Incandenzas, Avril "worked unobtrusively hard…to make Joelle feel like a welcomed and esteemed part of the family gathering – and something about the woman made every

follicle on Joelle's body pucker and distend" (744). The narrative suggests that Avril's performance triggered Joelle's desire to abuse drugs, as "that last pre-Subsidized Thanksgiving was the first historical time Joelle intentionally did lines of cocaine to keep from sleeping" (747). After that time, Joelle becomes increasingly dependent on cocaine, until she attempts suicide and ends up in Ennet House.

Coming from the world of the Incandenzas, Joelle can speak the upper-class language of E.T.A. At one of her first A.A. meetings, Joelle nitpicks at the A.A. slogans, arguing that "an indicative transposition like 'I'm here But For the Grace of God' is…literally senseless, and regardless of whether she *hears* it or not it's meaningless" (366). By deferring to grammatical rules, Joelle demonstrates her participation in elite, academic circles that typically consider themselves separate from places like Ennet House. And yet, despite her initial resistance to A.A. language and philosophy, Joelle becomes a part of Ennet's earnest community, exemplified by her close relationship with Don. By the time she reaches Ennet, Joelle has become devoted to U.H.I.D., the Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed, a 13 step program similar to A.A. As a member of U.H.I.D., Joelle must always wear a veil across her face, to reveal her commitment to hiding. Joelle and Don can be open and earnest with each other, despite Joelle's facial concealment. As she says to Don, "U.H.I.D. allows members to be open about their essential need for concealment" (535). Joelle's appearance is simultaneously open and closed, embodying a contradiction that challenges aesthetic hierarchy.

Joelle tells Don that her veil is hiding superhuman beauty. She says, "Don…I'm so beautiful I drive anybody with a nervous system out of their fucking mind….I am so beautiful I'm deformed" (538). In this, Joelle redefines people's reactions to her

appearance – rather than producing pleasure, Joelle's looks make people nuts. Because people react so strongly to Joelle's appearance, Joelle feels grotesque and disgusting. Later in the book, Joelle's friend Molly Notkin contradicts Joelle, testifying that Joelle wears a veil because Joelle's father threw acid on Joelle's face. The narrative, however, never fully discloses the truth about Joelle's appearance. This uncertainty allows us to imagine Joelle as both conventionally attractive and aesthetically damaged, a Schrodinger's cat of facial beauty. Like the characters who encounter Joelle in the text, readers can't judge Joelle's appearance on its actual image. We must understand Joelle's looks as she understands them – as deformity. In this way, Joelle annihilates the gulf between the beautiful and the grotesque, the entertainers and the obscene, E.T.A. and Ennet House.

By leaving the world of Orin, James and the rest of E.T.A., Joelle abandons the pursuit of aesthetic perfection. Through her radio show persona as "Madame Psychosis," Joelle has built a devoted audience based on intimacy and connection rather than aesthetic appeal. Madame Psychosis always began and ended her show with radio silence – silence that, though no different from any other radio silence, conveyed intimacy to her listeners. After Joelle's breakdown and admittance to Ennet, she had to take a break from her radio show. Describing the radio show that replaces Joelle's, the narrative says, "The disappearance of someone who's been only a voice is somehow worse instead of better. A terrible silence now, weeknights. A different silence altogether from the radio-silence-type silence that used to take up over half her nightly show. Silence of presence v. silence of absence, maybe" (624-625). The distinction between types of silence demonstrates how difficult it is to articulate (and commoditize) the intimacy that Joelle built with her

listeners. Although all radio silence sounds the same, Joelle's listeners trust Madame Psychosis to be on the other side of the station, silent, for them.

Madame Psychosis's signature opening line speaks to Joelle's rejection of aesthetic signifiers. In her last radio show before her cocaine overdose, the narrative says:

> [Joelle's] silhouette leans and says 'And Lo, for the Earth was empty of form, and void.
>
> 'And Darkness was all over the Face of the Deep.
>
> 'And We said:
>
> 'Look at that fucker Dance (184).

The "And Lo" tagline repeats itself throughout the novel. Mario remarks on a mysterious situation at E.T.A. by saying: "– yes and lo…Ortho's bed is up near the ceiling of their room. The frame has some way got lifted up and bolted to the ceiling sometime during the night without Kyle hearing it or waking up" (942). Repeating "and lo" becomes a way for people to accept the unexplainable, to remain open to unarticulable possibilities. Madame Psychosis's opening words reflect Joelle's challenge to superficial aesthetics, and create an essential image of *Infinite Jest*. Madame Psychosis illustrate a darkness that, like Joelle's veil, obscures the image of a surface. In this darkness, the absence of aesthetic value, we can see "that fucker Dance," and finally embrace the single-entendre earnestness that superficiality precludes.

In her embrace of formlessness, Joelle – like Mario – challenges the conventional hierarchy of aesthetics, and makes herself de-formed. By leaving the elite world of academia and avant-garde art to go to Ennet House, Joelle finds solace in a place that values community more than beauty. In a sense, the world outside of Ennet is as addicted

to Joelle's visual beauty as Joelle was addicted to cocaine. This superficial value system creates a world that destroys itself by pursuing aesthetic pleasure.

The natural landscape of O.N.A.N. mirrors the same destructive system of pleasure that Joelle challenges through U.H.I.D. Typical of *Infinite Jest*, we don't get a clear explanation of O.N.A.N.'s political history, but learn about the nation's past through a puppet show that Mario has filmed, which the members of E.T.A. view on Interdependence Day. In this show, we learn about "Johnny Gentle…founding standard-bearer of the seminal new 'Clean U.S. Party'…whose first platform's plank had been Let's Shoot Our Wastes Into Space" (382). Gentle, a man obsessively fixated on cleanliness, becomes the president of the U.S. on the platform that he wants to, literally, "Clean Up Our Urban Cities" (556). Gentle's disgust for filth drives his political campaign, and the president aims to build an aesthetically pure nation. In this way, Gentle embodies the self-centered aesthetic as in "Supposedly Fun Thing." Gentle's fixation on cleanliness allows him to privilege immediate pleasure at the expense of the United States.

When Gentle's administration fails to shoot waste into space, they institute a process called Annular Fusion, developed by James Incandenza himself. This process literally consumes the waste that it produces, forcing the land to alternate between desolation and excessive fertility. Ted Schacht explains the cycle of Annular Fusion: "You end up with a surrounding environment that's so fertilely lush it's practically unlivable…you need to keep steadily dumping in toxins to keep the uninhabited ecosystem from spreading and overrunning more ecologically stable areas, so that everything hyperventilates" (573). In trying to rid the entire country of waste, Johnny

Gentle ends up with a strange ecological situation. The waste that is filling up the United States leads Gentle to merge the U.S. with Canada and Mexico to form O.N.A.N., where Canada must share the responsibility for the "Great Concavity/Convexity" that is full of waste.

Catherine Nichols connects annular fusion to the physical deformities of characters in the novel. She says, "The effect of annular fusion on O.N.A.N.'s physical landscape has deformed the terrain itself into an image of grotesque circularity" (7). For Nichols, this circularity reflects Wallace's broader challenge to aesthetics. She claims that the various formal experiments of postmodern culture, such as the self-referential irony that Wallace critiques, fail to create a meaningful bond among readers. According to Nichols, "Wallace's radical realism erupts the 'anesthesia of form' that entertains but fails to heal postmodern culture" (15). In his writing, Wallace attacks the value of aesthetic form.

