What's "Really Real":

David Foster Wallace and the Pursuit of Sincerity in *Infinite Jest*

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Abstract

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Throughout his literary career, David Foster Wallace articulated the problems associated with the profusion of irony in contemporary society. In this thesis I assert that his novel *Infinite Jest* promotes a shift from the reliance on irony and subversion to a celebration of the principles of sincerity. The emphasis on sincerity makes *Infinite Jest* a landmark novel in the canon of American fiction, as Wallace employs postmodern formal techniques, such as irony, metafiction, fragmentation, and maximalism, in the interest of promoting traditional, non-ironic values of emotion, community, and spirituality. I draw from works of postmodern theory and criticism to bolster my argument that the novel both engages with and transcends the conventions of postmodernism. Through the emotional dilemmas of numerous characters, Wallace illustrates how irony no longer serves a constructive purpose in literature and society, thus asserting the urgency of a shift toward traditional values of sincerity in American fiction.

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For Buddy, the best dog in the world.
And Gracie. You're okay too.

Introduction

"Who's there?" ~Barnardo
~William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (I.i. 1)

Amid the highly structured training regimen at the prestigious Enfield Tennis Academy, Hal Incandenza, who consistently ranks near the top of E.T.A.'s impressive stock, cherishes a brief interlude of free time between afternoon drills and dinnertime. During this time, Hal descends into the Pump Room, an underground sanctuary containing powerful air ducts that inflate the "Lung," a massive dendriurethane shelter that forms a dome over the tennis courts when infused with hot air. The Lung is activated from November to March to save the players from the bitter Massachusetts winter. Hal enters the Pump Room alone, with his small brass one-hitter and Ziploc bag of weed, a lighter, and a bottle of eye drops. He gets high by himself in silence, exhaling into the exhaust vents, leaving no trace. He obsesses over the secrecy of his little daily ritual, taking overly fastidious precautions to make sure that no one knows where he is or what he's doing. Quiet time isn't easy to come by at a boarding school, let alone one wholly structured around cutthroat athletic competition. This little hour of freedom gives Hal a chance to engage in some inward meditation. In the Pump Room, Hal can take a quick glance inside himself to confirm it's still him in there, Hal the person, not Hal the tennis prospect, nor Hal the successful student, nor Hal the son of E.T.A.'s late headmaster and founding father, who committed suicide by baking his head in a microwave oven.

Hal craves confirmation that he is indeed human and unique. In the opening scene of *Infinite Jest* (1996), David Foster Wallace's 1,079-page magnum opus, while seated at an official college interview during his final year at E.T.A, he'll break down and plead with the admissions staff that they understand this about him:

> 'I am not just a boy who plays tennis. I have an intricate history. Experiences and feelings. I'm complex. I *read*… I study and read. I bet I've read everything you've read. Don't think I haven't. I consume libraries. I wear out spines and ROM-drives. I do things like get in taxis and say, "The library, and step on it." My instincts concerning syntax and mechanics are better than your own, I can tell, with due respect.
>
> 'But it transcends the mechanics. I'm not a machine. I feel and believe. I have opinions. Some of them are interesting. I could, if you'd let me, talk and talk. Let's talk about anything. I believe the influence of Kierkegaard on Camus is underestimated. I believe Dennis Gabor may very well have been the Antichrist. I believe Hobbes is just Rousseau in a dark mirror. I believe, with Hegel, that transcendence is absorption. I could interface you guys right under the table…I'm not just a creatus, manufactured, conditioned, bred for a function.
>
> [Hal opens his eyes.] 'Please don't think I don't care.' (*Infinite Jest* 11-12)

His appeal is not taken well: the Deans respond with grimaces of horror and, quite unexpectedly, tackle Hal where he's sitting, pressing his face against the cold parquet floor, and carry him away for medical attention.

In the first seventeen pages of the novel, Hal narrates his experience with the Deans and exhibits his formidable mental faculties to the reader. Immediately following his outburst of obscure knowledge, he convulses and seizes, prompting the Deans to spring to action. They are

horrified by the apparent "*Sub*anamalistic noises and sounds" he makes, which they liken to "some sort of animal with something in its mouth," or a "stick of butter being hit with a mallet," and a "writhing animal with a knife in its eye" (14). Hal also had apparently flailed and "waggled" his arms before they even touched him. The difference between what Hal says, both as a character speaking to the Deans and as a narrator speaking to the reader, and what the Deans hear, is peculiar. The reader finds him speaking with undeniable intelligence and presence of mind. "I am in here," Hal repeatedly assures the reader, starting just one paragraph into the novel (3). With these words he wishes to convey that his mind is up and running, despite the Deans' perception of him as "something only marginally *mammalian*" (15). They are so baffled by Hal's strange noises and movements that they do not even talk about his rapid and impressive display of remarkable intelligence.

Hal's alleged meltdown in the opening scene of *Infinite Jest* is fascinating because it is one of the few parts of the book that Hal narrates. Right from the start, the reader gets an idea of his extraordinary mind, but Hal quickly loses control of the narrative. The reader only understands what happened to Hal from the Deans' dialogue. It is surprising to see them spring into such vigorous action. What is apparent, though, is that, determined as he is to prove himself a thoughtful and noble young man, Hal fails to get through to them. It is during his alone time in the Pump Room that Hal looks inward to make sure there is more within him than what can be measured, quantified, ranked, printed on a resume, and sold to an institution of higher learning or professional tennis circuit. Hal wants to confirm that he still feels and believes and cares, that not everything he does is for the purpose of impressing someone just to advance his career. But the position he's in during this scene puts him in a bind. He's at an interview, in which his only reason for being there is to impress the interviewers so that they will consider him to be a

measurable asset to the school. Hal makes it clear to the reader that while he is a skilled self-promoter, he also knows that this self-promotion is shallow and contradicts all the effort he puts into his inward meditations in the Pump Room. And while creating an impression may be an effective interview tactic, what it really does is isolate him from the rest of the world. Actively making himself *seem* one way or another makes him lonely. Hal thus tries hard to convince the admissions staff and himself that he is internally complex, that he has feelings, that he believes in things. This bind that Hal finds himself in is due largely to his late father's coldly physical, performance-based approach to parenting, teaching, and coaching. Hal's father, James O. Incandenza, raised his son as a body with a certain set of skills to be perfected. Ever since his death, Hal has struggled to find a sufficient understanding of himself.

The virtue of believing in something is a concept that David Foster Wallace spent much of his career trying to define and depict. After all, a postmodern society is in many ways defined by skepticism regarding genuine belief in established moral systems. A postmodernist looks at the world and finds the many contradictions and hypocrisies that lie beneath the institutions in which people spend their lives trusting and believing. By the mid-1990s, when Wallace was writing *Infinite Jest*, postmodern irony had very much become ingrained in mainstream American culture. Once a provocative means of subverting institutions of authority, irony was now a customary attitude in contemporary society. When irony is the norm, it loses its edge and communicative force. So, throughout his life and work in both fiction and nonfiction, Wallace explored the status and credibility of traditional moral values in spite of the overly ironized, media-saturated, and consumer-driven culture in which he lived. The endorsement of sincerity and belief emerges from the fact that irony communicates only when it is on the fringe. Authors, artists, and critics make important use of irony when subverting major institutions of thought.

Alas, if irony is the language of mainstream society, then how does one ironize irony? Wallace argued with grave conviction that more irony is not the appropriate response to an irony overload. Rather, in both his fiction and nonfiction prose, Wallace championed a refreshing divergence for writers of serious fiction that is now commonly known as the movement of 'New Sincerity.' Throughout his literary career, Wallace relentlessly promoted the importance of sincere communication with the reader in order to provide an alternative to the stagnant and often destructive culture of irony.

Infinite Jest contends that the arts of a particular culture have a lasting effect on people's happiness. If this is true, one must look at the progression of art throughout the past several decades and how it has entered the general subconscious. When did irony begin to dominate contemporary culture and why? What purpose did it originally serve and when did irony lose its ability to communicate?

