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## **Infinite Intrusions: Solipsism and David Foster Wallace's Authorial Objectivity**

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Infinite Intrusions: Solipsism and David Foster Wallace's Authorial Objectivity

BY

Jacob Daniel Smith

**UNDERGRADUATE THESIS**

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for obtaining

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Infinite Intrusion: Solipsism and David Foster Wallace's Authorial Objectivity in *The Pale King*

In response to changing attitudes about fiction and entertainment in America during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, writer David Foster Wallace posited that Americans' massive daily doses of passive entertainment (television), the sole purpose of which is to please, has helped foster a narcissistic culture in which people are merely presented with representations of inclusion and pleasure. In actuality, according to Wallace, their misguided pursuit of these in a medium that requires nothing of them leads only to loneliness and solipsism. Wallace's argument comes primarily from two sources: his 1993 essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction", and a 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery. The former is largely the above-mentioned indictment of television; the latter outlines an agenda Wallace proposes for U.S. writers to combat the narcissism and impotent self-reflexivity that have begun to pervade contemporary fiction:

In dark times the definition of good art would seem to be art that locates and applies CPR to those elements of what's human and magical that still live despite the times darkness.  
(McCaffery 131)

In the McCaffery interview, Wallace claims that his second novel, *Infinite Jest*, will be an attempt to satisfy this agenda, eschewing the authorial posing rampant among his peers, which he admits being guilty of himself, and "antagoniz[ing] the reader's sense that what she's experiencing while she reads is mediated through a human consciousness [...] with an agenda not necessarily coincident with her own." (McCaffery 134). Such fiction, in theory, would have the opposite effect of passive media, forcing the reader to acknowledge a relationship to something outside of herself, as well as the effort required of her to maintain that connection. That effect, although self-reflexive and seemingly at odds with Wallace's

claims, is an example of Wallace's repurposing of the narrative tool. Instead of literature pointing to itself as a means to draw readers' attention to its cleverness, or the author wittily making his presence known, the self-reflexivity Wallace proposes involves the reader, not the text. By turning her attention to herself and the process of her own reading, the reader may become more aware of her role in her own entertainment. Almost all of the scholarship concerned with *Infinite Jest* deals at least tangentially with the degree to which it succeeds in satisfying Wallace's agenda. Many scholars, including Mary K. Holland and, contend that the text fails to meet the author's outlined criteria, citing a myriad of narcissistic loops, the protagonists' descent into solipsism, and the suggestion at the novel's end to return to the beginning.

Furthermore, Holland claims that Wallace's station within the culture of narcissism, a term coined by Christopher Lasch, renders him incapable of writing his, or his characters, way out of it, effectively arguing that fulfillment of Wallace's agenda is impossible. In response to such treatment of Wallace's subjectivity, examination of the author's subsequent posthumous novel, *The Pale King*, becomes invaluable. More specifically, a comparison between the metafictional narrative style of the latter novel and that of its predecessor creates a commentary on the very subject of personal or cultural objectivity that can serve as a lens through which to reevaluate claims regarding Wallace's success or failure to satisfy his agenda, that of creating fiction that not only depicts a dark world – but also offers hope for being human and alive in it, with *Infinite Jest*. Placing both novels side-by-side provides a more comprehensive understanding of Wallace's engagement with the culture he is critiquing in each and creates an opportunity for the latter text to answer questions raised by the former.

In order to discuss the critical reception of *Infinite Jest* and by extension the role *The Pale King* plays in reshaping or reevaluating the validity of the associated claims, an understanding of the literary environment in which the former novel was published is necessary. Wallace himself was very active in defining that environment and diagnosing, or attempting to diagnose, its problems. His essay, "E

Unibus Pluram” outlines, albeit in a convoluted fashion, a list of television’s effects on U.S. citizens, most explicitly young U.S. fiction writers like Wallace himself. The majority of the essay is reiteration from an anthology on mass-media and advertising, edited by Todd Gitlin. However borrowed the information may be, the attitude with which the author conveys it is colored with genuine earnestness and a sense of urgency that lends weight to Wallace’s diagnoses and vague agenda for his peers and himself, the satisfaction of which is the focus of this essay. When approached as a tool for understanding the unique literary environment surrounding *Infinite Jest*’s release, “E Unibus Pluram”, hereafter to be referred to as the T.V. essay, is perhaps best understood in three parts: 1) Wallace’s understanding of the younger U.S. generations’ relationship to Television, 2) the implications that relationship has for Americans’ attitudes toward entertainment, and 3) the effect of this new environment on fiction and the ways in which young writers adapt or ought to adapt to it. Each of these categories builds on the previous, illustrating the imbricated nature of art, pop culture, and the American entertainment seeker that concerns Wallace and informs not only his essay’s argument, but the tone and landscape of both *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*.

Wallace addresses the first category largely through humorous anecdote, classifying the average lonely American television viewer as the character “Joe Briefcase” and running through a list of viewing scenarios that help develop the cultural landscape he wishes to critique. Primary among these scenarios is that of Joe Briefcase as a kind of voyeur, an idea that, although Wallace does not completely agree with, he uses as a starting point for his larger discussion:

Joe Briefcase fears and loathes the strain of the special self-consciousness which seems to afflict him only when other real human beings are around, staring, their human sense-antennae abristle. Joe B. fears how he might appear, come across, to watchers...but lonely people, at home, alone, still crave sights and scenes, company.

Hence television. Joe can stare at Them on the screen; they remain blind to Joe. It's almost like voyeurism. (Wallace 23)

Joe B.'s description encapsulates two key ideas: 1) loneliness is the condition for which large doses of television watching has become a symptom and 2) the viewing itself is representational, a stand-in and a poor one at that. By providing Joe B. with the satisfaction of "sights and scenes", to use Wallace's phrasing, and not requiring him to actively participate within the scenes he is witnessing, television becomes a passive entertainment that can superficially assuage both a deep social anxiety and a longing for connection. The problem according to Wallace, besides the obvious alienating effects of such a cycle, lies in an important distinction between Joe B's television viewing and actual voyeurism.

In the latter, Wallace points out, only Mr. Briefcase is aware of the one-way viewing. For the characters on the television to be the object of a genuine voyeur's gaze, they would have to be unaware of his watching. This complicates matters for Wallace who claims that "the people we are watching through the T.V.'s framed-glass screen are not really ignorant of the fact that someone is watching them...[they]]know that it is by virtue of [a] truly huge crowd of ogling somebodies that they are on the screen...at all" (Wallace 23). This is a fact, according to Wallace, that most American's recognize but are willing to ignore in order to sustain the illusion that their social needs are being met and that they are effectively avoiding the specific brand of self-conscious pain that accompanies actual human contact. This willingness to suspend disbelief, to accept what is being presented on the screen as an actual depiction of the way things are instead of the way an increasingly hegemonized public thinks it ought to be, poses a particular threat to a specific subset of the young American public: those who, as part of their craft/profession, are oglers and watchers, taking in the sights and scenes of the world around them and using the information to construct artistic renditions and critical depictions of that world, i.e. young U.S. fiction writers.

In contrast to the pseudo voyeurs – fiction writers and lonely Joe B’s – Wallace presents the image of the imago able to stand Emerson’s “Gaze of Millions” (Wallace 25). In describing the character, the author identifies a paradox: “you have to be just abnormally self-conscious and self controlled to appear unwatched” (Wallace 25). Because entertainment serves as a mirror for the consumer – the actor on the screen nonchallantly reflects back at the viewer what he wants to see himself as – fiction authors become the imagos of the world of literature. However, they increasingly use their ability to curate the image of self to simply point out their ability to do so. Wallace argues that by not taking advantage of the powerful position of the writer to alert readers to truths about themselves and simply reflecting back at the reader cynicism and wit, contemporary authors are producing fiction that is no better than television itself.