Emily Russell comments on the deformed text of *Infinite Jest*, saying "Wallace constructs this unconventional textual body from a series of nonlinear episodes, shifting points of view, and nearly one hundred pages of explanatory endnotes" (147). She connects the form of the novel directly to its deformed characters, saying that Wallace's "experimentation with freakish textual forms finds expression in the bodies of the characters as well. Wallace populates his novel with…a host of characters with congenital malformations" (147). In this, Russell shows how *Infinite Jest* contains various systems of deformity that mirror and reflect each other. We see this clearly when Joelle is at Molly's party, about to attempt suicide. Joelle overhears people in the other room arguing: "'Convexity!' 'Concavity!' 'Convexity!' 'Concavity damn your eyes!"

(234). The billowing mass of wasted O.N.A.N. land is known as the Great Concavity/Convexity. By depicting this argument about the name of this land mass, the narrative shows how the self-absorbed partiers are more focused on the semantics of describing a horrible situation than the gravity of its environmental impact.

Wallace connects annular fusion to entertainment. We learn that it's become blasé to complain about both: "Saying [TelEntertainment] is bad is like saying traffic is bad…or the hazards of annular fusion: nobody but the Ludditic granola-crunching freaks would call bad what no one can imagine being without" (620). Here, we see how residents of O.N.A.N. take annular fusion and the contemporary media culture for granted. These two systems were both born out of a pursuit for aesthetic pleasure and cleanliness, and require that many people ignore the detrimental effects of modern culture. Annular fusion is clearly a political disaster and environmental tragedy. By comparing Teleputers to annular fusion, the novel makes the harm of entertainment seem as disgusting as global degradation. Absorbed in TelEntertainment, most viewers remain complacent with the status quo that systemically marginalizes people who end up in places like Ennet House.

In "Encyclopedic Novels and the Cruft of Fiction: *Infinite Jest*'s Endnotes," David Letzler portrays *Infinite Jest* as linguistically excessive, claiming that many of the novel's endnotes are "basically pointless" (130). Letzler connects the endnotes to the many other formalistic experiments that seem to take up space in the novel, borrowing the term "cruft" from computer science to talk about "excessive" text. Letzler says, "This junk text, simultaneously too excessive and too vacuous to be worth anyone's attention, can be found throughout *Infinite Jest*" (131). Although he sees much of the novel as

excessive, Letzler finds merit in some of the excess, saying that "there actually is quite a lot of important material in Wallace's endnotes, yet to discover it, one has to wade through lots of cruft" (134). This analysis is grossly off-point. Rather than concealing the "important" information behind layers of detritus, Wallace's writing foregrounds "wasteful" text to attack the hierarchy of aesthetics. As many Wallace scholars have discovered, even the most unnecessary-seeming passages can yield insight when we consider them seriously.

Letzler is turned off – disgusted – by Wallace's text. By evoking disgust at his "junk" writing, Wallace reveals the reader's prejudice against certain types of language. By weaving valuable information and beautiful language into his endnotes and overblown passages Wallace demonstrates the value of focus and attention. Moreover, the act of parsing through convoluted text requires the reader to trust that the novel contains something worthwhile. Because of this, the so-called cruft of *Infinite Jest* plays out the dynamic between disgust and faith. The apparent mess of the book points out the reader's visceral disgust, while encouraging readers to trust the narrative of the text.

In a capitalist society, if there is a product, there is a waste – and waste evokes disgust. By riffing off of the reader's disgust, Wallace challenges consumerist ideals of waste. Susan Morrison's *Literature of Waste* is an excellent study of waste in English literature. Morrison suggests that embracing waste challenges the capitalist model of production. Morrison quotes Slavoj Žižek as saying, 'the properly aesthetic attitude of a radical ecologist is not that of admiring or longing for a pristine nature of virgin forests and clear sky, but rather that of accepting waste as such, of discovering the aesthetic potential of waste, of decay, of the inertia of rotten material which serves no purpose" (9)

(From, *Living in the End Times*). Waste cannot be commoditized because it doesn't produce the consumer pleasure that we require of commercial products.

In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace pays close attention to various types of waste. He portrays people at elite institutions such as deeply flawed by pursuing perfection. Meanwhile, Wallace depicts substance addicts, the unproductive excess of bourgeois capitalism, as the most honest people in the novel. As Morrison says, "While the metaphor of waste has often been used for destructive purposes, the articulation of a waste aesthetics can reveal the humanity we share" (13). Perhaps this touches on the popularity of *Infinite Jest*. Like Mario and Joelle, Wallace takes a wildly different approach to aesthetics than mainstream culture. Drawn to the downcast excess of society, Wallace exceeds the "anesthesia of form" that Nichols identifies. In embracing an "aesthetics of disgust," Wallace avoids the tyrannical power of irony, and uses literature to create community. As Morrison says, "Waste allows us to see the fundamental similarity among us all" (175).

In an unsurprising allusion, Michael Pemulis remarks on "the barren Eliotical wastes of the western Concavity" (574). Morrison remarks on T.S. Eliot's relationship with waste, a truly modernist dilemma: "The Waste Land thus bespeaks a simultaneous fascination with, and revulsion from, waste…This creates a conundrum for Eliot: while waste must be 'eliminated from the poem,' it remains 'central to its production,'" (160). Eliot is troubled that he must work with waste in order to achieve beauty. In my next section I will demonstrate how Avril Incandenza confronts a contradiction similar to the one that Eliot faced. In wanting to appear as a high-functioning, emotionally open

mother, Avril crafts such a fake performance that Orin and Hal refuse to be open with her. Because Avril rejects waste, she can never become a supportive parent.

2. Avril is the Cruellest Moms

The Incandenza parents seem to represent two extremes. Avril, "the Moms," is obsessively polite, organized and clean. These traits allow Avril to constantly perform an ideal of calm, collected motherhood. James, "Himself," was much more reserved. James suffered quietly from alcoholism, and remained devoted to his own projects. Despite their apparent differences, James and Avril share in superficiality. Both parents are abnormally tall, and loom over the rest of the family. This symbolism illustrates how they both embody individual – but superficial – success.

Avril tirelessly performs the motions of compassion and hospitality. However, because her family detects Avril's artificiality, the work that Avril puts into her image makes her appear especially self-centered. Similarly, James's Entertainments show how his pursuit of aesthetic pleasure backfires against itself. In trying to communicate with his son, James creates a cartridge that becomes *too* appealing, killing any person who watches it. This cartridge leaves viewers drooling all over themselves, overloaded with aesthetic pleasure. By demonstrating the logical extreme of entertainment, *Infinite Jest* evokes disgust at the self-absorption of consumer pleasure. Similarly, Avril's performance of motherhood makes her a grotesquely hollow character, unable to trust her sons or accept their trust.

Avril is an administrator at E.T.A. Like the students at the academy, Avril aims to embody an ideal image. We can see Avril's self-centeredness when she's considering

how much to control Hal. The narrative says, "Avril feels it's important that a concerned but unsmothering single parent know when to let go somewhat and let the two high-functioning of her three sons make their own possible mistakes" (50). Avril tries to act as a "concerned but unsmothering single parent" would, rather than acting on her own feelings and affection for her children. This performance of support towards her sons always backfires, making Avril miserable and neurotic, as "the secret worry about mistakes tears her gizzard out" (50). Avril is always worrying about her children, but she refuses to admit this feeling to her kids. Her incessant anxiety represents the gap between Avril's embodied representation of mothering and the way she feels about her children.