David Foster Wallace was one of the foremost critics of the overuse of irony, as evidenced in his famed essay, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," in which he explores irony's pervasive role in popular television and its multifaceted influence on American literature, pinning "self-conscious irony" as "the nexus where television and fiction converse" (*A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, 35). "Irony and ridicule are entertaining and effective," he argues; however, at the same time "they are agents of a great despair and stasis in U.S. culture" (49). Hence, they pose "especially terrible problems for aspiring fiction writers," who should learn to produce entertaining and effective literature *without* further paralyzing the culture (Ibid.). Television's fusion of sound and image readily lends itself to irony. As Wallace contends, "since the tension between what's said and what's seen is irony's whole sales territory,

classic televisual irony works via the conflicting juxtaposition of pictures and sounds. What's seen undercuts what's said" (35). Because of the duality of television's medium, TV producers were able to adapt to the trend of irony fairly seamlessly. And when Americans were watching TV for an average of "over six hours a day," irony naturally became something of a national attitude. Furthermore, Wallace articulates that a certain subgenre of postmodern fiction emerging at the time was deeply informed by televisual culture. And televisual culture, Wallace contends and illustrates via the character of Hal, centers on the practice of watching and being watched.

It is no coincidence that postmodern literature blossomed in the 1950s and 60s, around the time when televisions began appearing in most living rooms around the country. This is the time, Wallace believes, that America became "a community that was exchanging an old idea of itself as a nation of doers and be-ers for a new vision of the U.S.A. as an atomized mass of self-conscious watchers and appearers" (34). What defined people was no longer what they did or how they acted, but what they stood witness to. After replacing the radio as many people's primary source of information, television became a central part of many people's lives and naturally found its place in literature. U.S. fiction began to feed on the ubiquitous irony inherent in television: self-awareness and pop culture references served to create an ironic, irreverent fusing of "high" and "low" culture (42). The problem with this new wave of TV-conscious fiction – coined post-postmodernism, Hyperrealism, and Image-Fiction (50) – is that the authors employ the same techniques of irreverence, irony, and self-awareness that the pioneers of postmodernism used to subvert the higher powers of their own context. Furthermore, television had already adopted these very techniques. Thus, the Image-Fiction writers – Mark Leynor, Robert Coover, and William T. Vollmann, for instance– often come off as impotent. They cannot effectively curb television's influence using the postmodern approach because "TV has beaten

the new Imagists to the punch," says Wallace, and television appeals to millions of people every day (52). When irony becomes the norm, one needs to take a different approach to subvert the norm.

One example of postmodern television is the beloved sitcom *Seinfeld*, which its creators Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David affectionately refer to as a show about nothing. That is precisely what *Seinfeld* achieves: the viewer is delighted to watch a thirty-minute episode in which nothing serious occurs to the main characters and everything is neatly wrapped up in the end. The main characters Jerry, George, Elaine, and Kramer spend their days sipping coffee at the same average diner or watching TV in Jerry's homey apartment, carping over the trivial nuances of common social behavior. Jerry Seinfeld's observational comedy has afforded him an enormously successful career because of his ability to appeal to everyone. He highlights the humor in familiar, everyday occurrences. Moreover, he never goes too far. His comedy is always safe and cautious, as he almost never curses and always keeps his subject matter light-hearted. He never asks his audience to think too deeply or question their own views on issues of politics, morality, or ethics. However, over the course of the show's nine-year run, the audience was continuously impressed by the way he employed groundbreaking ideas to emphasize the banal aspects of human existence.

The appeal and success of *Seinfeld* are largely due to people's fascination with the mundane. The show allowed people to see the humor in the tedium of their lives and laugh at what they experience every day. Jeffrey Nealon and Susan Giroux observe that what makes *Seinfeld* undoubtedly postmodern is that it,

> foregrounds and plays with the fact that nothing ever happens on sitcoms; the show doesn't even pretend to have a plot most of the time, and when it does, the plot is so

> contrived and full of planned "coincidences" as to be obviously and deliberately ridiculous. (140)

Seinfeld is so sound and consistent in its ironic shtick that every episode exhibits a similar structure and plotline. Some of the more transparent episodes emerge in the later seasons. For example, the title "The Bizarro Jerry," from the show's eighth season, alludes to the villain in *Superman* who is practically identical to the hero, donning the same costume and sporting the same trademark hairstyle, but who is indeed evil. Part of the show's premise is that Jerry and Elaine have previously dated but remained friends. In this episode, Elaine and her boyfriend Kevin break up but also remain friends with one another. As the "Bizarro" plot proceeds, Kevin, like Jerry, has two close friends, Gene and Feldman, who resemble George and Kramer in appearance and personality. Elaine begins to spend a great deal of time with Kevin, Gene, and Feldman at Reggie's, a coffee shop across town that has very similar décor to the familiar Monk's Café. To extend the Superman metaphor, Elaine has entered the "Bizarro World" of this new group of people, which opens her eyes to the familiarity of the routine she had been so much a part of with Jerry, George, and Kramer.

The audience would likely appreciate this humorous insight, having watched eight seasons of the same characters, settings, and storylines. At first, Elaine is thrilled with her new friends: they are obviously very similar to the friends she already had, but are different in refreshing little ways. For example, their conversations are a bit more thoughtful and they spend their time doing productive things like going to the library to read. Their new insights lead Elaine to realize how petty and shallow Jerry, George, and Kramer are. At one point in the episode, Elaine walks into Jerry's apartment just after he has divulged to Kramer his plans to break up with his current girlfriend on account of her "man hands." When Elaine rushes to leave, Jerry

complains about her recent aloofness. A fed-up Elaine replies, “Well, I can’t spend the rest of my life coming into this stinking apartment every ten minutes to pore over the trivial minutia of every single daily event!” This comment should resonate well with any casual *Seinfeld* fan, since it succinctly sums up the essence of the show. Here, Elaine explicitly refers to what *Seinfeld*, now enormously successful and in its eighth season, is all about. She is fed up with the routine and claims to see right through it, as should the audience at this point. Soon enough, however, the little behavioral tics of the “Bizarro” clique annoy Elaine to the point where she cannot stand to spend any more time with them, so she returns to her original friends. To remain friends with the “Bizarro” group would be a life decision far too drastic for her and for the show’s formula. The show also makes a blatantly ironic comment on Elaine’s inability to change in spite of knowing that such a change might be good for her. The “Bizarro” friends are really only annoying in their traits of apparent goodness and respect for one another. The audience, like Elaine, ironically cannot stand them and is glad to see her return to Jerry, George, and Kramer. Alas, the episode ends like any other episode: everything is back to normal, nothing really happens. The producers of the show give the audience a figurative wink, having plainly exposed the same mechanisms that have been in place for eight seasons, deconstructing the formula and putting it back together in the tight thirty minutes of allotted airtime. And, just as Elaine ends up right back in Jerry’s apartment, so too will the audience tune in the following week for another show about nothing.

Seinfeld is just one of many television programs that adopted postmodern techniques so seamlessly as to defend itself from subversion by writers like Leynor, Coover, and the rest of the Imagists. The show is clearly aware of the conventions of the medium and makes these conventions the focal point. The irony is thick enough to make the most skilled postmodern

fiction writer scratch his head and go back to the drawing board. The same is true for the sitcoms that followed *Seinfeld*, which so thoroughly exposed the medium's conventions that shows like *Friends* or *King of Queens* struggled to find a new way to show a savvy self-awareness without appearing hackneyed or imitative, which could create a new irony in itself – the irony of repetitive irony is that it becomes boring. *Seinfeld*'s nine-year bonanza seems to have marked the culmination of the reign of the ironic sitcom and, moreover, gives David Foster Wallace even more reason to believe that fiction writers should diverge from the ironic methods that television had so clearly mastered.