This very paradox becomes the crux of the argument Holland makes against Wallace’s success to satisfy his own agenda with *Infinite Jest*, plays an important role in any discussion of metafiction, and, therefore, becomes a dominant theme in discussing *The Pale King*. However, in its initial iteration, Wallace uses it to help define the relationship the young Americans’ share with television, a relationship that affects their demands of other forms of entertainment, and, therefore, their demands of fiction and fiction writers. What Wallace concludes is that the illusion set up by these hyper self-conscious depictions of idealized American life is toxic, stating “its toxic for lonely people because it sets up an alienating cycle (viz. ‘why can’t I be like that?’ etc.), and it’s toxic for fiction writers because it leads us to confuse actual fiction-research with a weird kind of fiction consumption” In other words, because television or fiction that mimics television is falsely assumed to depict the reality of American life while it actually only reinforces an unrealistic ideal, writers can fall into the trap of adopting the same portrayal as the thing their fiction reflects back, essentially perpetuating the illusion. (Wallace 26). Regardless of toxicity, the effect remains the same: young Americans, who according to Wallace watched up to six hours a day of television in 1993 – a figure that can only have increased with the

growing availability of television media and mobile streaming devices - , become hegemonized into believing, as Wallace puts it, “that the most significant quality of truly alive persons is watchableness” (Wallace 26). With this relationship thus defined, the implications of such a dynamic on the demands of American entertainment consumers become clearer; fiction writers, either falling into the same belief or capitalizing on it, begin to produce fiction whose only purpose is to pose them as author, to make them “watchable.”

In order to really understand the dilemma Wallace identifies for U.S. fiction, it is necessary to return to the idea that television is desire, i.e. that what is viewed on the screen, rather than being actual depictions of real people and the ways in which their various lives unfold, is instead a representation of what it has been decided Americans want to see themselves as, played out by actors self-conscious enough and controlled enough to allow the viewer to indulge in the flattering illusion. In combination with the pseudo-voyeuristic gazing that indulgence is comprised of, television becomes one extreme on a scale that has passive entertainment on one side and active entertainment, or the reading of good fiction – which Wallace defines as requiring the reader to “fight *through* the mediated voice presenting the material” (McCaffery 137), on the other.

The differences in question may best be understood if entertainment is thought of as a mirror. At either extreme the mirror will reflect something different: at the passive extreme, desire – at the active extreme, painful realities. As explained, television serves as the former pole. The latter role is filled by fiction. If T.V. displays what we want to see ourselves as, then fiction shows us as we are, forcing us to confront our individuality *and* connectedness, both things television strives to help us forget. Wallace expands on the various ways in which fiction manages to accomplish this in an interview with Larry McCaffery that will be addressed later. For the current argument, establishment of T.V. and fiction at opposite ends of a scale - with one (passive) showing an ideal and the other (active) the reality. will suffice.

If given a choice between what is ideal and what is real, the obvious decision the average person, or American (especially a lonely voyeuristic Joe B.), can be expected to make will most often be the former. Wallace explores this idea extensively in *Infinite Jest*, but it also plays an important role in his understanding of the demand entertainment consumers place on the artists that create various forms of entertainment media. Because passivity by definition requires no work, and because the social illusions that T.V. allows its viewers to maintain are so seductive, the demand for passive entertainment becomes the norm. In other words, because passive entertainment allows consumers to have an ideal image reflected back at them, the demand for that entertainment increases and artists have more of an incentive to create it.

The dilemma lies in the fact that television's appeal, reflection of desire rather than reality, relies on the wants and choices of the viewers. Those who produce television programming ascertain what these are, and then reinforce, congratulate, and even reshape them. For Wallace, this is disturbing because a public that watches six-hour-a-day mega doses of these images will inevitably change the way they think about themselves and the images around them. In his anthology, Gitlin posits that future advances in broadcasting technology will allow for more viewing options, affording the Joe B's control over what they choose to watch and thus avoiding the hegemony of a fixed broadcast. In retrospect, with the arrival of Netflix, Youtube, On Demand, DVR, and a multitude of other technologies that allow for the exact level of choice Gitlin predicted in the 90's, it is tempting to agree with him; that much of his thesis is true: increased broadcasting capabilities allow for a wider array of viewer choices. Wallace, however, claims that this is not a solution at all:

“Jacking the number of choices and options up with tech will remedy exactly nothing so long as no sources of insight on comparative worth, no guides to *why* and *how* to choose among experiences, fantasies, beliefs, and predilections, are permitted serious



“The fact is that it’s only in the U.S. arts, particularly in certain strands of contemporary American fiction, that the really serious questions about fin-de-sicle T.V.... are being addressed. But they are also, weirdly, being asked by television itself. This is another reason why most T.V. criticism seems so empty. Television’s managed to become it’s own most profitable analyst... The best T.V. of the last five years has been about ironic self-reference like no previous species of postmodern art could ever have dreamed to be.”

(Wallace 29-33)

Wallace’s comments come in the wake of a long description of the popular T.V. *St. Elsewhere*, in which he points out the self-referential intricacies of Mary Tyler Moore Studios and, more disturbingly to the author, the significance of the fact that he was even able to pick up on the self-reference. According to Wallace “the practice of watching is expansive [and] exponential” (Wallace 34) leading us to begin to watch ourselves watching. The literary response or outgrowth of this shifting mentality is metafiction. Just as T.V. begins to examine itself, essentially shielding itself from critique, and viewers begin to become conscious of their posture while gazing, fiction begins to become more and more about the act of writing fiction. Metafiction, Wallace claims, “was nothing more than a single-order expansion of its own great and theoretical nemesis, Realism” (Wallace 34). However, as far as metafiction as a critical tool goes, Wallace finds issue with the fact that it boils down to imitation of television’s own self-referential tendencies and becomes, rather than a response to television, an “abiding-in-T.V.” (Wallace 34).

These issues, the seeming impregnability of television and the repeated emptiness of any literary attempt to draw attention to it, are the heart of Wallace’s agenda. If the tools inherited from the literary avant-garde of the previous century have been subverted by television, and if the writers charged with replacing it are part of a culture that defines itself through images largely shaped by television and a self-directed spectatorial impulse (which inevitably leads back to television), then how does a young

American fiction writer step outside of the recursive loop that exists between postmodern entertainment consumers and the “art” they focus their attention on? How does such as a writer find a level of objectivity that allow him to provide the guide to morals and value that Wallace claims fiction should be? Wallace fails to answer his own question in the T.V. essay, but provides a list of way in which a fiction writer cannot achieve his stated goals. He cites Mark Leyner’s popular novel, *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist*, claiming that, although the prose is pristine and the novel itself good, it falls flat and, in fact, adopts television’s objective of simply wowing the reader (Wallace 79), instead of causing her to examine her definition of art as something that should merely wow her and revitalizing the notion that she is alive and active in the reading process, as Wallace claims to do with *Infinite Jest*. By flattering the reader for understanding the pop references, and by seeming to be funny in a sophisticated way and reminding that reader that are hip and funny as well for getting it, Leyner’s novel essentially acts just like the aforementioned episode of *St. Elsewhere*.

Wallace ends his essay by speculating that his “plangent noises about the impossibility of rebelling against an aura that promotes and vitiates all rebellion” (Wallace 81) may not have anything to do with the actual limits of fiction, but rather with his own “residency inside that aura” (Wallace 81). He posits that perhaps the next wave of rebellious writers will be those who return to a dryness, a straightforwardness, and risk ridicule fore being sentimental or banal or melodramatic (Wallace 81). They may, he claims, eschew the hip irony so popular among their peers and earnestly say “this is what is wrong, this is what we need to do.” *Infinite Jest* was released in the wake of the T.V. essay, but in the interim Wallace gave an interview with Larry McCaffery that, aside from expanding greatly on the ways in which fiction differs from television (i.e. the essential differences of passive and active entertainment and the social power those differences lend to each), invites, rather strongly, critics to approach Wallace’s second novel as an explicit attempt to fulfill his own agenda.