By needing to *appear* motherly, Avril can't form the genuinely open and supportive connection with her children that she craves. As Mary K. Holland says in "'The Art's Heart's Purpose': Braving the Narcissistic Loop of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*," "Avril's central failure as a parent is her absolute inability to put her own needs aside to answer her children's" (226). In a footnote to *Infinite Jest*, Marlon Bain, one of Orin's friends from E.T.A., recounts an incident that reveals the self-centeredness of Avril's mothering. While attending E.T.A., Orin got drunk and drove this mother's car while Avril's dog was tied to the vehicle. In a correspondence with Steeply, Marlon demonstrates how Avril's apparently kind reaction reveals a self-interest that damages Orin. Marlon asks:

> Was the almost pathological generosity with which Mrs. Inc responded to her son taking her car in an intoxicated condition and dragging her beloved dog to its grotesque death and then trying to lie his way out of it, was this generosity for Orin's sake, or for Avril's own? Was it Orin's 'self-esteem' she was safeguarding,

> or her own vision of herself as a more stellar Moms than any human son could ever hope to feel he merits? (1051)

Avril claimed to immediately forgive Orin, but this "generosity" was so transparently fake that Orin could never form an honest connection with his mother.

Although Avril wants to act like an accepting and well-rounded mother, her compulsive habits often interfere with her children's well-being. Avril insists on eating dinner very late at night, inconveniencing her young children with her own desires. Avril's need to seem like a devoted mother often makes her children uncomfortable, frustrated, and distant. This is clear when Avril insists that Hal eat her only apple. By offering her apple, Avril intends to demonstrate her selflessness and devotion to her children's appetites. However, this "generous" action manipulates Hal's emotions. When Avril offers Hal her apple, narrative says that "Orin and Hal's term for this routine is Politeness Roulette. This Moms-thing that makes you hate yourself for telling her the truth about any kind of problem because of what the consequence will be for her" (523). Politeness Roulette shows how Avril's performative generosity is much less about the person receiving her gift than it is about Avril's need to display her good will.

Avril's manipulative routines makes it impossible for Orin and Hal to be honest with her. Orin used a violent analogy to explain how he felt around his mother: "[Orin] said she went around with her feelings out in front of her with an arm around the feelings' windpipe and a Glock 9 mm. to the feelings' temple like a terrorist with a hostage, daring you to shoot" (523). By weaponizing her own feelings, Avril controls and manipulates her children, undermining her superficial appearance of generous motherhood. Avril's children consider her self-centeredness fundamental to her character.

From Hal's perspective, we learn that, "The Moms always had this way of establishing herself in the *exact center* of any room she was in…It was part of her, and so to that extent dear to Hal, but it was noticeable and kind of unsettling" (521, emphasis in original). While Avril aims to lead an open, loving, and supportive family, her self-centeredness prevents Hal and Orin from being honest with her.

We can see the effects of Avril's mothering style in Orin's future behavior. Holland says, "Orin learns to mimic the self-absorption he has been taught, becoming what [Marlon Bain] describes as "the *least open man* I know" (1048 n. 269, emphasis in original)" (227). Avril's façade of kindness makes Orin a manipulative womanizer. As Marlon says, "[Orin] has come to regard the truth as *constructed* instead of *reported*…He studied for almost eighteen years at the feet of the most consummate mind-fucker I have ever met" (1048). Marlon, of course, is referring to Avril. Because Avril cared more about looking generous than being generous, Orin lost faith in emotional sincerity.

Although Orin eventually stops talking to Avril, remnants of her influence remain in his character. Orin is addicted to having affairs with older women, generally mothers, and the obsessive cleaning of Orin's ex-lover Joelle mirrors Avril's neurosis. Although he stops communicating with Avril, Orin has been deeply damaged by his mother's fixation on the superficial. Orin is always aware of his own superficial image, and always trapped in what Marlon refers to as "a pose of poselessness" (1048). Despite his conscious effort to break ties with Avril, Orin is fixated on appearances because of his mother.

Contrasting Orin's rejection of Avril, Hal consciously seeks his mother's validation. According to Holland, Hal "remains stuck in the role of mirror that his parents

had assigned him throughout childhood" (227). In one conversation with Hal, Avril pretends not to remember the word 'Clinkers' so that Hal could define it and display his impressive memory. Hal is aware of Avril's manipulation, and feels both gratified and angry that he responds in the way that Avril desires. The narrative says, "[Hal] hated it that she could even dream he'd be taken in by the aphasiac furrowing and finger-snapping, and then that he's always so pleased to play along. Is it showing off if you hate it?" (525). Hal resents how easily Avril can make him obey her wishes. While Hal enjoys satisfying his mother, he doesn't want to earn her love through parlor tricks that show off his abnormal intelligence.

Because Avril commands such power over Hal, he feels a strong desire to rebel against her pathological appearance of openness. Hal's main escape from Avril is his habit of secretly smoking marijuana (known in the novel as "Bob Hope" or just "Hope"). Beyond the actual smoking, for Hal "a bigger secret is that he's as attached to the secrecy as he is to getting high" (49). Hal knows that Avril would be crushed to know that her appearance of openness hasn't produced the intimacy she craves. Hal admits to Mario: "it'd *kill* the Moms, Mario. It'd be a terrible kertwang on the Moms. Not so much the Hope. The *secrecy* of it" (784). Because Avril's parenting is meant to satisfy herself rather than her children, Hal becomes addicted to escaping her self-centered control.

The relationships between the Incandenzas are structured by power. To show how Mario yields power over Hal, the narrative contrasts Hal's perception of Mario and Avril. I've mentioned, "Mario floats, for Hal," and Hal fears Mario's opinion almost as much as Hal fears Avril's opinion (316). Hal actually sees himself as competing with Mario for Avril's affection. The narrative says, "Despite himself (and showing a striking lack of

insight into his Moms's psyche), Hal fears that Avril sees Mario as the family's real prodigy" (317). As the narrative suggests, this fear is completely off-base, as Avril is much more impressed by Hal's achievements than any part of Mario's character.

For Avril, Mario is mainly functional, a person against whom she can measure her own altruism and maternal openness. When Mario asks Avril how to tell if someone is sad, Avril suspects that Mario himself is sad, and says "the sun would leave my sky if I couldn't assume you'd simply come and tell me you were sad" (768-769). Rather than answering Mario's question directly, Avril gently insists that Mario has an ulterior motive, and (performing Politeness Roulette) threatens that Mario would ruin her emotions by withholding information.

Mario's purity emphasizes Avril's unhealthy relationship with openness, because Mario *actually is* always open with his family. When Hal and Mario are talking, Mario earnestly says, "Hal, pretty much all I do is love you and be glad I have an excellent brother in every way" (772). Hal realizes that this is something that sounds like something his mom would say, but the words are different when Mario says them. Hal says, "Jesus, it's just like talking to the Moms with you sometimes, Boo…Except with you I can feel you mean it" (772). Hal can trust Mario's sincerity because Mario doesn't care about *looking* like he loves Hal. As I've discussed in the previous section, Mario's deformities prevent him from having the same fixation on aesthetic ideals as Avril, or as many of the E.T.A. students. This disregard for idealized images allows Mario to transcend the superficiality of constructed affection and convey a genuine love for Hal.

Despite Avril's need for Mario to be completely open and honest with her (which he is), Avril's history with Mario suggest that she isn't unconditionally devoted to his

well-being. We learn that, “Mario was involuntarily incontinent up to his early teens. His father and later Hal had changed him for years, never once judging or wrinkling their face or acting upset or sad” (768). Notably, Avril didn’t change Mario when he was incontinent. The narrative says, “Avril couldn't change diapers…She'd sobbed and asked [Mario] to forgive her and to assure her that he understood it didn't mean she didn't love him to death or find him repellent” (768). There is, of course, no evidence suggesting that Mario thought less of Avril because she couldn’t change diapers. However, Avril didn’t understand this, and was afraid that Mario’s abnormal incontinence would shatter her idealized appearance of motherhood.