Alas, when irony is the key element in a show that won the hearts of Americans for an entire decade, fiction writers need to devise a new approach to communicating with their readers in a way that television could not: enter David Foster Wallace and his campaign for New Sincerity. As Wallace conveys in much of his fiction and nonfiction, irony in the postmodern period is an "agent of great despair" and serves no constructive purpose (49). Contemporary scholar and critic Lewis Hyde once famously offered one of the best observations of the dwindling effectiveness of irony over the past few decades, saying, "Irony has only emergency use. Carried over time it is the voice of the trapped who have come to enjoy their cage" (Hyde, 16). Irony is useful in small doses; when it becomes the primary method of communication, it loses its critical edge because it simply negates certain ideologies and does not propose any alternatives. David Foster Wallace provides a poignant example that successfully sums up this idea:

> Third World rebels are great at exposing and overthrowing corrupt hypocritical regimes, but they seem noticeably less great at the mundane, non-negative task of then establishing a superior governing alternative. Victorious rebels, in fact, seem best at using their tough,

> cynical rebel-skills to avoid being rebelled against themselves – in other words, they just become better tyrants. (67)

Having understood the limitations of irony in contemporary literature, Wallace sought a divergent path. Toward the end of "E Unibus Pluram," Wallace sounds his call to the next generation of "literary 'rebels'" who, he posits,

> might well emerge as some weird bunch of *anti*-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue… the new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the "Oh how *banal*." (81)

Until the final days of his life, David Foster Wallace worked relentlessly to blaze a trail for his generation's "*anti*-rebels," setting high standards for authors of the "New Sincerity" movement. His prolific body of work is a rigorous testimony to the urgency of his message in "E Unibus Pluram," inspiring a new generation of writers to wrestle with age-old questions of virtue and morality "with reverence and conviction." Thus, in this thesis I assert that David Foster Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest* promotes a shift from the reliance on irony and subversion to a celebration of the principles of sincerity.

Before delving into close readings of *Infinite Jest*, it is necessary to examine the position of Wallace's work in the context of the American literary canon. *Infinite Jest*'s publication in 1996 marks a pivotal period in the history of American fiction in that the novel both employs and rejects many conventions of postmodernism. Wallace published *Infinite Jest* a mere three years after "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" appeared in *The Review of Contemporary*

Fiction and sounded a call to writers of fiction to eschew irony and use different methods to depict the complexity of postmodern society. In this context, *Infinite Jest* appears to be Wallace's fulfillment of his own prophecy. The book is very much a manifestation of his case for sincerity; it is not, however, a complete rejection of the postmodern line of influence. Its postmodern predecessors in fact heavily inform the novel. Thus, a study of *Infinite Jest* requires a thorough investigation of what makes something essentially postmodern in order to demonstrate how the novel is informed by and resists postmodern thought.

In *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, Peter Barry offers a useful survey of postmodernism and its applications in literary studies. Postmodernism is not only a literary term, but also a pivotal period in history. It follows the period of modernism, which saw its zenith between 1910-1930 (82). As is common with major schools of thought, postmodernism developed largely from reactions to modernism, and modernism from reactions to realism. Modernism rejected conventions of realist literature, such as chronological plotlines, closed endings, and continuous narratives relayed by omniscient narrators. Major figures of the modernism era included James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust, and Franz Kafka. Barry notes how much of their work was defined by impressionism and subjectivity, which marked a shift from realism's clear-cut presentation of external narratives and moral values. Modernists sought to blur the distinctions between established genres and forms (82). Barry observes that, "the overall result of these shifts is to produce a literature which seems dedicated to experimentation and innovation" (82). He continues to note how postmodernism both adopted and opposed elements of modernism. For example, in the *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, J.A. Cuddon defines postmodernism as "literature which tends to be non-traditional and against authority and signification," noting that

it is “an eclectic approach, aleatory writing, parody and pastiche” (552). While this definition certainly describes many essential elements of postmodern literature, it also reveals its many similarities to modernism and further blurs the distinction between the two. After all, the words “eclectic” and “aleatory” are just as descriptive of modernism, as they refer to texts that disrupt the tradition of linear, chronological storylines that are neatly resolved in the end. Barry notes that what distinguishes postmodernism from its predecessor is the mood, tone, or attitude in which the artist employs certain elements in his or her work. For example, Barry observes that whereas the modernist laments over his use of pastiche or fragmentation to “register a deep nostalgia for an earlier age when faith was full and authority intact” (83), the postmodernist, in contrast, finds that “fragmentation is an exhilarating, liberating phenomenon, symptomatic of our escape from the claustrophobic embrace of fixed systems of belief” (84). In other words, while both schools share particular methods, they often use them to convey vastly different sentiments. In this way, modernism and postmodernism are very much defined by their historical contexts. Great works from each period often reflect and influence the prevailing attitudes of the time and region in which they were composed.

The influential work of Jean-François Lyotard helps to explain the phenomenon of the close ties between modernism and postmodernism. Lyotard observed the postmodern artist as being deeply shaken by the horrors of warfare, bloodshed, poverty, and corruption that seem to have defined the past two centuries (*The Norton Anthology: Theory and Criticism*, 1611). The “massive crimes against humanity and increasingly vicious wars since the French Revolution” have all amounted to a certain suspicious and wary sentiment that is uniquely postmodern (Ibid.). The use of pastiche, or historical or cultural references, is prevalent in modernist and postmodernist literature. It is the attitude with which it is employed that gives a device like

pastiche a uniquely postmodern significance. Lyotard asserts that postmodern artists use pastiche in an effort to "break the spell of the traumatic past that paralyzes the present moment" (*Norton* 1611). American novelist Philip Roth famously articulates this paralysis of the present moment in an article for *Commentary* in 1961:

> the American writer in the middle of the 20th century has his hands full in trying to understand, and then describe, and then make *credible* much of the American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meager imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist. (Roth)

Roth explains that American society in the middle of the twentieth century practically necessitated the use of postmodern techniques, as traditional approaches to writing fiction could not adequately reflect the culture's increasing absurdity. To illustrate this point, Roth begins his landmark essay with the true story of how the horrific kidnapping and murder of two girls in Chicago evolved into a grotesque national craze – for instance, the newly famous murderer lands a gig singing songs at a Chicago bar, and a newspaper launches a weekly contest offering prizes to readers who produced the "best" answers to the question, "How Do You Think The Grimes Girls Were Murdered?" (Roth). Roth muses on the question of how fiction is supposed to compete with the reality of the present. He proceeds to justify the postmodern approach, which was the most effective way to depict such an increasingly alienating society. Furthermore, postmodernists have "discovered that the modernist dream of utterly breaking with the past ensures repeating that past" (*Norton* 1611). Thus, Lyotard and Roth contemplated the growing lack of confidence, among postmodernists, in the notion of progress in general.

In “Defining the Postmodern,” Lyotard delves into several overarching themes of postmodernism, one of which involves the idea of progress. In the following passage, Lyotard describes a dilemma that informs much of postmodern thought:

> This idea of progress as possible, probable or necessary was rooted in the certainty that the development of the arts, technology, knowledge and liberty would be profitable to mankind as a whole. (*Norton* 1613)

Here, Lyotard lays his finger on the pulse of postmodernism, which casts doubt on the institutions that for centuries have promised “progress” to all of humanity, but have actually been shrouded in hypocrisy and brought much despair to those who have invested in them. As Lyotard astutely observes, “all the parties concurred in the same belief that enterprises, discoveries and institutions are legitimate only insofar as they contribute to the emancipation of mankind” (*Norton* 1613). Postmodernism is very much concerned with exposing the hypocrisies of institutions that have not kept their promise to “contribute to the emancipation of mankind.” A growing doubt about the legitimacy of such “enterprises, discoveries and institutions” brought irony to the forefront of the postmodern agenda. After two world wars and the most devastating economic depression in American history, people lost faith in progress. The institutions they had invested in had failed on their pact to help emancipate humankind. Further, Barry Lewis notes that literature of the postmodern period represented “a world uneasy with rapid technological change and ideological uncertainties” (121). Specifically, he points to “the assassination of John F. Kennedy,” the “erection and demolition of the Berlin Wall,” and “the death threat against Salman Rushdie for writing *The Satanic Verses*” as crucial historical events that defined the postmodern era as one “rife with terrorism and doubt” (121). Milestones such as these exposed a

widespread weariness toward change and intellectual liberty. The alarming ignorance of powerful people provided ample material for ironists.

However, the irony that became a defining aspect of postmodern literature, as David Foster Wallace contends, is ironic in itself. If one is to believe Wallace's argument in "E Unibus Pluram," it becomes apparent that irony in fact does not contribute to the emancipation of humankind, which Lyotard states is the very purpose of the development of the arts, but rather further enslaves. To recall Wallace's metaphor, ironists are similar to third-world rebels – they are great at exposing and criticizing corruption, but are inept at establishing a better alternative government. As a result, irony, like third-world rebels, is anti-developmental, stifles progress, and thus fails to contribute to Lyotard's emancipation of humankind.