The McCaffery interview came out at the same time as the T.V. essay and covers much of the same material. In fact, any of McCaffery's questions are in response to the essay. For the most part this content simply helps to contextualize the many of the later questions regarding the forthcoming release of *Infinite Jest* as well Wallace's views on what makes good art and good fiction. Although Wallace doesn't really say anything new on the subject of television, his own distillation of the T.V. essay's argument provides an arguably more accessible description of mass media's link to a fiction audience:

We all suffer alone in the real world; true empathy's impossible. But if a piece of fiction can allow us imaginatively to identify with characters' pain, we might then also more easily conceive of others identifying with our own. This is nourishing, redemptive; we become less alone inside. It might be just that simple. But now realize that T.V. and popular film and most kinds of "low" art – which just means art whose primary aim is to make money – is lucrative precisely because it recognizes that audiences prefer 100 percent pleasure to the reality that tends to be 49 percent pleasure and 51 percent pain ... So it's hard for an art audience, especially a young one that's been raised to expect art to be 100 percent pleasurable and to make that pleasure effortless, to read and appreciate serious fiction. That's not good ... [i]t makes trying to engage today's readers both imaginatively and intellectually unprecedentedly hard. (128)

Wallace's final statement, that about the difficulty of engaging today's readers on a meaningful level, proves to be the main focus of the interview. The author addresses the topic, aside from frequent returns to his T.V. argument, by examining what was passed down from the previous generation of American fiction writers, elaborating on the ways in which that inheritance affects the current literary climate, and finally by explicitly stating what makes good art, or what sets meaningful art apart from "low" art and even some supposed serious art. Wallace's answer to this final question, that "rule breaking has got to be for the sake of something" (McCaffery 132) and "serve a purpose beyond [it]self" (137), provides the

platform from which Mary K. Holland later claims that *Infinite Jest* fails to satisfy Wallace's agenda, the definition of which relies heavily on an understanding of Wallace's (and all young American fiction writers') literary forefathers.

Wallace, who openly expressed an aversion to attaching himself to any specific literary movement like postmodernism and often replied "I'm in English" instead of telling people he was a writer, does align himself, when prompted by McCaffery, with a string of American writers that came before him. Wallace's claims are not of similar styles and themes, but goals. The author identifies the significant authors of the previous decades (Barth, Coover, Burroughs, Nabokov, and Pynchon), those who managed to write fiction that had profound cultural effects, and claims them as "patriarch[s] for my patricide" (146). Wallace's phrasing indicates both an intimacy and respect for these writers, but also a degree of something else, something darker. The suggestion of patricide invites the question of *why*. Wallace addresses this question, defining both the reasons these authors were successful, and the unfortunately damaging effects their legacy has left on his generation.

Wallace claims that "The only stuff a writer can get from an artistic ancestor is a certain set of aesthetic values and beliefs, and maybe a set of formal techniques" (McCaffery 147). It is with the specific rules he feels have been inherited from the aforementioned authors that Wallace takes issue, not the authors themselves or even their use of the same techniques:

The problem is that, however misprised it has been, what's been passed down from the postmodern heyday is sarcasm, cynicism, a manic ennui, suspicion of all authority, suspicion of all constraints on conduct and a terrible penchant for ironic diagnosis of unpleasantness instead of an ambition not just to diagnose and ridicule, but to redeem.  
(147)

What Wallace finds troubling about these techniques has nothing to do with an intrinsic flaw, but rather with their relevance to the current state of American culture. Wallace states that "the great thing about

irony is that it splits things apart” (147). In other words, irony is good subversive technique with which to reveal the flaws and within a culture. They are essentially ground-clearing. As Wallace puts it, “[s]arcasm, parody, absurdism and irony are great ways to strip off stuff’s mask and show the unpleasant reality behind it” (147). For these reasons, according to Wallace, such techniques were perfect for the hypocrisies of the fifties and sixties (147) and enabled the authors who wielded them to become wildly successful, not by producing “low” art or thinly veiled by a sense of wit and intelligence, but by creating something germane to the time and powerful in its cultural implications. However, these techniques in the hands of Wallace’s generation have had a much different social effect.

According to Wallace, “[t]he modernists and early postmodernists – all the way from Mallarme to Coover, I guess – broke most of the rules for us” (132). Because of the exceptional work of the authors before them, contemporary American writers are working in an environment that no longer benefits from the destructive subversive power of irony and sarcasm. That, however, has not stopped writers like Leyner and Brett Easton Ellis from adopting the previously successful techniques. What makes this dangerous is that their fiction is met well, largely because of the readers’ changing expectations, as outlined in the T.V. essay. There is no more ground to clear, that work has been done. What the use of the techniques boils down to is strictly authorial posing to please the reader or amuse the author. Either one, in Wallace’s opinion, amounts to “low” art, an attempt to gain a larger readership and sell more books. Wallace emphasizes that rule breaking “has to be for the *sake* of something” (132) and that when “the mere form of renegade avant-gardism ... becomes an end in itself, you end up with bad language poetry and *American Psycho*’s nipple-shocks and Alice Cooper eating shit on stage” (132). As stated in the T.V. essay, metafiction is an outgrowth of these techniques, attempting to break the illusion of unmediated content. Wallace’s statements regarding his agenda deal largely with emphasizing a mediating conscience in fiction, which leads many critics to question his adherence to his own ideas of good art, i.e. how can an author create good art when his aims are similar to those that he

condemns as destructive, and how, if he can overcome that obstacle, can he do so while self-consciously adopting the use of techniques that undermine his message? Wallace addresses these questions in the McCaffery interview, elaborating on his use of T.V.-esque techniques in his short story collection, *Girl With Curious Hair*:

Readers I know sometimes remark on all the flashcuts and the distortion of linearity in it and usually want to see it as mimicking T.V.'s own pace and phosphenic flutter. But what it's really trying to do is just the *opposite* of T.V. – it's trying to prohibit the reader from forgetting that she's receiving heavily mediated data, that this process is a relationship between the writer's consciousness and her own, and that in order for it to be anything like a real full human relationship, she's going to have to put in her share of the linguistic work. (138).

Wallace identifies a key distinction here between his work and the work he critiques so heavily: the mere form of his work is not his goal. He is able to articulate a well-defined objective behind his use of various literary techniques, and none of them have to do with winning the reader over with his charm or boosting sales. Irony and sarcasm may be destructive and subversive, but Wallace is claiming to revitalize them by repurposing that power to reveal the narcissism afflicting both contemporary readers and writers. In a statement reminiscent of his claims concerning the next brand of true literary rebels from the T.V. essay, Wallace uses this distinction to observe that the division between good art and bad art “lies somewhere in the art's heart's purpose” (148). While this sounds like a reiteration of his claims that writing must be for the sake of something, Wallace takes a step toward the more sentimental by claiming “[i]t's got something to do with love. With having the discipline to talk out of the part of yourself that can love instead of the part that just wants to be loved” (148). Wallace's many statements of this nature, his claims that his “form-conscious” writing is meant to “antagonize a reader's intuition that she is a self, that she is alone and going to die” (137), and the comparisons he invites between

contemporary fiction and that of the early postmodernists create an expectation that *Infinite Jest*, which came out three years after the interview, will be a demonstration of Wallace's ability to effectively write from the part of himself that can love and "not just ... depict the way a culture's bound and defined by mediated gratification and image, but somehow ... redeem it" (136). The author himself invites such an expectation, claiming that "[w]hether I can provide a payoff and communicate a function rather just seem jumbled and prolix is the issue that'll decide whether the thing I'm working on now succeeds or not" (137).

After the subsequent release of *Infinite Jest*, critics took it upon themselves to make that decision, many of them concluding that the novel falls short. However, I contend that this analysis is flawed. Scholars like Holland focus on issues of Wallace's form - which he explained preemptively in the McCaffery interview - , ignore carnivalistic elements of the novel's landscape and layout that allow for an examination of transgressive art, and lack the opportunity to have read *Infinite Jest* through the lens of *The Pale King*, which emphasizes and clarifies much of Wallace's argument from the previous novel and defines much more explicitly for readers what the act of reading good fiction should require of them. In order to understand Holland's critique, a brief summary of Wallace's expansive novel is necessary.