The moment when a young Hal ate mold also threatened Avril’s idealized image of motherhood. Early in the novel (but relatively late chronologically), Hal recalls an instance when, as was a young child, Hal approached his mother “holding out something [Orin] said was really unpleasant looking in my upturned palm...’I ate this,’ was what I was saying” (10-11). Avril reacts in a way that is remarkably emotional and *not* composed. Hal says, “In [Orin’s] first memory, the Moms’s path around the yard is a broad circle of hysteria: ‘God!’ she calls out. ‘Help! My son ate this!’ she yells” (11). In this moment, Avril feels incompetent, pacing aggressively around her garden and unable to help her son. As when Mario needed changing, , Avril’s visceral disgust at Hal eating mold paralyzes her. Because of this, Avril can’t act like the ideal mother she imagined, and needs to depend on others.

Avril refuses to change Mario and fails to help her poisoned son because she was so disgusted by the situation. While these instances seem to suggest that Avril is a bad mother, I argue exactly the opposite. Avril’s self-consciousness often hurts herself and

others, but she is not a bad or even a truly selfish person. Rather, she is the product of a society that values pleasure over substance, signifiers over meaning. Avril's infrequent breakdowns – the fall of her meticulous façade – are the only times that she is honest with her children. Avril genuinely cried when she couldn't change diapers, and called for help when Hal ate mold. When she saw Hal hurting himself, Avril reacted in a way that proved she really did care, and wasn't just trying to look affectionate. Unfortunately, Avril responds to her breakdowns by internalizing her self-hatred, and making her intense worry a secret. Ironically, Avril's secret is that she isn't as open as she makes it seem. This creates a vicious cycle of anxiety for Avril, as she tries continuously to act like someone without any secrets.

Avril's desire to be a perfect mother comes from a place of love, but her fixation on appearing selfless prevents Avril connecting with her children. However, I don't want to blame Avril too harshly. After all, she is a widow, who was married to an alcoholic and had to "keep up appearances" for her family. Mario asks Hal, "How come the Moms never cried when Himself passed away?" (41). To respond, Hal uses an analogy that reveals the structure of Avril's coping mechanism. He says, "Booboo, there are two ways to lower a flag to half-mast….one way to lower the flag to half-mast is just to lower the flag. There's another way though. You can also just raise the pole. You can raise the pole to like twice its original height" (42). Avril refuses to let herself appear vulnerable. When Avril encounters a situation like Mario's incontinence, Hal's mold consumption, or her husband's horrific suicide, she tries even harder to appear like a perfect mom. Avril's disgust for her family's pain comes from love. However, she deals with the filth and shame of her family by cleansing her own image of any imperfections.

Avril's pursuit of aesthetic perfection prevents her from bonding with others. This reflects the luxury cruise that Wallace describes in "Supposedly Fun Thing," an experience that Wallace terms "like having a mom without the guilt" (*SFT* 297). While Avril believes that appearances will convince her children that they are important and valued, Mario often reveals his flaws and vulnerabilities to make others feel better. The narrative says, "Avril remembers Mario still wanting Hal to help him with bathing and dressing at thirteen…and wanting the help for Hal's sake, not his own" (317). Ironically, Mario's willingness to appear flawed makes him the redemptive character that he is. Mario's genuine openness starkly Avril's affectated generosity. Compared to Mario, Avril's mannerisms seem fake, artificial, and broken.

While Mario emphasizes Avril's self-centeredness, he reveals a soft side to James Incandenza's aloof and intimidating character. James was an alcoholic, and a young Hal describes his father as "a towering figure in optical and avant-garde film circles [who] single-handedly founded the Enfield Tennis Academy but drinks Wild Turkey at like 5:00 A.M." (30). James was successful in various fields, embodying American entrepreneurial self-reliance. However, despite James's individualism, he did build strong connections with a few other people, notably Mario.

As I've mentioned, James changed Mario's diapers for several years. The bond between James and his middle son extends beyond Mario's immediate physical needs, as we learn that, "[Mario] and his late father had been, no pun intended, inseparable" (314). Mario can detect when James is being genuine in his work. James's art is often overwrought with irony. We can see this in the extensive footnotes, several of which are categorized as, ""*Untitled*. Unfinished. UNRELEASED" (990). James himself regarded

his work with a nearly impenetrable irony. In conversations with Joelle, "Jim referred to the Work's various films as 'entertainments.' He did this ironically about half the time" (743). However, as I discussed before, Mario can detect and appreciate sincerity in his father's films. Mario's favorite is *Wave Bye-Bye to the Bureaucrat*, known for its "unhip earnestness" (689).

James's connection with Mario was more than superficial. Through Orin, we learn that James was terrified of spiders. Orin mentions the "conscious horror Himself had somehow developed about the Southwest's black widows and their chaotic webs" (45). Interestingly, the narrative compares the fetal Mario to a spider, saying that he was "spiderishly clinging" to Avril's womb (313). James's attachment to Mario suggests that James's arachnophobia didn't hinder his affection for his disabled son. This demonstrates how James acted on a deep trust and respect for Mario.

Despite the attachment James had with Mario, James struggled to connect with Orin and Hal. The narrative says that, "Jim…told Joelle that he simply didn't know how to speak to either of his undamaged sons without their mother's presence and mediation" (743). Before killing himself, James becomes convinced that Hal literally couldn't talk to him. Although the narrative of *Infinite Jest* shows that Hal believes himself to be speaking, it never reveals why James can't interpret his son's communication.

In an effort to reach Hal, James creates an Entertainment that is pleasurable enough to kill everyone who watches it. Late in the novel, a "wraith" visits Don Gately in the hospital. The narrative strongly suggests that this wraith is the deceased James, so I'll refer to the two characters interchangeably. The wraith says he made the deadly Entertainment as trying to communicate with a son that couldn't speak:

> The wraith…says he spent the whole sober last ninety days of his animate life working tirelessly to contrive a medium via which he and the muted son could simply converse.… To concoct something the gifted boy couldn't simply master and move on from to a new plateau. His last resort: entertainment. Make something so bloody compelling it would reverse thrust on a young self's fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life. (838-839).

By making a work of art, the wraith tries to connect with his son on an aesthetic level. James can communicate with Mario because Mario never aspires to be any more than he is. However, because Hal doesn't see himself as disabled, he aspires to impress his parents and satisfy their idealized image of their son. As James says, Hal is great at "mastering plateaus." By making the world's most Entertaining artwork, James tries once and for all to create an unmasterable plateau for Hal. However, this backfires horribly, as it leads James to produce a cartridge that kills anyone who watches it. Rather than learning to trust Hal and believe that his son is communicating, James invests himself in aesthetic pleasure, dooming himself and the rest of the world.

Avril and James are self-centered in different ways, and we can see this in the way they act with their family. When Joelle van Dyne first joins the Incandenzas for Thanksgiving, she picks up on the different behavior of each parent. Although James and Avril were both very tall, they carried their height differently. Joelle remarks that, "Avril Incandenza was…the tallest pretty old woman with immaculate posture (Dr. Incandenza slumped something awful) [Joelle'd] ever met" (744). The contrast between Avril and James continued throughout dinner. As I've discussed, Joelle quickly felt the artificiality of Avril's affected politeness, as Avril "worked unobtrusively hard…to make Joelle feel

like a welcomed and esteemed part of the family gathering – and something about the woman made every follicle on Joelle's body pucker and distend" (744). While Avril is working very hard to embody the kind of hospitality she wants Joelle to feel, James makes no attempt to be hospitable or even friendly. We learn that, "At some point Orin's father got up to go freshen his drink and never returned" (746). While James's departure struck Joelle as strange, the rest of the family took it for granted: "Dr. Incandenza's absence from the table went unmentioned, almost unnoticed, it seemed" (747). The Incandenzas were used to James's rudeness and Avril's affectation. While James disdained social norms and openly ignored them, Avril works tirelessly to act perfectly social.