Postmodern irony was not progressive but rather reactionary. Whereas modernism sought to explore the possibilities of artistic expression, postmodernism exposed why belief in such progress was wistful and naïve. Postmodernists harbored a weary suspicion toward change, conscious of the fact that large-scale change in society is usually ushered in only by violent means. In "Defining the Postmodern," Lyotard evokes a vivid example to explain this attitude. Modern architecture promised to transform the way people lived together by creating cities composed of radically different-looking buildings. But despite its appealing, idealistic aims, urban renewal efforts demolished old neighborhoods and created new living spaces that were aesthetically unprecedented and interesting in this way, but somewhat oblivious to the basic ways people interact in their places of living (1610). Modern architecture sought to establish a unified aesthetic that could be recognized as distinctly modern; this effort ignored the variety of ways people like to live with one another. The cynicism of postmodern ironists was topical, current, and understandable in light of the modernist promise of progress for all. In *The*

Postmodern Condition, Lyotard expresses that key to postmodernism is a respect for diversity and the plurality of ways that humans live as opposed to the old-fashioned belief in human progress as one ubiquitous movement (1610). Wallace drew attention to these specific reactions to the grand narratives of modernization. He believed that literature should explore the diverse ways of living in the twentieth century. Modernism promised a grand narrative of progress, and postmodernism exposed its failings. Wallace sought to focus on the richness and diversity that postmodernists observed was modernism's aftermath. In doing so, he created a body of literature that Lyotard may have believed contributes to the emancipation of humanity.

Infinite Jest follows a large number of diverse characters, most of whom struggle to cope with the realities of modern life, including but not limited to readily available information, drugs, and entertainment, authoritative arbiters of success, and political responsibility. Rather than merely exposing the ills of society, Wallace invites the reader to empathize with each character's distinct form of unhappiness. Moreover, the apparatus of the book gives the reader a first-hand experience of postmodern life – it is physically massive, gives far more information than the reader needs to understand the story, includes a number of unreliable narrative perspectives, and has no clear-cut resolution. Like the characters, the reader is challenged to sift through an overwhelming amount of material. The book offers much more than irony, inviting the reader to empathize with the characters' struggle to live fulfilling lives in spite of the distractions, vices, corruption, and hypocrisies that pervade postmodern society.

Chapter 1

"Yeah everybody wear the mask, but how long will it last?"
~Lauryn Hill

The development of a post-ironic literary movement, and David Foster Wallace's pioneering role in it, have come to the attention of many of those interested in the evolution of thought-provoking literature in the new millennium. Scholars and critics have explored and discussed the irony-sincerity dichotomy apparent throughout Wallace's work. One essay in particular, "No Bull: David Foster Wallace and Postironic Belief" by Lee Konstantinou, pays homage to Wallace's literary innovation. In "No Bull," Konstantinou states, "Wallace wanted to use literary form to construct ethical countertypes to the incredulous ironist" (85). In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace explores the possibilities of new forms of belief that characters – and readers – can hold on to in a maddeningly complex society. His proposition is certainly not simplistic or obvious. Rather, over the course of a thousand pages, he gradually presents some possible solutions to the problem of the "culture of indefinable but ubiquitous sadness" in which we live, as Konstantinou puts it (85). Konstantinou discusses the role of believability in the reading of fiction and how difficult true faith in the written word may be to achieve in a postmodern society. Any piece of fiction asks the reader to accept the terms of its fictive world, yet it takes a text of serious emotional weight to make the reader truly believe in what the author has to say. Konstantinou maintains,

> For Wallace, creating postironic belief was the goal of literary communication. This is why Wallace polemically railed against "death of the author" arguments and constructed

> his fictions, and especially his epochal *Infinite Jest* (1996), around the unfulfilled desire to communicate. (85)

Konstantinou articulates plainly Wallace's devotion to communicating honestly with the reader. The continued failure of characters in *Infinite Jest* to communicate with one another is wholly frustrating to the reader, who sees how badly the characters need one another. The very first scene is an example of Hal's failure to communicate due to everything that had plagued his conscience. He believes what he says to the Deans, that he is "complex," is honest and true to his instincts. However, stiff and fastidious, seeking nothing but Hal's credentials and measurable assets, the Deans fail to appreciate his honesty. The scene reads as especially frustrating because, in a situation where Hal's future is on the line, and the only thing he has to do to succeed is recite his impressive resume, Hal exhibits his uncanny thoughtfulness and complexity in a truly unique manner. He stands out from the crowd of other college candidates who approach the interview in a standard, expected, and uninteresting fashion. Since, so early in the novel, the reader knows nothing else of Hal's character, the interaction with the Deans invites several different readings. Most readers would commend Hal for his honesty in a situation that encourages superficiality. Others might see him as pompous, showing off his worldly knowledge to people who don't care to hear it. Still others might pity him as a fool who for some reason cannot answer simple questions. Or further, one could call him an ungrateful brat who is too stubborn to appreciate the wonderful opportunity that is before him, if only he could speak a few words so the Deans can confirm he has a working brain before they offer him a scholarship. Whatever the interpretation, it is certain that Hal fails to communicate in this initial scene. The beauty of *Infinite Jest*'s opening passage is that, through Hal's failure to communicate, the author communicates with the reader in a powerful way. The reader quickly develops a strong opinion, positive or negative.

Poor communication is a pervasive motif throughout *Infinite Jest*. Konstantinou cites the example of Hal's relationship with his father, James O. Incandenza, who sought to reach out to his son through the medium of film. Primarily devoted to his prolific career, James was distant for much of Hal's life. Toward the end of the novel, James appears in the form of a wraith in the dream of recovering drug addict Don Gately, who is in the hospital, comatose and severely injured. James' film "Infinite Jest" is allegedly so entertaining that it paralyzes everyone who watches it, leaving him or her in a dazed stupor with no desire to do anything but watch the film nonstop. In Gately's dream-state, James explains that he made the film, the actual content of which the reader is left with only a tantalizingly vague idea, because he thought it "would reverse the thrust on a young self's fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life" (*IJ* 839). Hal never sees the film, and James commits suicide before they can build their relationship. What is sad is that James spends his final ninety days on earth making the film. His last great effort is all for his son, and he exhausts his energy and creativity and will to live, in hopes of "contriv[ing] a medium via which he and the muted son could simply *converse*" (*IJ* 838). James' relationship with his son Hal had been almost entirely pedagogical. He did everything he could to teach him how to succeed, training Hal extremely hard on the tennis court so that the boy could surpass his father's disappointing career. However, James explains to Gately that this type of parenting unfortunately made Hal highly introspective and unwilling or unable to embrace his father as a companion. Entertainment, therefore, was a new medium via which James sought to reach him. The film "Infinite Jest" was meant to be "something the gifted boy couldn't simply master and move on from to a new plateau"; rather, it was "something the boy would love enough to induce him to open his mouth and come *out*" (*IJ* 838-839).

Wallace introduces the tension between Hal and his desperate father quite early in the novel. *Infinite Jest* is set in a future of subsidized time where each year is sponsored by a megacorporation. It is the First of April in the Year of the Tucks Medicated Pad, and Hal is ten years old. Hal's father sets up an appointment for him with a "professional conversationalist" so that he can learn how to properly converse with others. Hal reports to the specialist's mysterious office as per his father's instructions. Even at age ten, Hal flaunts his high intelligence and biting wit. As he banters with the professional, retorting to his every statement with some clever wordplay or obscure bit of knowledge, Hal subverts this professional's efforts to conduct the session. For example, the professional conversationalist implores Hal to have a lemon soda. When Hal initially refuses, the conversationalist says, "I'll begin by asking if you know the meaning of *implore*, Hal" (*IJ* 28). Hal responds with a comprehensive dictionary definition:

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

To the professional's condescending rhetorical question, Hal's response could not be more factually accurate, yet it is subversive and counter-productive to the professional's agenda. Hal is wickedly bright; yet, from an early age, this brightness renders him aloof. He uses his smarts as a defense mechanism against anyone prying into his feelings. As the conversation continues, Hal grows suspicious of his mysterious interrogator, wondering why his father sent him "to converse with an enthusiast with a blank door and no diplomas anywhere in view" (29). Superficial as that is, Hal accuses the so-called professional of having no credentials to teach him anything. Hal is

well aware of his gifted intelligence and thus uses it to escape uncomfortable situations like the one in which he currently finds himself. He sees the conversation as just another intellectual obstacle course, which he can use his wit to safely traverse. Suddenly, Hal's (and the reader's) suspicions are confirmed: this "professional conversationalist" turns out to be Hal's own father wearing a crude disguise. His mask begins to melt in the hot sun, his fake mustache turning askew. As Hal voices his revelation, his father's speech grows more desperate: he tries pathetically to play up his own credentials:

> You think we don't delve full-bore into the psyches of those for whom we've made appointments to converse? You don't think this fully accredited limited partnership would have an interest in obtaining data on what informs and stimulates our conversees? (29)

James O. Incandenza conducts himself in the anguished didactic manner in which he has always dealt with Hal. James is one of many characters in *Infinite Jest* who devotes huge amounts of time and energy to mastering a specific craft. He thus has tried to raise Hal as his protégé of sorts. This dynamic has instilled in Hal an equally competitive drive, so he is constantly seeking to prove his worth. James O. Incandenza's pain in his inability to connect with his son is rendered painfully poignant by the end of the chapter. He sees much of himself in his son, and this relationship reminds him of his troubled relationship with his own father. From early on in Hal's life, James is clearly desperate for a father-son bond that was denied to him, setting up an absurd scheme only in the interest of forcing his son to "recognize the occasional vista beyond [his] own generous Mondragonoid nose's fleshy tip" (31). James recalls how his father was just as self-absorbed as Hal is. He asks if Hal realizes that he, "used to pray daily for the day his own dear late father would sit, cough, open that bloody issue of the *Tucson Citizen*, and not turn that

newspaper into the room's fifth wall? And who after all this light and noise has apparently spawned the same silence?" (31) Hal's supposed silence surely resonates with the reader, who, having just been exposed to the charm of his wit, now has to discover how terribly it pains his father. James prays for "just one conversation…that does not end like all the others: you staring, me swallowing" (*IJ* 31). The chapter immediately ends when James says "Son?" twice in a row, only to be answered with complete silence.

In this chapter, Wallace jerks the reader's emotions around fairly abruptly. At first, Hal is a hyper-intelligent, energetic ten-year-old, reciting dictionary entries and expressing an acute knowledge of Byzantine erotica, among other wildly obscure topics. Hal comes across as either the juvenile but lovable antihero of the Holden Caulfield tradition, in contrast to his father with his creepy disguise and deceitful agenda, or as an impudent and self-amusing brat who fails to respect his father's longing to simply get to know him better. Alas, Wallace sheds considerable light on James' motives and evokes a great deal of sympathy from the reader. James' own son refuses to talk to him, just as his father had refused to talk to him, or even look at him, unless it was for the purpose of instructing him on how to succeed in some way. The competitive drive and serious commitment to self-betterment that runs in the Incandenza genes comes ultimately at the expense of emotional availability. The end of this chapter leaves the reader with a nerve-wracking conclusion: Hal and his father both need help, badly, or else they're bound to end up with nobody by their sides.

So in the home stretch of the novel, why does the ghost of James O. Incandenza pay a visit to Don Gately, of all people, a recovering drug addict whose only discernable connection with the Incandenza family is that he happened to check into a halfway house across the street from Enfield Tennis Academy? The reason probably lies in the fact that Gately, lying in a

hospital bed, hardly able to move, is just as desperate for genuine human connection as was James in the final days of his life. The novel follows closely the painfully tedious and challenging process of recovery from addiction. Gately commits himself to the twelve-step program Alcoholics Anonymous, having reached the "rock bottom" of his addiction. The AA process revolves around heavily spiritual principles. Its participants are highly encouraged early in the process to submit themselves to the loving support of a "Higher Power," or "God as you understand Him" (*IJ* 443). At AA meetings, alcoholics learn that the only route to recovery is genuine, no-holds-barred *belief* in something greater and more powerful than themselves. Unquestioning faith in one's God is how recovering addicts are able to find peace in the excruciating, second-by-second pain of withdrawal. The only way to escape the crushing despair that comes with drug and alcohol addiction is this belief. Without booze, pills, needles, or powders, recovering addicts need something to satisfy their craving to escape their own tormented psyches. Submission to a Higher Power is much easier said than done, though, because true belief is not something one can fake or force. By definition, belief must be truly felt. As Lee Konstantinou astutely notes, "A believer is someone who in some sense cannot help but hold his or her ontological convictions" (87). So Gately needs to believe in something, for his life depends on it; however, after ten months drug and alcohol free, Gately,

> opines that at this juncture he's so totally clueless and lost he's thinking that he'd maybe rather have the White Flag Crocodiles just grab him by the lapels and just tell him what AA God to have an understanding of, and give him totally blunt and dogmatic orders about how to turn over his Diseased will to whatever this Higher Power is. (443)

Gately has been going through the rituals of prayer and giving thanks and submitting himself to this vague higher power without actually believing in it, deep down. Gately's case is especially

heart-wrenching because he has fully committed himself to the AA program. He has followed every instruction; he has heeded the examples of his mentors. Regardless of how hard he tries, though, submitting one's will to a higher power is not something that can be taught. Belief must come from one's "ontological conviction," as Konstantinou puts it. Gately owes his ten months of sobriety to sheer luck, explaining to an AA crowd that "he feels like a rat that's learned one route in the maze to the cheese and travels that route in a ratty-type fashion and whatnot. W/the God thing being the cheese in the metaphor" (443). The conundrum here is that once he eats the cheese, he surely gets hungry again and needs to find another piece. He is following the steps diligently. What he fails to realize is that belief in a God will supposedly provide continual nourishment. Similarly, James O. Incandenza needs to believe that his son is happy and present and is not at risk of falling "into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life" (839). He thus visits Don Gately, pitiful, immobile, and barely alive, to explain to him the lengths he (James) had gone to in order to connect with another individual in his life. Incandenza had lived a largely self-centered life, devoting all of his energy to his personal pursuits of greatness (tennis, optical physics, teaching, coaching, administrating, and filmmaking). Hence, he comes to Gately to convince him to believe in the supreme importance of devoting such time and energy to people whom he cares about.

As *Infinite Jest* progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that the attitude in vogue at Enfield Tennis Academy is ironic and jaded. Hal has mastered this mentality from an early age. In the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment, however, as he completes his final school year at E.T.A. and confronts his prospects for the future, he begins to realize how gravely deceived he

has been while following the trend of hip irony. The following lines shed light on what has been plaguing Hal's psyche during his hours of soul-searching in the Pump Room:

> Hal himself hasn't had a bona fide intensity-of-interior-life-type emotion since he was tiny; he finds terms like *joie* and *value* to be like so many variables in rarefied equations, and he can manipulate them well enough to satisfy everyone but himself that he's in there, inside his own hull, as a human being. (694)

Hal craves his alone time because he fears that his success in athletics and academics and any other aspect of his life is due only to his ability to "manipulate." In his adolescence, he has come to regard this ability with skepticism. At E.T.A., competition is not just intense – competition is the only way to succeed. Without exception, every student at the school studies and trains exceedingly hard, as the post-graduation opportunities for slackers are sparse and unappealing. Those who do not maintain an impressive tennis ranking and academic GPA fail to earn a scholarship and thus will usually join a low-level tennis circuit. The longer one drudges among the thousands of players who are very good but just below the threshold of 'great,' the more likely one is to fade into tennis obscurity. Every student who enters E.T.A. harbors hopes of athletic greatness – there is no way anyone would endure such constant, rigorous training if one did not hope for a huge payoff. As they grow into their final years at the school, the great players begin to stand out considerably from the less-than-great. So, the less-than-great realize that they should quickly devise a back-up plan, which means they must see to their onerous load of academic responsibilities, while still participating in all things tennis-related.

The point is that E.T.A. students get nowhere without devoting huge amounts of time and energy to certain skills. Hal, then, considers the possibility that in his devotion to performing well, he has neglected his emotions. His looming fear is that he really is emotionally unavailable,

and one of the overarching storylines of *Infinite Jest* follows Hal's frantic efforts to pay more attention to how he feels. Throughout the novel, it becomes apparent that the spastic environment of today – what Wallace once described as a culture of "Total Noise" (*Both Flesh And Not*, 301) – impacts Hal in ways he has serious trouble overcoming, as he grows increasingly estranged from his family and friends. Having lost his father to a horrific suicide, Hal begins to cast serious doubt on the performance-based approach to life that his father always encouraged. His exceptional transcript, encyclopedic brain, and rapidly developing tennis prowess are no longer giving him any peace of mind.