*Infinite Jest* is a monstrous novel in many respects. With one thousand seventy-nine pages and weighing over one pound, Wallace's novel is a massive undertaking. Physical formidability aside, *Infinite Jest* is also expansive in terms of content. The novel's multitude of interwoven story lines take place primarily in two settings: Enfield Tennis Academy (ETA), a school for gifted young athletes to prepare for careers in the televised tennis circuit know as "the show", and Ennet House, a drug recovery facility where many of the novel's characters go to rid themselves of addictions ranging from alcohol and marijuana to dilaudid and crack. The novel's core family, the Incandenzas, populate the ETA setting. The family's patriarch, James Orin Incandenza - who commits suicide by putting his head into

a microwave oven prior to the novel's action, is ETA's founder, an optics genius, and an avant-garde filmmaker responsible for the narcotizing/fatal video cartridge that shares the novel's title. The three Incandenza sons, two of whom attend ETA, all possess physical deformities of varying degrees. Hal, a marijuana addict and tennis prodigy, has an enlarged forearm from constantly squeezing a tennis ball. Mario, the son of his mother's step brother, is deformed from birth and only able to walk upright with the support of a police lock. Orin, the eldest son, has a hypertrophied right leg from punting while playing professional football. Primary among Ennet Houses residents are Don Gately - a recovering painkiller addict, burglar, and murderer - and Joelle Van Dyne, a crack addict, member of the Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed (U.H.I.D.), radio personality, and star of James Incandenza's film 'Infinite Jest'. The novel's landscape consists of the Organization of North American Nations (O.N.A.N.), in which Canada, the U.S., and Mexico have combined, and an altered sense of temporality dominated by subsidized time, in which years are designated by corporate sponsorship. The novel's overall story, which takes place primarily in the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment, consists of Hal and Don's struggles with addiction, anhedonia, and loneliness while a group of Quebecois terrorists known as Les Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents (A.F.R.), or The Wheelchair Assassins, fight with the F.B.I., now known as the Bureau of Unspecified Services, for possession of the "Infinite Jest" cartridge, which has the ability to entertain people to death.

Holland openly states at the beginning of her essay, "The Art's Heart's Purpose: Braving the Narcissistic Loop of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*", that her critique of the novel deals exclusively with the extent to which the author is able to satisfy his agenda, stating that because *Infinite Jest* was "conceived in the fire of...a manifesto [for fiction]" (218), her grandiose term for the T.V. essay, such a directed approach to the novel cannot be avoided. While many others and I agree with Holland at least to this extent, she continues to claim that the novel is a failure:

*Infinite Jest* fails to deliver on the agenda that Wallace set for it, not only because it fails to eschew empty irony for the earnestness that Wallace imagines but also, and more importantly, because it fails to recognize and address the cultural drive toward narcissism that fuels and is fueled by that irony. (218).

Holland's choice of narcissism as the target for her essay is appropriate given Wallace's own concern with uncovering the reader's self-indulgent cycles and addiction to illusion-sustaining passive media. The T.V. essay deals almost exclusively with the drive Holland mentions. The book itself, if thought of in terms of the spectrum of passive and active media and the idea of entertainment as a mirror, becomes an opportunity for Wallace to reflect back to the reader her own narcissism, making her uncomfortable by emphasizing a mediating conscience and therefore her place in the implied relationship and the lengths to which she has been willing to go to avoid that confrontation with herself. If it could be shown that this is indeed what *Infinite Jest* does, Holland's argument would be undermined. However, her claim is that the novel fails to even address the issue of narcissism as the foundation of American cultural issues. This seems an irrational claim given the environment the novel was produced in. Regardless, Holland cites at least three points which she sees as contributing to the novel's failure: 1) Wallace's weak handling of infantile narcissism in the text, 2) his use of the same narrative techniques he criticizes and his writing from within the narcissistic aura he is critiquing, and 3) his failure/inability to create characters who break free of their narcissistic loops and rise out of solipsism. Holland's points, whatever degree of persuasiveness they display, do create an excellent background against which to examine Wallace's handling of narcissism in *Infinite Jest* - both through the aura of his essay and interview and through the lens of *The Pale King* - , the ways in which he succeeds in freeing his characters from their narcissistic loops, and the suggestions he offers for a healthier more fruitful relationship to art and fiction.

The first of Holland's points comes in two parts, the latter of which seems to contradict the former. She begins by stating her perceived neglect of narcissism in the text:

Whereas Wallace devotes constant attention in *Jest*, as in his critiques, to the problems of irony and mediation, infantilization and narcissism emerge in the novel not so much as problems consciously to be solved as a deadly undertow against which the novel struggles – and, I argue, fails – to make forward progress. I argue that this unconscious stagnation in the culture of narcissism ultimately prevents the novel from fully accomplishing the goals that Wallace sets forth in his agenda for novelistic redemption: The nagging compulsion of narcissism, left unfaced and unresolved, quietly but insistently overwhelms the considerable bravery of the novel, its author, and its characters as they labor to re-create individual integrity and communal connection from their cultural ruins. (225)

Despite such an assertion, Holland contradicts herself with claims that “the novel argues unmistakably that instinctive desire for infantile fulfillment both contributes to the pathological narcissism that adults fall into and continues to be an unspoiled hope despite the impossibility of its fulfillment” (231.) She then shifts her critique's focus to the fact that *Infinite Jest* “remains ambivalent about how best to treat this problem” (231). This new claim proves to be irrelevant to evaluating Wallace's fulfillment of his agenda, which he defines most clearly in the McCaffery interview:

In dark times, the definition of good art would seem to be art that locates and applies CPR to those elements of what's human and magical that still live and glow despite the times darkness. Really good fiction could have as dark a worldview as it wished, but it'd find

a way both to depict this dark world *and* to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in it. (131)

Wallace takes issue with pointless irony and mere mimesis of the type employed by Brett Ellis in *American Psycho*, for example. *Infinite Jest*, while it does act as what Wallace calls “a performative digest of...social problems” (131), also shows, in a sympathetic light, the marginalized alternative to those problems. The author manages this task primarily through the characters of Mario Incandenza – the bradykinetic dwarf sibling of the novel’s protagonist, and Remy Marathe – legless leader of a Canadian separatists group called The Wheelchair Assassins. The former observes that “it’s like there’s some rule that real stuff can only get mentioned if everybody rolls their eyes and laughs in a way that isn’t funny” (*Infinite Jest* 592). The latter, aside from providing a long argument against passive entertainment and unmediated access to such entertainment, notices similarly to Mario that he “feels an aftertaste of shame after revealing passion of any belief and type when with Americans, as if he had made flatulence instead of expressing belief.” (318). Both characters exhibit a transgressive earnestness that aligns Wallace with his agenda. Holland’s claim that Wallace does not provide a solution to the social problems of contemporary American culture has no place in her argument; Wallace claimed good fiction would be earnest and depict humanity among darkness, and *Infinite Jest* fits the description.

However, even when Holland identifies Mario and Marathe as vehicles of such hope, she focuses solely on their disfigurement and marginalization as a means to negate whatever significance their perspectives may carry. An alternative to

Holland's interpretation, which favors an image of Wallace as a writer who is incapable of escaping his own addiction to irony and cynicism, is that Mario and Marathe's placement outside the physical norm, rather than being punishment for their sincerity, is Wallace's accurate depiction of the dominant culture's reception of such views and an indication that seemingly abject earnestness in the true heir to the early postmodernist's irony.

Catherine Nichols expands on this idea of transgression in her examination of the carnivalesque in *Infinite Jest*, applying a similar critique to Wallace's protagonists – Hal Incandenza and Don Gately – , and creating a compelling counter argument to Holland's point that Wallace fails to create characters capable of breaking free of their narcissistic loops.

Holland's focus on the theme of infantile narcissism and her Freudian analysis of the text ignore many elements of the novel's structure, plot, setting, and character development that reveal a more optimistic reading. By approaching the novel's environment as carnivalesque and examining the implications of depicting such an environment through a novel with a structure that can itself be considered grotesque, it is possible to argue that both of Wallace's protagonists, Don Gately and Hal Incandenza, escape their own narcissism, and that that act amounts to a transgression that renders both unintelligible to the majority, emphasizing Wallace's claims in the T.V. essay that "the new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn...the parody of gifted ironists... To risk accusations of sentimentality...of willingness to be suckered by a world of lurkers and starers who fear gaze and ridicule above imprisonment without law" (Wallace 81-82).

*Infinite Jest* can be thought of largely in terms of the carnivalesque idea of inverting the upper and lower. The reconfiguration of North America into O.N.A.N. demonstrates this inversion in at least two ways: 1) through the acronym itself, and 2) through the resultant creation of the Great

Concavity/Convexity. The former aligns O.N.A.N. with Stallybrass and White's idea of the grotesque body, while the latter addresses the dualistic ambivalence of the nations organization in terms of Mikhail Bakhtin's description of the carnivalesque ritual of crowning/decrowning.