Avril and James present themselves very differently. While Avril values her image to a fault, James moodily slinks in the background, more concerned with creating works of art than acting hospitable. To think about how the two parents function in the novel, we can consider *The One vs. the Many*, Alex Woloch's excellent study of minor character. In the prologue, Woloch says that, in *The Iliad*, "The formal clash between protagonist and minor characters redounds back on, and is motivated by, the clashing world of the story itself" (3). This continues to be true in postmodern American literature, especially in a narrative with as many characters as *Infinite Jest*. While they aren't portrayed as main characters in the same way as Hal or Gately, the parental shadows of Avril and James represent the tension of centralized narrative authority. In her desire to perform ideal motherhood, Avril is always casting herself as a main character, what Orin once described as "the Black Hole of Human Attention" (521). Likewise, James makes a point to defy social norms and act like a brooding artistic genius. Avril and James both

want to connect with their children, but are too caught up in aesthetic representations to build sincere relationships.

Mediating between Avril and James, the narrative of *Infinite Jest* suggests a way out of the self-obsessed solipsism of these two characters. Catherine Nichols has described Wallace's writing as "radical realism" (15). One trademark of Wallace's style are his empathetic representations of characters. In "Wallace and Empathy: A Narrative Approach," Toon Staes quotes Keen as saying, "Wallace's ideas on moral fiction were modeled on the so-called empathy-altruism hypothesis, the popular belief that readers learn to substitute 'experiences of narrative empathy' for 'shared feelings with real others' (Keen vii)" (24). As I explained earlier, irony delegitimizes sincere emotions. In order to create that feeling for the "real other," Wallace must show that genuine emotion can exist despite – or because of – irony.

In discussing the relationship between major and minor characters, Woloch argues that "the realist novel is structurally destabilized…by *too many people*" (19). Woloch suggests that providing every character with equal attention will destroy a narrative. However, a literary ethos that eschews aesthetic pleasure must recognize the incalculable value of every person. Woloch asks, "How can a human being enter into a narrative world and not disrupt the distribution of attention?" (26). Woloch resolves this question by recognizing that "Novelists cannot 'possibly give equal emphasis to all' characters; but narratives certainly do call attention to the process of emphasizing…suggesting how other possible stories…are intertwined with and obscured by the main focus of attention" (40). The narrative of *Infinite Jest* manages to escape the self-reflexivity of Avril and James by shifting its attention towards Ennet House, which

contains a whole cast of interesting people. The residents of Ennet generally evoke disgust among the upper-class population of E.T.A. By both entertaining and contradicting this disgust in his empathetic descriptions of characters, Wallace challenges us to avoid the visceral reactions that judge "disgusting" people as unworthy.

In his discussion of *The Iliad*, Woloch mentions how the friction between major and minor characters allows a third kind of character to emerge. He says, "The disappearance of Achilles also prompts the emergence of a third kind of character in Book 2, or, more precisely, a group of characters" (6). As in *The Iliad*, the narrative tension of *Infinite Jest* introduces a third group, "Les Assassins en Fauteuils Roulants (A.F.R.)," known in English as the Wheelchair Assassins. This is a terrorist organization seeking the lethal Entertainment that James produced. Our main entrance into the world of A.F.R. is Marathe, a Quebecois man in a wheelchair, who works alongside Steeply, an American operative. Marathe is a double (or triple?) agent, more concerned with caring for his ill wife than devoted to any political cause.

Steeply and Marathe function as a kind of chorus to the rest of the narrative, and their action loosely connects Ennet House and E.T.A. Reflecting on the deadly cartridge that is killing people across O.N.A.N., Marathe provides a moralizing voice. He says that "now is what has happened when a people choose nothing over themselves to love, each one. A U.S.A. would die…for the so-called perfect Entertainment, this film" (318). By putting the Entertainment into perspective, Marathe connects the selfishness of the drug-addicted residents of Ennet House and the self-obsessed Incandenza parents to broader social trends that favor individual pleasure over others. Marathe's single-entendre disgust

for consumer pleasure provides an alternative to the drug- and entertainment-seekers that drive much of *Infinite Jest*.

We hear Marathe's moralizing voice when he compares pleasure to pea soup. He asks, "Suppose that you and I, we both wish to enjoy a hot bowl of the Habitant *soupe aux pois*…But there is one can only, of the small and well-known Single-Serving-Size…who can decided who may receive this soup?" (425). By raising this question, Marathe demonstrates how individuals often achieve pleasure at the expense of others. This is particularly relevant for privileged people at E.T.A., who live up the road from the destitute residents of Ennet. With his pea soup analogy, Marathe suggests that superficial pleasure is not worth pursuing if it causes another pain. This shows the dishonesty of self-reflexivity. Images, drugs and soup all come from the social world, and to consume something just for pleasure ignores the context of what you consume.

Despite his criticism of superficial entertainment, Marathe can't decide whether it is moral for one to knowingly view a lethal film. He says "to decide not to be this pleasurably entertained in the first place. There is still a choice, no? Sacred to the viewing self, and free? No? Yes?" (430). Believing that there is something more valuable than pleasure, Marathe questions whether people can choose freedom over entertainment. In this, Marathe suggests that when people choose death by pleasure, they are sacrificing life to absolute solipsism. He argues that, if people choose to see the lethal entertainment, they are already unfree. Marathe says to Steeply: "The appetite to choose death by pleasure if it is available to choose – this *appetite* of your people unable to choose appetites, this is the death" (319). In the dystopian near-future of *Infinite Jest*, people are

conditioned to believe that endless, uncontrollable pleasure is a worthwhile life. Without a broader ethical framework, self-reflexive aesthetics overpower individual decisions.

Set apart from E.T.A and Ennet, Marathe comments on the moral significance of the action of the novel's major settings. Marathe criticizes American culture for its shortsighted imagination. He says to Steeply, "You U.S.A.'s do not seem to believe you may choose what to die for…Love of your nation, your country and people, it enlarges the heart. Something bigger than the self" (107). Marathe suggests that there can be a guiding ethical principle outside of self-centered pleasure. Through his exchanges with Steeply, Marathe interrupts the insular systems of E.T.A. and Ennet House.

Although no person can resist the effects of the deadly Entertainment, Steeply's mission is to find an "anti'-Entertainment" that is supposed to "counter the lethality" of James's film. (126). Within the narrative, we never learn whether or not this mythical antidote exists. However, many critics have suggested that the novel itself is acting as a kind of anti-Entertainment. Bradley Fest says that, "*Infinite Jest* subtly suggests that an 'anti-Entertainment' was produced to negate the effects of the original… *Infinite Jest* very much attempts to be such an alternative text" (147). *Infinite Jest* evokes disgust at the excesses of consumption, and requires its readers to parse through an incomplete and convoluted text. By doing so, the novel proves to its readers that single-entendre values can exist alongside and within irony. In the next chapter, I will show how Don Gately's relationship with his Higher Power demonstrates that we can heal the pains of consumerism by having faith in other people.

3. "Epiphanyish": Against the Aesthetics of the Buzz

Infinite Jest evokes disgust at different kinds of self-absorbed pleasure. From Orin and Avril to Randy Lenz and Joelle van Dyne, most characters in the novel are devoted to pleasing themselves. This pursuit of pleasure makes the characters appear grotesque, deformed, or fake. In "E Unibus Pluram," Wallace laments the self-reflexivity of postmodern American literature and calls for a new radical earnestness. Despite his attack on irony, *Infinite Jest* constantly constructs and plays with self-reflexive systems. However, the novel uses irony to distance readers from the systems of pleasure that they find natural, and reveal these systems as both artificial and harmful.