The story of *Infinite Jest* takes place in the vaguely not-too-far-off future, in a society that, to Hal, is deeply flawed and contradictory. If the cultural refinement of any society is oriented in part by the art and media with which people fill their lives on a daily basis, then Hal would take issue with whatever art and media are responsible for the prevailing attitudes of his society. Although the narrator states, "The U.S. arts are our guide to inclusion. A how-to" (694), Hal struggles with loneliness and sadness because, in his view,

> the lively arts of the millennial U.S.A. treat anhedonia and internal emptiness as hip and cool. It's maybe the vestiges of the Romantic glorification of *Weltschmerz*, which means world-weariness or hip ennui. Maybe it's the fact that most of the arts here are produced by world-weary and sophisticated older people and then consumed by younger people who not only consume art but study it for clues on how to be cool, hip – and keep in mind that, for kids and younger people, to be hip and cool is the same as to be admired and accepted and included and so Unalone. (694)

So, if the youth of any society uses "lively arts" as a guide to living and acting in public, then Hal would believe that his society's arts are teaching a dangerous message. According to the

logic provided above, by following the examples of the "lively arts," which is to be anhedonic and empty, young people will be accepted and therefore 'unalone.' Hal feels the adverse effect, since to feel empty is truly not to feel anything at all. His emptiness might make him seem like he's on the right track to being socially successful, but he realizes that social success is superficial. Hal seeks to be more than "hip and cool" and "admired and accepted." When he realizes that he has spent much of his life on the path to admiration and acceptance, he comes to the crushing realization that he has not given nearly enough attention to his inner self. The narrator elaborates on the attitudes that the "world-weary and sophisticated older people" are promoting:

> We are shown how to fashion masks of jaded irony at a young age where the face is fictile enough to assume the shape of whatever it wears. And then it's stuck there, the weary cynicism that saves us from gooey sentiment and unsophisticated naiveté. (694)

Hal fears that he has been wearing the mask for as long as he can remember and, in doing so, cannot communicate openly with the people in his life. At this crucial period in his development, Hal sets out to discern what lies beneath it.

It doesn't help Hal that his eccentric father, James O. Incandenza, led a side career as a producer of "après-garde" film. Many of Incandenza's films were extravagantly stylized, conceptual, erratic, unfocused, and aesthetically challenging. Critical reception ran the gamut: many condemned them as pretentious nonsense, while some claimed they saw a hint of genius in them. For Hal, though, his father's artistic films left a deep and lasting impression. One of the films, for example, is titled *The American Century as Seen Through a Brick*. The film revolves around the assertion that "naiveté is the last true terrible sin in the theology of millennial America" (694). Naiveté is a trait that ironists devour, often employing irony only to show that

they are not naïve, that they are smart enough to know better. From early on, Hal had been exposed to the serious artistic agenda of just the type of "world-weary and sophisticated older people" that the narrator warns about. Naturally, Hal is acutely conscious of the effects of serious artists on mainstream attitudes. Hal, being perhaps smarter but more impressionable than any of his friends, feels constantly the negative effects of the cynical culture of which he is a part. He believes he must somehow always make a choice of whether to adhere to his sentimental instincts, which would open him to criticism and ridicule, or simply wear the "mask of jaded irony." He's clever enough to wear the mask all the time – he understands irony, he understands that everything can be satirized; he's in on the joke. Yet, paradoxically, he's also thoughtful enough to know that wearing the mask is a direct betrayal of his instincts and a denial of his own individuality:

> Hal, who's empty but not dumb, theorizes privately that what passes for hip cynical transcendence of sentiment is really some kind of fear of being really human, since to be really human (at least as he conceptualizes it) is probably to be unavoidably sentimental and naïve and goo-prone and generally pathetic, is to be in some basic interior way forever infantile, some sort of not-quite-right-looking infant dragging itself anaclitically around the map, with big wet eyes and froggy-soft skin, huge skull, gooey drool. (695)

These are Hal's exact reasons for feeling as lonely as he does. There is no feasible way out of the paradox.

This part of *Infinite Jest* is especially jarring to anyone growing up in the new millennium, as Wallace's vision of millennial America is remarkably accurate: the over-saturation of irony throughout the culture, which is the source of Hal's crippling loneliness, is more prevalent today than it ever has been. Nearly everything one sees in popular culture is laced

with thick irony. From television, film, and advertisements to Internet media and modern colloquial speech, the twenty-first century is overly ironized. Irony has been used not as a literary tool but as an easy way to distance oneself from problems, to show that one is clever enough to avoid showing any form of genuine sentiment.

And so, if what Wallace says is true, that "the lively arts of millennial U.S.A. treat anhedonia and internal emptiness as hip and cool," then who is responsible for such art? Who are the guides, and are they aware of their impact on today's youth? In describing Hal's pitiful mental state, Wallace offers an indirect but gloomy diagnosis of how the prevalence of irony in the arts creates a cultural paralysis:

> One of the really American things about Hal, probably, is the way he despises what he's really lonely for: this hideous internal self, incontinent of sentiment and need, that pules and writhes just under the hip empty mask, anhedonia. (695)

Hal is paralyzed and has seemingly no one to help him emerge from his thick shell, with the exception of his closest companion.

Throughout the novel, Wallace uses as a conduit of sincerity the small but captivating voice of Hal's older brother Mario, the middle child of the Incandenza family. In spite of severe growth-stunting physical disabilities, Mario is perhaps the happiest character in the novel. His straightforward view of the world and wide-eyed curiosity are heroic amid the cynicism that surrounds him throughout the Enfield Tennis Academy, and come as a relief to the reader. Through the overwhelming complexity of the book, Mario shines as a bastion of sincerity.

Mario's unique attitude is undoubtedly a product of his physical disabilities. His very existence is miraculous, as he was born "terribly premature," and had to be "more or less scraped

out…like the meat of an oyster from a womb to whose sides he'd been found spiderishly clinging, tiny and unobtrusive, attached by cords of sinew at both feet and a hand, the other fist stuck to his face by the same material" (313). His unlikely existence certainly instilled in him a deep-seated appreciation for life. His day-to-day hardships have become mere facts of life. Mario is quite short, his fully-grown stature after age eighteen being "in a range somewhere between elf and jockey," and has deformed arms that render eating, opening doors, and throwing tennis balls extremely challenging (313). His feet, "not only flat but perfectly square," and severely curved spine give him the ability to stumble awkwardly, but never truly walk. As a child, he fell on his face so frequently that his nose became permanently flattened. His skin is oddly colored and textured. Lastly, his mental development is slow. The narrator assures the reader that he is

> *not*, verifiably *not*, retarded or cognitively damaged or bradyphrenic, more like refracted, almost, ever so slightly epistemically bent, a pole poked in mental water and just a little off and just taking a little bit longer, in the manner of all refracted things. (314)

Mario's condition is especially sad given his environment. He grows up on the campus of an elite academy devoted to advanced physical and intellectual performance. Tremendously gifted student-athletes from all across North America enroll at E.T.A. to train intensively in hopes of reaching their highest potential. At a school that celebrates athletic and academic achievement, Mario cannot even grip a racquet or take regular classes. Wherever he is on campus, he is always the lowest-achieving person. And yet, possibly because of his obvious disadvantages, he possesses a stronger attitude and wiser outlook than anyone else. Although he is sincerity embodied, Mario's status in the novel is ironic. Students at Enfield, wholly committed to personal excellence, quietly feel sorry for him, viewing his life as "by all appearances kind of a sad and left-out-type existence, the only physically challenged minor in residence" (314).

Mario's incredible mental stability, however, comes across as something of a blessing. Because he is on such a different path, he is free from the immense stress that plagues almost everyone at E.T.A.