In *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* Peter Stallybrass and Allon White define the grotesque body as "an image of impure corporeal bulk with its orifices ... yawning wide and its lower regions ... given priority over its upper regions" (9). The acronym *O.N.A.N.*'s biblical allusion to ejaculation simultaneously aligns the novel's setting with both the open and excreting body, but also the self-indulgent and sterile. By creating such an allusion, Wallace essentially turns the landscape of *Infinite Jest* into a grotesque body. This idea extends beyond a name and carries over into the physical layout of the novel's North America as well.

O.N.A.N. manages its waste through a complicated process invented by James Incandenza called annular fusion. The process involves using waste as fuel for an energy producing process, the waste of which further fuels the process. More importantly for an examination of the carnivalesque in the novel is the means by which O.N.A.N.'s waste is gathered and where it is held prior to its use in the process. Large catapults hurl all the U.S. waste into a designated deserted area near New York, where the effects of the waste removal process are so total that they have resulted in giant infants, a rainforest, and packs of oversized feral hamsters. Because the U.S. president detests filth, he has the U.S./Canadian border altered to include the waste zone as Canadian. The resultant curve in the boundary line is known simultaneously as the Great Concavity and the Great Convexity, depending on the perspective. In fact, it is often referred to as the Great Concavity/Convexity. The dual nature of the border as well as the process of annular fusion, which combines images of waste and production, echoes Bakhtin's description of the carnivalesque act of crowning/decrowning:

From the very beginning, a decrowning glimmers through the crowning. And all carnivalistic symbols are of such a sort they always include within themselves a

perspective of negation (death) or vice versa. Birth is fraught with death and death with new birth. (252)

While Bakhtin argues that this “absolutizes nothing” (252) but “proclaims the joyful relativity of all things” (252-53), Nichols views Wallace’s carnivalesque landscape as combating the very idea of *joyful* relativity, and argues that the liminality achieved through such carnivalistic inversions becomes an opiate that traps people in the narcissistic loops Holland condemns *Infinite Jest* for.

In her article, “Dialogizing Postmodern Carnival: David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*”, Nichols addresses the ways in which Wallace’s carnivalesque world “falls short of Bakhtin’s utopian ends” (6). Nichols begins by highlighting the previously mentioned landscape, stating:

Whereas Bakhtin viewed bodily emissions such as urination and defecation as evidence of the human form in a constant state of growth and change, Wallace’s annular fusion produces waste that only perpetuates stasis. (7)

By emphasizing this message of dysfunctional inversion at such a basic level as the novel’s landscape, Nichols lays the groundwork for a discussion of *infinite Jest*’s characters as well as an examination of what Holland interprets as their eventual slip into solipsism. To begin her discussion of Wallace’s characters, Nichols first establishes the nature of the dominant or high culture within the novel. In order to achieve this she cites the Bureau of Unspecified Services’ methods for sending agents undercover, which require “tak[ing] on carnivalesque identities” (9). Men dress as women, heterosexuals dress as homosexuals, whites dress as blacks, etc. Nichols addresses the significance of this practice, stating, that “[i]n the traditional carnival setting, these “costumes” would have suggested transgression, but that implication is undermined by the fact that such disguises are used to cloak a conservative group of government agents...” (9). Nichols claims that the costumes, because they help further the work of the agents, “serve as instruments of social control rather than subversion” (10). Illustrating the point further are the Wheelchair Assassins. As a marginalized and feared group, it is significant that they have no

legs, or rather that their bodies consist solely of the upper stratum. This fact emphasizes Nichols' point that Bakhtin's joyful relativity, in Wallace's novel, is presented as having created an environment in which high and low are inverted, but in which the resultant liminality leads to stasis and, eventually, the very kind of recursion and self-reflexivity Holland finds fault with.

The image of static and stagnant inversion resembles Wallace's claims in his essay and interview regarding the now impotent use of postmodern irony and related techniques like metafiction. For Nichols, the addicts in the novel, primarily Don and Hal, face a similar dilemma as young American fiction writers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: how to be genuine and how to be heard in a culture where the donning of masks and disguises, whether literal or in the form of addiction, has become the cultural norm. Holland interprets the two characters' inability to make themselves understood at the novel's close as a sign of their slipping deeper into their disguises, reading Hal's incoherence as the result of his consumption of a potent hallucinogen and Don's memory of a past drug binge as a sign of his abandonment of sobriety. Nichols, however, comes to an antithetical conclusion.

She interprets Hal and Don's inability to communicate as a definitive sign that they have broken free of their narcissistic loops. Both men's unintelligibility begins in the wake of a display of earnestness or an attempt to be genuine. Hal gives up marijuana and his inner dialogue is replaced with actual dialogue. Don, already on the path of sobriety, ends up intubated in the hospital after being stabbed while defending a fellow resident of Ennet House. Each, when he tries to communicate from his new position of marginality, appears to those around him to only be making animalistic noises. Nichols identifies this as an indication of the "social as well as the physical borders" (14) each has crossed. She ends by claiming that when viewed in the context of a whole that only makes sense through a coming together of seemingly disparate parts, much like the novel itself,

the transformation experienced by Hal and Don becomes one of moving through the alienation denied by their carnivalesque masks to begin expressing themselves as vocal

“figurants” whose incoherent voices may eventually coalesce into an audible, collective human hum capable of restoring dialogue to a decidedly monologic culture. (15)

When read in combination with Wallace’s statements in the McCaffery interview, Nichols analysis seems to suggest that Wallace satisfies his agenda, effectively portraying a dark world view while also offering hope for humanity to survive despite bleak conditions. In so doing Nichols also counteracts Holland’s claims to the contrary.

Although much of what Holland and other critics say of *Infinite Jest* is true – it does play narrative games and employ subversive techniques that it proposes to eschew – Wallace’s self-conscious use of his culture’s narrative and psychological crutches to make a point of highlighting their ineffectiveness and detrimental nature revitalizes them with purpose, freeing him from suggestions of his novel’s failure and aligning *Infinite Jest* more with the early postmodernist’s work. Furthermore, Wallace’s use of a carnivalesque environment invites questions concerning the cultural margins within the text, what they reveal about its characters, and, consequently, where we draw our own margins and the risk/necessity involved in crossing them in the name of art. Having dealt with Holland’s unwarranted expectations of Wallace, as well as her assertion that Wallace fails to create characters capable of escaping the narcissistic loop, it becomes necessary to return to her initial claim, although she contradicts herself, that *Infinite Jest* fails to address to cultural affliction with infantile narcissism and the resultant solipsistic recursion.

Although Holland claims that Wallace fails to address the issue of narcissism, by her own definition of narcissism as the adult behavior of “lov[ing] others for reflecting what they perceive as best about themselves in an attempt to approximate that closed-loop bliss of infantile self fulfillment that ego formation forces them to leave behind” (224), *Infinite Jest* very directly addresses the reader’s narcissism. By

forcing the reader to do work, to actively engage with the novel and its author, in other words by emphasizing a mediating conscience, Wallace's novel mimics the split from the mother in Freud's primary narcissism. However, it then combats the resultant secondary narcissism by forcing an uncomfortable awareness of it.

Presumably readers come to *Infinite Jest* or any novel primarily for entertainment. As Wallace explains in detail through both his essay and his interview, the American expectation of entertainment is increasingly for the passive variety that reinforces the narcissist's self image. *Infinite Jest* consistently refuses to do so by interrupting the expected or anticipated flow of reading with endnotes, convoluting the story with countless subplots, altering chronology, delaying confluence, and employing syntactically correct but painfully long and complex sentences. Readers cannot just passively be entertained, they have to actively sort through and piece together the different pieces of the text.

A large portion of the novel itself is dedicated to multiple characters' search for a video cartridge nicknamed "the entertainment", a film shot from the perspective of an infant and depicting a mother apologizing for the pain that her abandonment caused the child. This mirroring of the readers pursuit in combination with those same characters' various addictions and the suggestion at the novel's end to return to it's beginning reflects back at the reader not what she sees as best in herself, but rather her insatiability and the destructiveness of her avoidance of acknowledging it, both of which have been fostered by her own proclivity for entertainment that masks them. Holland focuses on the recursive nature of this relationship as a failure on Wallace's part to fulfill his agenda. If

reader's seek out passive entertainment to avoid the disappointment or pain that accompanies recognizing their shortcomings and *Inifinite Jest* makes those shortcomings apparent, readers will seek out more passive entertainment to affirm a more positive self-image. However, that avoidance behavior is the behavior that readers are trying to avoid. For Holland, Wallace's novel traps its characters and readers in this recursive loop. Wallace observes in the McCaffery interview that witnessing an event alters the event (). Although the author was responding to a question regarding metafiction's effect on the literary landscape, his observation remains relevant to combating Holland's argument. There is a difference between narcissism and acknowledgement of narcissism. The latter is almost oxymoronic. By becoming aware of her narcissism, or pursuit of self-image affirming entertainments, through engagement with media that does the opposite, a reader of *Inifinite Jest* is removed from her narcissistic loop. Wallace examines this theme much more explicitly in his final novel, *The Pale King*.