Infinite Jest is largely fatalistic, projecting a future in which entertainment becomes so ubiquitous and unchallenged that it kills everyone on earth. The novel both reflects the late-capitalist culture in which it was written and magnifies the most self-indulgent aspects of that culture. This forces readers to think seriously about their own participation in consumerism. However, Wallace responds to his anxiety of entertainment in his portrayal of Ennet House and Alcoholics Anonymous. By depicting Gately's experience in AA, Wallace shows how people can build communities that challenge self-obsessed pleasure. Honest and inclusive programs such as AA help addicts to escape their pursuit of pleasure and build a community based on trust and respect.

The language of *Infinite Jest* shows that words can do more than signal irony – language forms communities in books and among readers. In "Modeling Community and Narrative in *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*," Andrew Warren argues that *Infinite Jest* is playing with self-referential systems of communication. Warren quotes Giles as saying that, "one of Wallace's uncanny strengths is his ability to absorb jargons and discourses –

say, business-speak or academese – and then demonstrate what sorts of human beings are formed by/within those discourses (Giles 335)" (70). The narrative of *Infinite Jest* not only illustrates how people come into being through existing discourses, but creates its own slang that appears throughout the text. Warren mentions "*the squeak, eating cheese, interface, eliminating one's own map, howling fantods*" (70) as words and phrases that create a narrative that is both embedded in and separate from the reader's world. Through this "local argot" (as Warren calls it), the novel can create meaning out of language, and construct the settings, characters and conflicts that power the narrative. Warren says "what first appears as *constative* language eventually turns *performative*" (70). In this, the self-reference of Wallace's made-up slang words do not reify pre-existing social order, but create new communities around these novel words.

Family nicknames in *Infinite Jest* demonstrate the performative power of language. Early in the novel, Hal describes how his family uses pet names, and recognizes this as a common practice. Hal says, "Himself is my dad. We call him Himself…We call my mother the Moms. My brother coined the term. I understand this isn't unusual. I understand most more or less normal families address each other internally by means of pet names and terms and monikers" (29). The narrative confirms Hal: Joelle refers to her father as her "own personal daddy" and Michael Pemulis refers to his father as "Da."

For the Incandenzas, nicknames represent the flaws of the two parents. "The Moms" suggests that Avril's character becomes separated through her tireless performance of motherhood, while "Himself" signals James's aloof and impenetrable personality. These names become part of the Incandenza vernacular, one of the many in-

jokes meant to strengthen family bonds. However, these names don't prevent the Incandenza's dysfunctionality. For Hal, nicknames even carry self-hatred. Hal says, "Don't even think about asking me what my little internal moniker is" (29). While the Incandenzas use pet names to indicate each other, these names also distinguish characters from others in the novel who share similar family roles. I.e., not all dads are "dad," and varied nicknames for father work together to reveal the complexities of each male parent. *Infinite Jest* uses multiple names for one person or for one type of relationship to compare how people relate to others in different contexts. This demonstrates the malleability of language, and its power to both reflect and shape social relations.

In his discussion of language, Warren argues that the title of *Infinite Jest* exemplifies performative language. He says, "Perhaps the greatest example of this movement between registers…[is] the phrase *Infinite Jest* itself. Over the course of the novel it moves from naming a film or set of films to naming the novel itself and the 'work' of the novel, its literal task" (71). The title's flexibility gestures towards the ineffable mission of the book itself. As I've mentioned, Wallace said in an interview that, "Fiction's job isn't just to list the information, but to show the information being used, to make it plausible, contextual" (Stivers 1996). Conventionally, naming has been used to exercise power, to mark one person or community with the symbol of another. However, *Infinite Jest* treats slang words as *always already* in use, a pre-existing system that the readers must navigate. By using a language that nearly – but not completely – resembles the one of many readers, *Infinite Jest* distances readers from their own language. By doing so, the novel demonstrates how our everyday language structures our relationships with others.

Infinite Jest not only creates new words, but positions those words in a constantly unsettled narrative perspective. For example, between pages 32 and 42, we find a third-person description of Hal on the phone, a scene centered on an Arab and Canadian medical attaché, a first-person confessional account in Ebonics, a third-person description of Bruce Green's history, and then a conversation between Hal and Mario that consists only of dialogue. This unfocused-seeming narrative reflects the the anti-self-reflexive intentions of the novel. In "Wallace and Empathy: A Narrative Approach," Toon Staes argues that *Infinite Jest* travels between narrative registers in order to undo the classic notion of transactionary reading. Staes says that the narration, "contains many passages that revert to so-called unnatural narration – consciousnesses bleeding into one another, multiply embedded narratives, and other examples that obscure the idea that narration is a form of communication involving a sender and a receiver" (28). Staes argues that *Infinite Jest*'s narrative style(s) not only flaunts convention but suggest a lack of central order. Staes cites Richardson, saying, "*Infinite Jest* distorts the humanistic concept of the narrator 'who is like a person' because there seems to be no discrete narrative voice that dominates the novel. What we get instead are fictional minds corrupted by the debris of others" (34). As I've discussed, this debris is exactly what allows *Infinite Jest* to do what it does. By avoiding a singular narrative authority, the novel teaches its readers to pay attention to the "waste" of other people's perspectives.

Staes says that *Infinite Jest* is organized around the lack of "humanistic" narrator. He says, "While *Infinite Jest* does have local narrators, attempts to understand or empathize with the novel's global narrative are ultimately centered around an absence in the text" (34). Matt Tresco echoes this sentiment in his discussion of endnotes, which are

a trademark of the novel's unconventionality. In 'Impervious to U.S. Parsing': Encyclopedism, Autism and *Infinite Jest*", Tresco says that

> one does not find a clear distinction between body text and endnote, with important information allocated to the former and 'waste products' relegate to the latter…the arrangement of material lack sans obvious organizing principle, with suggestive information…hidden in a single note (117).

As I've shown earlier, the novel reveals "waste" as a socially-dependent category. This parallels the construction of the book itself, as the "excess" material of endnotes yields insight into other parts of the text. In this, readers must reconsider their preconceptions of narrative, and learn to adapt to a style that treats endnotes not as surplus, but as fundamental to the structure of the novel.

Staes and Tresco seem to agree that *Infinite Jest* lacks the narrative cohesion we traditionally expect from novels. However, the text's apparent lack of structure forces readers to trust the novel and try to inhabit the setting of the novel. In this struggle, the reader discovers that *Infinite Jest* depicts a remarkably interconnected society. Part of the *Infinite Jest*'s wide appeal comes from its narrative unity – though the unity isn't what most readers expect. While the shifts in setting and narrative voice are disorienting, many of the novel's threads intertwine to reveal Wallace's literary genius. We can see how the novel comes together in a scene about halfway through the book which depicts the simultaneous action of many of the novel's characters:

> The Darkness splayed out stiff on the deuce side of the center line…At just this moment, …Ennet House live-in Staff Don Gately lay deeply asleep…Four-odd clicks to the northwest in the men's room of the Armenian Foundation

> Library…Poor Tony Krause hunched forward…getting a whole new perspective on time and the various passages and personae of time…Charles Tavis had his head mashed up against the upholstered seat-rail of his sofa,…Avril Incandenza's whereabouts on the grounds were throughout this interval unknown. At just that moment M.S.T., Orin Incandenza was once again embracing a certain 'Swiss' hand-model. (654-655)

Once familiar with the characters and their significance, readers can feel the power of this narrative description. Through the simultaneity of these actions, we see how the characters are embedded in the same symbolic universe. It doesn't matter *how* the narrative remains cohesive. Rather, the beauty of this scene is that the book achieves cohesion because of its fragmented narration. *Infinite Jest* permits its readers to believe something that they don't understand, and haven't "actually" experienced themselves. Shortly after the above scene, we read, "Sometimes it's hard to believe the sun's the same sun over all different parts of the planet" (655). In this, something can be both banally obvious and completely incomprehensible, part of a logic that exists beyond the self-conscious individual.