And this is an important fact about students at E.T.A.: all of them are under a tremendous amount of stress. Take LaMont Chu, for example. One of E.T.A.'s most promising prospects, LaMont harbors an "increasingly crippling obsession with tennis fame" (388). Everyone who attends E.T.A. aspires to succeed, but not all of them are equipped with the mental toughness to cope with defeat, disappointment, and the plain fact that, in spite of their tremendous efforts, the odds of making it in professional tennis are stacked up against them. LaMont is particularly vulnerable. No one is more motivated than he is: "He wants to get to the Show so bad it feels like it's eating him alive" (388). This fact is treacherous because, as he confesses to Lyle, the school's mysterious yet always trusted guru, his ambition has tragically morphed into a crippling fear of failure. This fear has recently begun to compromise his performance on the court. He tells Lyle that, as of late, "he won't take risks in tournament matches even when risks are OK or even called for, because he finds he's too scared of losing and hurting his chances for the Show and hype and fame, down the road" (388). His obsession with "hype and fame," moreover, is the other reason LaMont's condition is treacherous. He is motivated not by personal growth, but by the toxic allure of fame, of being publicly recognized for his achievements, of having his pictures in magazines, of becoming a celebrity. By measuring his own self-esteem purely by his tennis performance and professional prospects, LaMont embodies the extreme end of the addictive nature of E.T.A.'s competitive climate. Lyle enlightens LaMont with the following words of advice: "After the first photograph has been in a magazine, the famous men do not *enjoy* their photographs in magazines so much as they fear that their photographs will cease to appear in

magazines. They are trapped, just as you are" (389). Lyle poignantly illustrates the cyclical and unfulfilling road that lies before LaMont, should he allow superficiality to motivate him. Fame, like a drug, and like James O. Incandenza's film *Infinite Jest*, at first is intoxicating. Its insidious nature reveals itself when one loses it, withdraws, and re-enters anonymity, sobriety, the plain old unglamorous world. Succumbing to the allure does not make a person happy, it only increases that person's unhappiness while without it.

And so the point here is that Mario Incandenza fortunately does not have any of this wracking his mind. It is no worry to him that the school's headmaster, Charles Tavis, has cultivated a state of what he calls "Total Worry" across campus, in order to ensure optimal performance by all students (451). The students at E.T.A. generally appreciate Mario's presence, which always imbues the atmosphere with a welcome air of honesty and kindness. For example, "Players at Denny's, when they all get to go to Denny's, almost vie to see who gets to cut up the cut-upable parts of Mario's under-12-size Kilobreakfast" (316). Mario's attitude is infectious, bringing out simple, innocent, and honest behavior that is not common among E.T.A. students, usually either high-strung and stressed, or making fun of one another, or (otherwise) looking to get high. And, most importantly, the students never fake it with Mario. There is never awkward condescension or exaggeration. They have become used to his condition, and the narrator makes it clear that everyone's affection toward him is genuine: "there was almost nobody at E.T.A. or its Enfield-Brighton environs who did not treat Mario M. Incandenza with the casual gentility of somebody who doesn't pity you or admire you so much as just vaguely prefer it when you're around" (316). Because of his disabilities, Mario will never experience the things that other characters in the book lust after: fame, brilliance, financial success, political power, drugs, and sex, all of which lure numerous characters with their promise of immediate pleasure, yet plague

them with long-term sadness and cynicism. Mario knows he will never be a professional tennis player, will never be as smart as his younger brother Hal and, to the reader's knowledge, has never experimented with drugs or alcohol. He seems to lack everything, his health especially, and yet he is the happiest character in the book. Therefore, Mario's sincerity offers a refreshing break from the cynicism that afflicts the other characters in the book.

One of the reasons for Mario's effortless sincerity is that he does not understand cynicism, or at least manages not to conform to the cynicism around him. Because Hal's friends at E.T.A. are performance-oriented and self-centered in this capacity, they prioritize their lives according to their personal interests and as a result are extremely stressed out most of the time. Their devotion to advancing and ascending the ranks to surpass their peers both athletically and academically has instilled in them a certain mode of hostility toward one another. Lunch table conversation is resultantly tense. A telling example is Michael Pemulis, an industrious, street-smart ruffian from nearby Allston, Massachussets. Pemulis is E.T.A.'s most reliable peddler of drugs and clean urine and, because of his infectious personality, one of Hal's closest buddies. He is the type of kid who, despite a sky-high IQ, always manages to be on academic probation, busy as he is with his various extracurricular enterprises. In tennis he's good but not quite great. He gets by with a scrappy lob game, having grown up without the privilege of expensive lessons. He distinguishes himself with his abrasive on-court style, often playing in a backwards yachting cap, cut-off jean shorts, and t-shirts with crude sayings on them. A young Andre Agassi comes to mind, but with much less talent. Pemulis is constantly testing his luck with irreverent behavior, getting into all sorts of mischief. At one point, he connects a high-voltage Delco battery to the doorknob of his arch nemesis, Dr. Delores Rusk, E.T.A.'s counselor. To his chagrin, a custodian gets there first and ends up with a "permanent perm and irreversible crossed eyes" (512). While

at many times likable and endearing, Pemulis has an obvious darker side, harboring unspecified scorn for authority figures. His malicious behavior ultimately gets him expelled from the school.

Michael Pemulis is a cynical character, yet the reader can hardly blame him. He was born into unfortunate circumstances and attained a seemingly golden opportunity to succeed. Being a kid from the streets, he knows more about the harsh realities of life than most of his peers do, and his view of life does not quite fit the E.T.A. mold. He is not one to focus on improving his own prospects at the expense of his peers'. Instead of working to achieve high marks and impressing the establishments that determine the students' futures (the school administration and professional tennis circuits), Pemulis focuses on providing his friends with ways to undercut the authorities and celebrate youth. His community-oriented efforts, however, are often detrimental. He gives them drugs, which the kids love but which are undoubtedly damaging, as Hal comes to understand all too clearly when he tries to quit smoking pot. Pemulis gives them a special enthusiasm for the fabled game of Eschaton, in which players simulate the destruction of the world. The epic Eschaton battle on Interdependence Day of the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment ends in an all-out brawl, sending a handful of kids to the emergency room. Pemulis works to provide a pressure valve in a stressful environment, but his efforts are misguided. He gives them glimmers of fun, the highest-quality marijuana in the metro-Boston area, drug-free urine so they can enjoy it all year long, and brazenly irreverent humor, none of which really helps anyone in the long run.

The following lunch-table interaction between Pemulis and Mario is especially poignant, as Mario sees the disappointing effect of Pemulis's humor:

> The worst-feeling thing that happened today was at lunch when Michael Pemulis told Mario he had an idea for setting up a Dial-A-Prayer telephone service for atheists in

> which the atheists dial the number and the line just rings and rings and no one answers. It was a joke and a good one, and Mario got it; what was unpleasant was that Mario was the only one at the big table whose laugh was a happy laugh; everybody else sort of looked down like they were laughing at somebody with a disability. (592)

The Dial-A-Prayer joke evokes a deep and personal topic that Hal and his friends have much difficulty discussing, because the punch line of the joke is sad and opens up channels of vulnerability. The joke forces the audience to consider their own beliefs regarding religion and God. To discuss these topics sincerely is to open themselves to criticism from others, to risk accusations of naiveté and innocence. The guys thus struggle to raise their shields and distance themselves from such a prospect. Mario doesn't get it. He does not possess the self-conscious aversion to sharing his beliefs among friends, and would always rather speak openly about such topics. He gets increasingly frustrated with the way his brother and his friends, on the outset so much more capable than he is, physically and mentally, insist on raising their guards whenever they approach topics of real weight: "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). As the students age, they learn to adopt the aforementioned "world-weary and sophisticated attitude" that educated people of an older generation facilitate via the art that they produce (694). It is especially heart wrenching to see Hal resist in this way, given that "Mario loves Hal so much it makes his heart beat hard" (590). Mario and Hal have endured far more traumatizing events than any kids deserve, and it saddens Mario when Hal refuses to respect his sincere offerings of discussion. Instead, the self-conscious Hal acts in the exact way that Wallace criticized throughout his literary career: he belittles Mario and his sincerity, pretends that his issues are banal and irrelevant to him, and pities his

unsophisticated, unhip, and painfully honest naiveté: "when Mario brought up real stuff Hal called him Booboo and acted like he'd wet himself and Hal was going to be very patient about helping him change" (592). With this scene, Wallace conjures an allegory for what he sees as the dilemma of postmodernism. Hal, Pemulis, and the rest of their clique represent postmodern authors, critics, and enthusiasts, i.e. those who view the world with skepticism and are thus in on every ironic joke. Mario, then, represents an old-fashioned type of reader that Wallace really admires. Mario is one who gives his friends, family, and other pleasant acquaintances his full and undivided attention, all the time. He invests huge amounts of faith in people like Hal and Pemulis and seems to hang onto their every word. Wallace is certainly not promoting blind faith; he is, however, highlighting the damaging effects of ubiquitous cynicism. When Hal and his buddies laugh uncomfortably, they are able to appear hip and distant, while safely avoiding exposing their own doubts and vulnerabilities. As a result, each person at the table successfully suppresses his own emotions and further distances himself from the others. Mario, having no capacity for irony, is left feeling like an outsider when all he wants is to share a laugh with his pals. Wallace empathizes with the reader who invests faith in the author to deliver an honest story, just as Mario does with Hal and pretty much everyone else.