The author's final contribution to the world of literature can and should be approached with the same question one brings to *Inifinite Jest*: How does this fulfill Wallace's agenda? Additionally, it is inevitable to discuss the difficulties involved with answering yes to that question given the authorial intrusion and metafictional elements of the novel, both stylistic choices Wallace cites in his essay and the interview as indicative of shallow art or authorial posing. However, when read through the lens of Wallace's stated agenda, *The Pale King* proves to alter the effect of such forms, turning the destructive nature of metafiction's irony and cynicism back on itself, making the seemingly inescapable recursion Holland identifies work

to help break the reader's narcissistic cycle. Furthermore, Wallace includes many personal addresses in the novel that exhibit an equal if not greater level of earnestness than the Mario and Marathe portions of *Infinite Jest*. Aside from displaying a high degree of sincerity, these sections of the novel also explicitly address attention expenditure and self-awareness, ideas central to Wallace's agenda and necessary in any discussion of metafiction. The degree to which *The Pale King* qualifies as metafiction and the unique ways the novel employs stylistic elements of the form provides a good starting point to understanding where Wallace's final novel fits in and affects Holland's critique of *Infinite Jest*.

*The Pale King*, very different from its predecessor, is about various employees of the Internal Revenue Service, the small tedious tasks that make up their positions, and a practiced and cultivated attention to detail. Painfully dull plot aside, the novel is stylistically interesting. Despite Wallace's outspokenness against the use of metafiction and its effectiveness in the wake of the early postmodernists use of it, Wallace has on two occasions used the technique himself. *The Pale King* is the second of these attempts. The first was a novella titled "Westward the Course of Empire Makes its Way" published in his short fiction collection *Girl With Curious Hair*. When questioned by McCaffery about this first use of the style, Wallace explains the rationale behind his attempt:

In "Westward I got trapped on time just trying to expose the illusions of metafiction the same way metafiction had tried to expose the pseudo-unmediated realist fiction that came before it. It was a horror show. The stuff's a permanent migraine. (142)

Aside from admitting he did not succeed in his attempt at such an exposure, Wallace's statement provides a criteria for evaluating his second attempt in *The Pale King*. Instead of being about itself, Wallace's final novel, or the metafictional sections of the novel, are about themselves being about themselves. Self-conscious fiction reflecting on the fact of its self-consciousness.

The novel's ninth chapter, titled "Author's foreward", comes sixty-six pages into the text and begins "Author here. Meaning the real human author...not some abstract novelistic persona...this right here is me, as a real person, David Wallace, S.S. no. 975-04-2012 adressing you...to inform you...all of this is true. This book is really true" (66-67). Immediately after he directs readers back to the publishers disclaimer on the first page, which states "the characters and events in this book are fictitious" (67), which means Wallace's claims sixty-six pages into the text are fictitious. However, the author's foreward claims that the publishers note is strictly there for legal reasons and that what follows is in actuality real. Wallace continues in this looping fashion for about a page before he states that "I find these sorts of self-referential paradoxes irksome...and the very last thing this book is is some kind of clever metafictional titty-pincher" (67). For the most part Wallace follows through on this claim. The intrusive chapter are few, and despite the fact that the personal details of his life the "author" reveals only vaguely resemble the actual Wallace's, the message regarding literature and metafiction remain relevant and coincide with Wallace's similar claims in the McCaffery interview, that "[metafiction] gets empty and solipsistic real fast" (142) and that "by the mid-seventies everything useful about the mode had been exhausted" (142

These chapters present themselves as more than just a stylistic game to impress readers. Wallace effectively exposes the annoying and pointless recursion inherent to metafictional texts by staging his own metafictional loop at the beginning of his foreword, and having done so he reflects on the form and, for the most part abandons it. Based on Wallace's statement in the McCaffery interview, he met at least this part of his agenda. In reference to Holland's claims that *Infinite Jest* fails in its attempts to expose the reader's endless recursion, *The Pale King* emphasizes Wallace's position that witnessing an event changes the event. By becoming conscious of being conscious, consciousness is altered, heightened; the reader gains the hyper self-consciousness enjoyed by authors and actors, becoming capable of understanding herself and her reactions to the world around her from an almost third-person perspective, and more thought can be placed on where attention is directed, i.e. what entertainment choices are being made and what they say about an audience. After having displayed the process of creating such a hyper-consciousness through text with his metafiction example, Wallace goes on to offer earnest and direct commentary regarding self-awareness and the fact that it can be painful, but that that pain can be constructive.

Large sections of the novel are comprised of various IRS employees speaking directly to either a video camera or tape recorder. One of these employees, known to his co-workers as 'irrelevant' Chris Fogel, has a 100- page monologue in this fashion. Within this chapter, Fogel details his experience with the dug Obetrol, a speed variant.

Obetrolling didn't make me self-conscious. But it did make me much more self aware. If I was in a room, and had taken an Obetrol or two with a glass of water and they'd taken effect, I was now not only in the room, but I was aware that I was in the room...I knew I was noticing.

(181)

What Wallace puts into the mouth of Chris Fogel is essentially a counter argument to Holland. If, as Holland states, *Infnite Jest* fails because all it does is portray and, in her opinion, perpetuate the kind of solipsistic self-referential loops apparent in the text, its characters, and its readers, then Wallace argues essentially that what a novel like that does is essentially act as obetrol, allowing one to get outside of themselves and view themselves seeing things. That kind of objectivity allows for self reflection in a different way than the kind of infantile and narcissitic manner Holland focuses on. Fogel notices that his roommate annoys him when he tries to impress girls on the phone. However the Obetrol allows him to notice that he is annoyed because it makes him realize that what bothers him is not so much the fact of his roommate's insincerity, but the fact that he himself is guilty of the same thing. *Infnite Jest* creates this kind of objectivity for its readers, putting them in a better position to analyze their pursuit of entertainment and whatever uncomfortable realizations about themselves such an objective analysis reveals.

Holland's claims against *Infnite Jest* not unfounded. In fact, without having first raised them himself, Wallace may not have written the novel or his subsequent one. Questions regarding the ability of any author to effectively critique a narcissistic culture that they are themselves apart of have been present for decades

and Holland is not unique in her observations. However, what Holland fails to recognize and what Wallace contends throughout the entirety of his final novel is that yes, readers, writers, the average citizen are all infantile, narcissistic, and lonely, but if they also possess the willingness and discipline to become aware of that fact, to not ignore it and to even examine what it means that they can be aware of it and choose to ignore it, progress can be made toward redeeming not only the integrity of literature, but also the humanity of contemporary American culture.

Revisiting *Infinite Jest* after examining these aspects of *The Pale King* reveals the former novel to have within it a commentary on the ways in which Americans, once they achieve the level of painful self-consciousness outlined in the latter by Fogel's description of obetrolling, can redirect their attention in ways that are more satisfying and meaningful. In other words, to explain things in terms of Fogel and his roommate, *Infinite Jest* steps in once the reader gains the consciousness Fogel has when he realizes his roommate's phone calls bother him because they make him realize a painful truth about himself. Once a reader is able to notice that she notices, she becomes aware of what she is noticing and gains the power to choose where she directs that attention. Explaining this process is something Wallace does fail to do clearly in *Infinite Jest*, and that failure undoubtedly opened the gates for critics like Holland, allowing them to ignore the content that instructs the reader what to do with her newfound power. *Infinite Jest* instead simply creates such a self-awareness in ways previously discussed. *The Pale King* makes it clear that this is what the previous novel does, enabling readers to identify the content that aligns Wallace strongly with the criteria of his agenda to offer hope for humanity. This content comes primarily through the conversations held between Hugh/Helen Steeply and Marathe, which are staggered throughout the novel, the advice of the sweat-licking weight room guru at E.T.A., and also carry over into representations of family life in the text.