By depicting Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Wallace demonstrates the limits of rational thinking and the power of empathetic communities. Most of the descriptions of AA are filtered through the perspective of Don Gately. The narrative first describes Gately by saying, "Don Gately was a twenty-seven-year-old oral narcotics addict…and a more or less professional burglar; and he was, himself, unclean and violated" (55). By sneaking "himself" into the middle of the sentence, the narrative suggests that Gately and the rest of the world has come to see uncleanliness and violation as the essence of

Gately's character. This makes Gately's narrative centrality especially poignant, as his participation in AA turned him from a social outcast, living on the margins of acceptability, into a self-respecting and productive person. Contrasting the negative reputation of drug-addicts and burglars, the narrative undermines its own depiction of Gately as "unclean." We learn that, "As an active drug addict, Gately was distinguished by his ferocious and jolly élan" (55). This jolliness is not immediately apparent to the world outside of Gately's inner circle, as most of society had considered him a waste.

Gately escapes his addition and unclean identity by attending AA. In these meetings, Gately finds guidance and mentorship in older men, referred to as "Crocodiles." When Gately catches himself judging someone else's recovery, the narrative (in his perspective) says "who's Gately to judge what works for who. He just knows what seems like it works for him today: AA's tough Enfield-Brighton love, the White Flag Group, old guys with suspendered bellies and white crew cuts and geologic amounts of sober time" (277-278). By attending AA, Gately enters a community that had existed before him, with the experiences of other AA members to guide him.

Other people's experiences are all there is to AA. In footnote 90, Geoffrey Day portrays AA as a perpetual promise, complaining that it fails to fulfil immediate desires. Day asks, "what's supposedly going to be communicated at these *future* meetings I'm exhorted to trudge to that cannot simply be communicated *now*, at *this* meeting instead of the glazed recitation of exhortations to attend these vague future revelatory meetings" (1001). In this way, AA inverts the logic of addiction. While drugs provide their consumers quick pleasure that is increasingly difficult to achieve, AA provides a long journey for members to seek a personal success that becomes more accessible over time.

Because members must remain committed for AA to work, the deferred gratification of AA requires its members to trust the experiences of others.

In Gately's descriptions, AA appears both wildly liberal and fundamentally conservative. As Gately says, "There are, by ratified tradition, no 'musts' in Boston AA. No doctrine or dogma or rules…Boston AA's take on itself is that it's a benign anarchy" (356). This "anarchy" provides the appearance of freedom to its members. However, the lack of written doctrine doesn't impede AA's functionality. Gately had wondered "for quite some time about why these AA meetings where nobody kept order seemed so orderly…where's the enforcement" (357). Gately, like most people, was conditioned to believe that human beings (especially substance addicts) needed written rules and a hierarchy of power to maintain peaceful relations.

Gately finds that AA succeeds *because* it rejects written doctrine. Rather than following rules of their own, AA appeals to a higher authority. Gately realizes, "Boston AA had the planet's most remorselessly hard-ass and efficient sergeant at arms…AA's disciplinarian looked damn good and…sincerely urged you to have a nice day…Just one" (359). Gately realizes that addiction itself is AA's authority figure, and every individual is humbled by the pain they've suffered under addiction. Gately shows that AA is controlled by something that is more real and powerful than any human-made rules. Speaking of AA's "suggestions," Gately says, "It's all optional; do it or die" (357).

AA gives advice through slogans that seem ridiculously simple to new members. When we first encounter an AA meeting, we learn that the walls are covered with "portable felt banners emblazoned with AA slogans…The slogans on them appear way too insipid even to mention what they are. E.g. 'ONE DAY AT A TIME" (344-455).

Geoffrey Day criticizes the banality of AA slogans by suggesting that they supplant individual agency by imposing rules on members. Day says "Oh lovely…Oh do not ask what *is* it. Do not ask not whether it's not insane. Simply open wide for the spoon" (1002). Here, Day also displays his literary knowledge by citing T.S. Eliot. Although Gately probably doesn't pick up on Day's reference, he resists Day's elitism. Gately says 'For me, the slogan means there's no set way to argue intellectual-type stuff about the Program. Surrender To Win, Give It Away To Keep It…You can't think about it was like an intellectual thing" (1002). By contradicting Day, Gately acknowledges that AA follows a logic beyond individual reason.

The limits of individual reasoning are particularly relevant in AA, where substance abuse has radically changed what people value. In describing AA, the narrative says, "The will you call your own ceased to be yours as of who knows how many Substance-drenched years ago…You have to want to surrender your will to people who know how to Starve the Spider" (357). "Spider" is AA jargon for addiction, and "starving the Spider" means abstaining from substances. Gately explains the purpose of AA mottoes by telling Day that "clichés are (a) soothing, and (b) remind you of common sense, and (c) license the universal assent that drowns out silence; and (4) silence is deadly, pure Spider-food, if you've got the disease" (278). Throughout *Infinite Jest*, we encounter several characters concerned with vermin, insects or spiders. James and his father were both terrified of spiders; Orin is scared of cockroaches; Randy Lenz is obsessed with capturing stray animals; Poor Tony Krause sees red ants during his lowest drug-fueled episode. These various pests represent the fissuring seams of individual ideology. As pests (or fears of pests) occupy people's attentions, these people reveal a

fear of their individuality. By saying that silence is "Spider-food," Gately suggests that addicts can only avoid falling back into substance-use by filling their mind with the slogans – and wisdom – of other addicts. This also recalls the description of Mario as "spiderishly clinging," as he embodies the detritus of addiction – a drug baby. The narrative proves that Mario is not worthless, but the most redemptive character in the novel. But, the description of Mario as a spider represents how the narrative can present a character as worthless. By ignoring Mario's humanity – remaining silent about his value – people feed the perception that Mario's disabilities turn him into a pest.

Because of the danger of silence, recovering substance addicts need a way to fill the void left behind by their drug. Part of this healing consists of the mottos that are passed through the AA community. These slogans come from the history and experiences of AA members. The lives of AA members prove the truth of the program's mottos. The practice of AA is conservative, as new members learn to respect the experiences of preceding AA members. The narrative recognizes that strictness can make AA feel authoritarian: "Boston AA's real root axiom, is almost classically authoritarian, maybe even proto-Fascist…'Do not ask WHY/If you do not want to DIE/Do like your TOLD/If you want to get OLD" (374-374). While AA's "suggestions" may seem fascist, they differ from political fascism in that no individual imposes rules gains power over others. Rather, all AA members are equally subjugated to the authoritarian logic of substance addiction. The AA members mutually discover the "rules" by sharing their experiences, rather than creating rules for others to follow. The narrative says that, "Boston AA, with its emphasis on the Group, is intensely social" (362). With its lack of written doctrine, AA is nothing *but* social, derived from and committed to the interactions of its members.

Along with the clichés that AA members adopt from shared experience, AA allows people to fill the void of silence with a "Higher Power." We learn, "It's suggested in the 3rd of [page] Boston AA's 12 Steps that you turn your Diseased will over to the direction and love of 'God as you understand Him'" (443). Gately struggles very much with this part of AA. Gately lacks religious experience, and the narrative says, "You might think it'd be easier if you Came In with 0 in the way of denominational background…to sort of invent a Higher-Powerish God from scratch …but Don Gately complains that this has not been his experience thus far" (443). Spiritual connection to a Higher Power requires a different self-conception than other types of knowledge. Worship can be difficult for those (like Gately) unfamiliar with religion.