Much of *Infinite Jest* revolves around entertainment. More specifically, it revolves around the Entertainment, a video cartridge so intoxicating it allows for death by pleasure. For the most part, Wallace approaches the topic in the conversations between Remy Marathe and Hugh (Helen) Steeply, an agent with the Bureau of Unspecified Services. The mens' argument, like the men themselves, is static. However, each presents theories and observations about entertainment, freedom, choice, and more specifically, a uniquely American relationship to each of these that leads to questions about not only the roles each element plays in our lives, both culturally and individually, but also to those about the work that goes into reading *Infinite Jest*, and what the end result of that effort is.

Before any speculation regarding the significance or relevance of the argument between these two men, an understanding of both sides, the American and the Quebecois, is necessary. Paramount for both men is choice, the *freedom* to choose. Entertainment, or rather the Entertainment, is the incendiary object, being for the A.F.R. a desired weapon, which they plan to disseminate, making it available, by choice, to U.S. citizens. In microcosm, the mens' disagreement is over one key idea: American's are free to choose. Marathe disagrees. The A.F.R agent begins the discourse with a simple question: "You, M. Hugh Steeply: you would die without thinking for what?" (107). What follows, after a silence on the American's part, is a back-and-forth that reveals much of Wallace's feelings toward the American relationship to entertainment and what is expected of it, as well as the author's thoughts regarding desire and the impulses that drive it.

Marathe responds to Steeply's silence with not only an elaboration on his (Marathe's) question's significance, but also a preemptive argument against that for the freedom of U.S.A.'s to choose:

For this choice determines all else. No? All other of our you say *free* choices follow from this: what is our temple. What is the temple, thus, for U.S.A.'s? What is it, when you fear that you must protect them from themselves, if wicked Quebecers conspire to bring the Entertainment into their warm homes? (108)

Marathe arguably touches on the crux of many of the novel's matters: what do we choose to focus on, and what does it say about us? The question extends into almost every aspect of the novel: family life, athletics, drugs, time. Perhaps most intriguingly, it extends beyond the text, into the realm of the reader and where his or her attention and effort are expended, making it a strong companion to *The Pale King's* examination of gaining the objectivity required to view the self through a similar lens. Once such an objectivity is achieved, the reader becomes acutely aware of where she is placing her attention and what it says about her, causing her to essentially ask herself, just as Marathe asks Steeply, what her "temple" is. Marathe's answer to his own question, that "your temple is self and sentiment" (108), leads into the argument about the Entertainment, which by extension is an argument about the power to choose in any context.

Steeply's side of the argument can almost be represented fully with a statement he makes early on in the conversation: "there are no choices without personal freedom, Buckaroo. It's not us who are dead inside. These things you find so weak and contemptible in us – these are just the hazards of being free" (320). In Steeply's view, the fact that people may choose as their "temple" something as destructive as the Entertainment over something more meaningful like devotion to asserting a national identity one can be proud of is a sort of byproduct of the freedom that would also allow them to choose the latter. On the surface Steeply seems to have a good point; freedom implies choice, and choice implies a variety of outcomes. However, the American's argument rests on the assumption that U.S.A.'s are free when it comes to choice; Marathe points out the flaw in that assumption:

Always with you this freedom! For your walled-up country, always to shout 'Freedom! Freedom!' as if it were obvious to all people what it wants to mean, this word. But look: it is not so simple as that. Your freedom is the freedom-*from*: no one tells your precious individual U.S.A. selves what they must do. It is this meaning only, the freedom from constraint and forced duress. [...]. But what of the freedom-*to*? Not

just free *from*. Not all compulsion comes from without. [...]. How for the person to freely choose? How to choose any but a child's greedy choices if there is no loving-filled father to guide, inform, teach the person how to choose? How is there freedom to choose if one does not know how to choose? (320)

Marathe's response to Steeply not only complicates the latter's argument, but introduces a new idea to the novel: it is possible that, despite our alleged freedom, it is impossible for Americans to do anything but self-destruct, with regards to the Entertainment. This echoes almost exactly Wallace's claims in the T.V. essay that simply expanding broadcasting choices will not fix the problems in Americans' relationship to entertainment, that without some kind of guide to show them how to choose the proper entertainment they will still choose only those passive forms that allow them to hide from themselves while reinforcing an ideal self-image. Such a guiding force is suggested in the novel as the anti-Entertainment, or a video cartridge that could reverse the effects of Incandenzas fatal film. For Wallace, as stated in the T.V. essay, that anti-Entertainment is fiction, or rather good fiction, by his definition. Both *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King* work to reverse the effects of television media, emphasizing a mediating conscience, providing commentary on personal objectivity, creating texts that force readers into such an objectivity, and, as is the case with *Infinite Jest*, offering instructions on how to handle the newly identified freedom *to* choose. Marathe may have put his perception of what happens without such a force most concisely earlier in the novel, saying, "in such a case as this you become the slave who believes he is free. The most pathetic of bondage" (108). In a way Marathe is similar to James Incandenza here; J.O.I is said to have been "the maker of reflecting panels for thermal weapons" (490), and Marathe is figuratively holding a mirror up to Steeply as a weapon against the American argument concerning freedom and choice regarding the Entertainment, the name of which is symbolic and connects the arguments applied to it to many of the novel's other elements.

Prominent among these elements is family life/relationships. The novel presents many different pictures of families, although the Incandenzas are arguably the primary family in *Infinite Jest*. When thinking of family in terms of the Entertainment and the attached arguments from Marathe and Steeply, it is important to refer back to Marathe's early question, "What is the temple, thus, for U.S.A.'s?" (108). His answer that the temple is "self and sentiment" (108) seems evident in the Incandenza household. It takes a third party to recognize this. That third party manifests itself first as the reader of *Infinite Jest*, and then within the novel as Joelle Van Dyne, who shares Thanksgiving dinner with the family. The latter makes observations about the Incandenzas (not to say that readers don't).

Much of what Joelle sees of the Incandenzas fits with Marathe's statement about self and sentiment; the dinner is shrouded in pseudo goodwill. No one will broach a topic that will upset anyone else, as is evident in the family's conspicuous avoidance of sport-related conversation in Orin's presence. Joelle "noticed that pretty much everybody at the table was smiling broadly and constantly [...]. She was doing it herself, too" (746). Although it is arguable that each individual *chooses* to ignore certain things to protect his/her own self interest (ex. Avril's failing to acknowledge Orin's role in the family dog's death because she does not want a tainted image of her son), the connection to Marathe's statement becomes stronger if the family is thought of as one entity. Collectively the Incandenzas are very concerned with *self*, or the family unit as *self*. Every avoidance maneuver and all the superficiality of the family's interactions are to preserve at least the illusion of a happy family, even if individually each member knows it to be an illusion. This too strengthens the connection to Marathe's statements about Americans in regards to the Entertainment; he hints at a level of awareness among Americans that they would choose the fatal pleasure of the Entertainment, what else could their fear of its dissemination suggest? This kernel of awareness is the same as the discomfort Fogel feels in *The Pale King* when listening to his roommate lie to women on the phone, and it is what gets amplified through the reading of the both novel's, which act as obetrol and force readers to confront the painful realities about their

narcissism. Marathe's argument also has a much clearer connection to drugs and addiction in *Infinite Jest*.

Although clearly the addiction and abuse of substances seem to support Marathe's end of the argument, much of the novel that deals with these elements is set in Ennet House. A.A. in the novel actually seems to be support for Steeply's side. The idea of giving in to a higher power and Identifying with other individuals echoes what Marathe seemed to be saying about devotion to "something bigger than the self" (107). Don Gatley's scene outside Ennet House, fighting the Canadians who come for Randy Lenz, then becomes a very important scene for thinking about the ways in which Marathe may not have accurately assessed the American capacity for freedom-*to*. Gatley, who has already chosen a more difficult path for himself (recovery), and who has dedicated himself to giving in to a higher power, stands up in defense of someone who arguably does not deserve it at all, thus making a series of choices which, according to Marathe's assessment of American's would not be possible without the freedom-*to*. It may be that A.A.'s higher power provides the "loving-filled father to guide" (320) that Marathe finds necessary to gaining freedom-*to*. As the unhappy circumstances of the various families in the novel suggest, these father figures are lacking in the world Wallace asserts in the pages of *Infinite Jest*. However, he does not exclude them from that world completely. Lyle, in his capacity as guru at E.T.A., fills this role arguably for many students, but definitely for LaMont Chu.

During the screening of Mario Incandenza's ONANAtiad, a puppet show that depicts the political goings on of O.N.A.N., LaMont Chu visits Lyle with a problem very much in the vein of Marathe and Steeply's talk about the "temple" and what we choose to focus on:

He wants to get to the show so bad it feels like it's eating him alive. To have his picture in shiny magazines, to be a wunderkind, to have guys in blue I/SPN blazers describe his every on-court move and mood in hushed broadcast clichés. [...]. He confesses to Lyle: he *wants* the hype; he *wants* it. (388)

Aside from still being on some level *self*, LaMont's "temple" seems to be fame. However, because he has Lyle to offer his sweat-licking-guru wisdom, he has someone to fill the "loving-filled father guide" (320) role and show him how to choose, instead of just obsessing over the hype and fame he envies.

The advice Lyle offers LaMont is reminiscent of some of the A.A. language:

The photographed men do not *enjoy* their photograph in magazines so much as they fear their photograph will cease to be in magazines. They are trapped. [...] You have been snared by the delusion that envy has a reciprocal, [...] You burn with hunger for food that does not exist. [...] You might consider how to escape from a cage must surely require, foremost, awareness of the cage. (389).

The unsatisfied hunger Lyle talks about works well with the idea of substances, and the image of the cage is similar to Don Gately's idea of his addiction. Additionally, Lyle's comment about the cage is the most explicitly stated version of what Wallace makes clear in *The Pale King*: witnessing an event changes the event. In other words, being aware of witnessing an event, or the circumstances of one's relationship to self and entertainment, changes those circumstances allowing for the relationship itself to change, for readers to break out of a narcissistic cycle. However, what is most intriguing about this scene with Lyle is not the connection it has to the worlds or Ennet House or the Incandenza family (a happy family can be substituted for hype or fame in their case), but its connection to the issues raised by Marathe and Steeply and what it suggests about Wallace and the work of reading *Infinite Jest*.

Wallace's inclusion of figures like Lyle may tell readers that the author does not fully agree with either Marathe or Steeply. Rather, he seems to occupy some middle ground in their argument. It may be that Wallace agreed with Marathe, but instead of sharing the Quebecer's disdain and destructive intent for Americans, he took it upon himself to create a novel that would in effect be a mirror in which readers are forced to evaluate themselves and the ways they approach and expect things from the text. Indeed, it is inevitable to anticipate an ending to the novel with some kind of significant convergence of story

lines. The novel does appear to be leading up to such an ending, with the A.F.R on their way to E.T.A. and James Incandenza's wraith visiting Don Gately in the hospital. However, Wallace does not provide that ending. There is not satisfaction the way readers expect. When readers finish *Infinite Jest*, they are left with the realization that for all 1079 pages of the novel and end notes they "burn[ed] with hunger for food that does not exist" (389). The abrupt ending to *Infinite Jest* and the gap chronologically between the last section and the first, invite readers, once at the end, to return to the beginning. In a similar way, the realization readers come to, at the end of the novel, about their own temple, their own self-centered expectations of the novel (to be entertained) invites them to go back to the beginning as well, to start over and really engage in a more meaningful way with the text, similar to Marathe's devotion to something larger than one's self. If Lyle is a guide in the novel, and it seems he is, then Wallace's description of Lyle during his conversation with LaMont Chu begins to sound like a description of the work of reading, the kind of reading free from the expectation of entertainment without any investment (other than time) from the reader:

Like all good listeners, [Lyle] has a way of attending that is at once intense and assuasive: the supplicant feels both nakedly revealed and sheltered, somehow, from all possible judgment. It's like he's working as hard as you. You both of you, briefly, feel unalone. (388)

In many ways, reading in such a way seems to be the remedy for the problems the novel points out in its readers. Such work is, in a sense, the anti-Entertainment. The language in the description also connects it to descriptions of Hal and anhedonia. Hal feels alone, and listening such as Lyle's can make one feel unalone, strengthening that argument that Wallace is inviting readers to return to the novel, or any reading for that matter, with this new approach or outlook. By directing the reader in such a way, Wallace himself steps in as a loving-filled father to guide,

showing readers where to place their attention once they have gained the awareness of it demonstrated by *The Pale King*. In so doing, Wallace not only addresses Holland's claims that he fails to offer a solution to the problem of narcissism in American culture, but also delivers on his promise to create good fiction by writing out of the part of himself that can love, rather than the part that just wants to be loved.

Having examined *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King* side by side, as well as elements of the former novel on its own, it is beneficial to return to Holland's argument against Wallace's success in satisfying his agenda. Specifically, a reiteration of her three points allows for a clear understanding of the ways in which the author actually does succeed in meeting every expectation he expressed of goof fiction.

Holland's first claim, that Wallace neglects to address the issue of infantile narcissism as a cultural affliction underlying most of the problems in Americans' relationship to entertainment, is perhaps the most cleanly resolved. *The Pale King* asserts that stepping outside of one's self is necessary to become aware of the "cage" of narcissism that causes the solipsism Holland takes issue with. Understanding this objectivity, it becomes clearer that *Infinite Jest*, through its structure, creates this objectivity and also offers a solution, inviting readers to return to the beginning, redirecting their previously inward-aimed attention. These facts make it clear that *Infinite Jest* is an effective anti-Entertainment, its achieved purpose being to combat the narcissism Holland claims it neglects.

The second claim, that Wallace is unable to overcome his own addiction to irony and eschew the use of subversive techniques not for the sake of something is also proven to be unwarranted. *The Pale King*'s metafictional author's note highlights best the ways Wallace uses the techniques he condemns against themselves. Instead of revealing the illusion of unmediated fiction, Wallace employs metafiction to emphasize the recursive nature of metafiction, subverting the form he is using. Having this so cleanly played out at the beginning of *The Pale King* helps to identify similar tactics in *Infinite Jest*. Although Holland finds fault with Wallace's constant interruption of narrative through endnotes,

letters, charts, and the lack of confluence, these are all elements that Wallace incorporates to antagonize the reader's sense of a mediating conscience and both create a hyper self-awareness and redirect readers attention away from themselves.

For Holland's final claim, that Wallace fails to create characters that are strong enough to break free of their own narcissism, evaluation of both structural elements of the novel's landscape and characters and an understanding of *The Pale King's* theme of self-awareness are relevant. By examining the carnivalesque in *Infinite Jest* it becomes clear that the inversion of upper and lower stratum apparent in the novel have led to a culture in which carnivalistic relativity and liminality are the norm. This emphasizes the fact that an assertion of self through heightened awareness as demonstrated in *The Pale King*, rather than abiding in the liminal space behind some form of mask, amounts a transgressive act. Both Hal and Gately's incoherence following their taking charge of the decision to choose *to* indicates such a transgression and makes it clear that they have removed themselves from the trap of recursion and narcissism.

Once Holland's concerns are dealt with, it becomes easier to evaluate *Infinite Jest* in terms of Wallace's agenda free of a dissenting voice. Wallace's claim that good art will "illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human" (McCaffery 131) in a dark time is demonstrated with *Infinite Jest*. The darkness of contemporary American time is clearly the narcissism rampant in our culture, both on the readers' part and the writer's. Not only Wallace does depict this accurately throughout his novel, providing a running commentary on it in the form of Marathe and Steeply's conversations, but he also illuminates the possibilities for redemption by guiding the readers back to the beginning of his novel, with a now unselfish expectation. *Infinite Jest* repurposes the narrative techniques the author fears have lost their effectiveness with the current generation of American fiction writers and effectively re-teaches Americans what to expect from entertainment by pointing out the problems inherent with their current narcissistic expectations.

By addressing the objections raised by Holland through a reading of *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King* I hope to have elucidated the purpose of the former novel in a way that not only combats Holland's claims, but also suggests that Wallace satisfies his agenda and then moves beyond mere suggestion of hope for humanity and effectively begins the process of redeeming Americans' sense of self and entertainment one reader at a time. Beyond that, in keeping with his claims of writing from a loving place, he does so in a way that makes readers feel revealed, sheltered, and unalone simultaneously.

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