To build a relationship with a Higher Power and overcome substance addiction, Gately has to get on his knees and pray. At first, kneeling doesn't seem to work for Gately. Early in Gately's recovery, "when he kneels at times and prays or meditates…he feels nothing – not nothing but Nothing, an edgeless blankness that somehow feels worse than the sort of unconsidered atheism he came in with" (443). In this stage, Gately feels that praying isn't just ineffective at connecting him with God, but reveals a lack of spirituality. Gately feels the absence of God as its own terrifying presence.

Gately didn't realize that experiencing the scary blankness of "Nothing" was actually leading him to connect with God. Unawares to him, Gately's physical routine of kneeling and praying helped him to escape his obsession with drugs. Although Gately was initially frustrated with and embarrassed by praying, the narrative says, "maybe after five months…[Gately] all of a sudden realized that quite a few days had gone by since he'd even thought about Demerol or Talwin or even weed" (467). In "Anti-Interiority:

Compulsiveness, Objectification, And Identity in *Infinite Jest*," Elizabeth Freudenthal says that Gately's physical routine allows him to overcome addiction. Freudenthal says, "Gately fights addiction by replacing his compulsive drug use with this kind of repetitive, performative, bodily ritual. He doesn't use talk therapy, he doesn't articulate how he feels, he cannot intellectualize how or why it works" (192). As Freudenthal says, Gately overcomes his addiction without the intellectualism Day tries to use to escape his pain. Freudenthal says that Gately's ritual proves his devotion to recovery, even if his mind doubts the efficacy of his action. She says, "Despite [Gately's] ambivalence about the nature of the powers controlling him, he creates a functional but empty signifier for them, using his own body as a similarly functional instrument of free-floating, originless well-being" (192). In his devotion to this "empty signifier" Gately invests himself in fulfilling an obligation he doesn't understand. By performing his faith in the recovery process could Gately overcome his addiction.

Fruedenthal refers to Gately's practice as "anti-interiority," an action directed away from instant self-gratification. This anti-interiority allows AA members to express and embrace a truth not masked by self-conscious irony. When discussing which speakers are most liked in AA, the narrative says, "The thing is it has to be the truth to really go over, here….And maximally unironic. An ironist in a Boston AA meeting is a witch in church" (369). The anti-interior attitude of AA allows its members to derive value from more than aesthetic pleasure.

The collectively-produced truth of AA contrasts the easy pleasure of drugs, which is largely aesthetic. As Gately says when reflecting on his old favorite drug, "The thing about Demerol wasn't just the womb-warm buzz of a serious narcotic. It was more like

the, what, the aesthetics of the buzz" (890). Because drugs produce individual pleasure, the truth of AA must come from a supportive rather than fun experience. As Gately says to new members of Ennet, "Why is the truth usually not just un- but *anti*-interesting? Because every one of the seminal little mini-epiphanies you have in early AA is always polyesterishly banal, Gately admits to residents" (358). Recovering from an endless pursuit of pleasure, addicts are grounded by the "obvious" realities of everyday life.

The tension between truth and aesthetics is the fundamental problem of *Infinite Jest*. If, as AA shows, real truth comes out of social experience, and aesthetic representation is always unfulfilling, how can a novel ever achieve a redemptive truth? No revelation consisting only of language can ever be more than "epiphanyish" (833). The narrative approaches this problem by drawing attention to how it imposes language onto Gately's experience. While in the hospital in and out of consciousness, Gately encounters "ghost words" that invade his mental space and narrate his experience. The narrative says that "in Gately's own brain-voice but with roaring and unwilled force, comes the term PIROUETTE, in caps" (832). Gately has never learned the meaning of this word, and he refers to its imposition as "a sort of lexical rape" (832). In this way, *Infinite Jest* acknowledges the violence that it performs by telling someone else's story. This shows that literature should not be static or insular, but encompass a struggle where people control their own representation and realize honest relationships with others.

By discussing the importance of Higher Powers in addiction recovery, *Infinite Jest* insists that people can't save themselves from solipsism. Consumer culture is based on people avoiding the images and experiences that disgust them. This leads to the increased self-centeredness of consumer culture. The existence of a world outside of

consumption can completely shatter someone's worldview. After Hal quits smoking marijuana, he says, "It occurred to me that I didn't have to eat if I was not hungry. This presented itself as almost a revelation. I hadn't been hungry in over a week. I could remember when I was always hungry, constantly hungry" (907). When Hal manages to quit smoking weed, he can re-imagine his relationship with consumption. However, this quote indicates that he may have gone too far, approaching anorexia in his resistance to consumption. Because of the predominance of the culture industry, the prospect of escaping consumer pleasure may impose a loss of self. Abandoning the comfort of consumer pleasure leaves people in limbo, and requires them to anchor their selves in something besides consumption.

The paralysis of apathy and ambivalence recurs throughout *Infinite Jest*. As David H. Evans points out in "The Chains of Not Choosing," "The book begins with a scene in the course of which Hal Incandenza winds up lying 'catatonic' on the floor of a men's room; it concludes (ignoring the endnotes) with Don Gately "flat on his back on the beach in the freezing sand (*IJ* 981)" (177). These scenes demonstrate the oppressive power of pleasure – the "tyranny of irony" that prevents us from escaping consumer capitalism. However, the novel demonstrates that we can fill the emptiness of individual existence by trusting the good will of other people. Only together, can we recover from our addiction to consumption.

One never knew, now did one.

∞: "I Do Have a Thesis"

Infinite Jest is a cult classic. It's also a literary tour de force – one of the highest-praised American novels published after World War II. The novel can be difficult to discuss because its influences range from Greek Mythology through Victorian literature to Thomas Pynchon and *M*A*S*H*. Despite its signature capaciousness, *Infinite Jest* leaves us with a few simple truths. People are better than things; community prevents than loneliness; acting cool can interfere with being honest.

The lessons of *Infinite Jest* are often "polyesterishly banal." However, the structure and content of Wallace's writing frequently excites his readers. In his essays, Wallace confronts the complexity of late capitalist culture, willing to attempt the intellect diving into the ideology of everyday consumption. In "E Unibus Pluram," Wallace asserts that "irony tyrannizes us," a sentence that itself signals the inescapable power of irony. Aware of his own hypocritical irony, Wallace rebelled against the banal, quotidian, and unquestionable power of TV. By both producing pleasure and absorbing its own criticism, television lures people into a cycle of viewing that is difficult to escape. By the late twentieth century, Western cultural experiences were constantly filtered through TV. Television presented culture as a frontier for the culture industry to colonize and control. Through the 1990s – and still today – the intersection of consumer capitalism and mass media is positing a world where, as Adorno and Horkheimer put it, "real life is becoming indistinguishable from the movies" (1944).

Is there more to life than consumption? *Infinite Jest* binges itself on characters, allusion, and information. The novel requires that we consume – *digest* – the richness of its text. By criticizing consumer culture, must embrace the opposite extreme – asceticism

or anorexia? As *Infinite Jest* demonstrates, anything can become an addiction. Abstaining from consumption can't be healthy if you abstain to improve your image. To escape the self-centeredness of consumption, people need to fill the void that easy pleasure leaves behind.

Life is other people. For Wallace, consumer culture is dishonest because it makes us feel like we're alone. He proves that selfhood is social, and people can't be satisfied by aesthetic pleasure. This is the cult of David Foster Wallace. *Infinite Jest* is a signifier that negates its own meaning. As a shibboleth, the novel's title represents an outward-facing in-group. To a generation raised in a culture of individual pleasure, *Infinite Jest* proves that other people exist. David Foster Wallace may have killed himself before I ever heard his name. But I knew him.

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