This passage might have a lasting effect on readers familiar with postmodern methods. Hal, Pemulis, and the rest are depicted as cold in the way they belittle Mario, which might resonate with readers who are used to "roll[ing] their eyes or laugh[ing] in a way that isn't happy" when reading a work of postmodern fiction (592). Perhaps Mario's pitiful physical disabilities deprive him of any authenticity in the eyes of the driven E.T.A. students. His small stature and weak frame, combined with his infantile drooling and stumbling, seem pathetic in comparison to his peers who devote most of every day to improving and perfecting their own

physical prowess. This contrast in physical appearance substantiates Hal's theory, as previously mentioned, that "to be really human… is to be in some basic interior way forever infantile, some sort of not-quite-right-looking infant dragging itself anaclitically around the map, with big wet eyes and froggy-soft skin, huge skull, gooey drool" (695). This image heavily hints at Mario's appearance, and the "Dial-A-Prayer" scene illustrates the students' calculated display of "transcendence of sentiment" in the face of the infantile creature that sits before them, cracking up with unabashed laughter, a constant reminder of their own humanness that they try very hard to disguise. Although they admire Mario and appreciate his kind demeanor, they fail to respect him as a valuable resource. Likewise, a contemporary reader tends to trust a work of literature that assumes the sophisticated postmodern form. This reader might gravitate toward a book that is fragmented, self-referential, and pop-culture laden, much like *Infinite Jest* is, and mistrust a book with simpler form and content. *Infinite Jest*, being distinctly postmodern in form, lures the ironic reader, satisfies his expectations and, ultimately, reveals its sincere aims. This reader would likely recognize himself in Hal and his friends, who swiftly push their feelings deeper within themselves and boast a sophisticated cynicism. This type of reader would finally realize how he had neglected to wrestle with his own stance on topics of "real stuff," just as the E.T.A. students resist the sincere curiosity of Mario (592).

Chapter 2

"When I stopped living in the problem and began living in the answer, the problem went away."
~*Alcoholics Anonymous* (417)

Wallace delves deep into some central themes of postmodernity in a passage that stands out even from *Infinite Jest*'s convoluted plot. The passage has a title that is far too long to be reproduced in full here, but it essentially asks the question of why a particular product met initial success but long-term failure. Interlace, the fictional corporation that produces the home entertainment system known as the 'teleputer,' once released video-telephoning technology, allowing two-way video communication between callers. A revolutionary idea at the time, 'videophony,' as it was called, initially enjoyed huge popularity among consumers. The passage provides a logical explanation of why, "within like 16 months or 5 sales quarters, the tumescent demand curve for 'videophony' suddenly collapsed like a kicked tent… the average U.S. phone-user deciding that s/he actually *preferred* the retrograde old low-tech Bell-era voice-only telephonic interface after all" (145). Over the ensuing six pages, the narrator proceeds to give a lengthy breakdown of why the product initially succeeded and ultimately failed. The passage is rich with postmodern elements. Irony pervades, as Interlace and other companies invent products that are designed to curb anxiety, but end up perpetuating it. Videophony is also a technology that promises to improve inter-personal communication, but ends up stifling it. Further, the consumers' pressing demands illustrate the deadening impact of Jean Baudrillard's culture of "hyperreality." In maximalist, encyclopedic fashion, the narrator uses hard consumer data and micro-economic theory in an attempt to give a comprehensive report on the product's results.

The effort to encompass every single factor, however, leads to an exploration of the psychological trends of the postmodern consumer and the ironies at the root of them. The end, despite the narrator's extensive efforts, leaves the reader with perhaps even more questions than he or she started with.

To the initial success and ultimate failure of the videophony phenomenon, the narrator attributes "1.) emotional stress, 2.) physical vanity, [and] 3.) a certain queer kind of self-obliterating logic in the micro-economics of consumer high-tech" (145). The section on the emotional stress of videophony begins with a discussion of the narcissistic pleasures that people enjoy when talking on the phone. A traditional telephone conversation lets one assume that the person on the other end is paying full attention while also letting one get away with not having to return the attention. A person can divide his or her attention among many things while on the phone, but the handheld telephone, "whose earpiece contained only 6 little pinholes but whose mouthpiece (rather significantly, it later seemed) contained (6^2) or 36 little pinholes," is designed to indulge the fantasy that whoever is on the other side of the line is listening intently (146). The illusion that one could space out or doodle distractedly without thinking that the other person was doing the same is "aurally supported: the phone-line's other end's voice was dense, tightly compressed, and vectored right into your ear, enabling you to imagine that the voice's owner's attention was similarly compressed and focused" (146). The narrator notes how this illusion is "almost infantilely gratifying," likening it to "being able both to lie and to trust other people at the same time" (146). The ubiquitous presence of the telephone makes narcissism, rather than empathy, the primary goal in conversation. Herein lies irony, as the telephone, a device designed to connect people all across the globe, actually drives people further away from one another and further into themselves. The telephone's technical apparatus enforces the idea

that everyone has a voice that is loud and clear and commands attention, that what one hears is only secondary to what one says.

The development of video-telephone technology undercut this "infantile" enjoyment. Upon receiving a videophone call, people were frustrated to have to compose expressions of earnest attention and interest that they previously had reserved only for real-world encounters. Their fantasy was interrupted as they were thrown into a situation that more closely resembled live, person-to-person conversation. No one wanted to display this distracted behavior on camera, for this would expose that person's juvenile self-absorption. Even worse was the feeling people got when they noticed the person on the other end appearing distracted. Those who used videophone technology found it "monstrously stressful" to discover that they were "commanding not one bit more attention than [they] were paying" (147). Moreover, people were rather displeased by the way they appeared on camera, which led to the second reason for videophony's ultimate failure: people's physical vanity. Any trace of vanity amplified the stress of the experience. The technology distorted the callers' faces with a "shiny pallid *indefiniteness* that struck them as not just unflattering but somehow evasive, furtive, untrustworthy, *unlikable*" (147). The word "furtive" speaks to the expository effect of the technology. Callers had grown used to how seamlessly the telephone had hidden their distracted behavior. Now, appearing "furtive" to the other caller, a person clearly saw the guilt in his facial expression. The fact of one's divided attention now seemed embarrassingly obvious.

A rather telling bit of data is the following statistic: an Interlace survey showed that "a phenomenally ominous 71% of senior-citizen respondents specifically compar[ed] their video-faces to that of Richard Nixon during the Nixon-Kennedy debates of B.S. 1960" (147). This staggering fact speaks volumes about the impact of televisual culture that Wallace's characters

are a product of. The 1960 Nixon-Kennedy debates were the first presidential debates to be televised in the United States. It is widely believed that this visual broadcasting is what lost the election for Nixon. When the two candidates entered the debates, Nixon was the heavy favorite. Americans held much faith in him, with his extensive experience and impressive political report card, over the young, inexperienced, and Catholic John F. Kennedy. The power of image quickly reversed public opinion. Kennedy simply looked much better than Nixon on screen. He was tall, with impeccable posture, robust hair, a handsome profile and a kind smile. Nixon, on the other hand, did not look the part. He appeared pale and sickly, according to a piece in *Time Magazine* (Webley). His bulging jawline and short build gave him an abrasive demeanor and confrontational body language. Moreover, Nixon kept sweating throughout the debate, and that Americans could not get past. Was he nervous in the limelight? Certainly Kennedy wasn't, flashing a winning smile, never displaying signs of nervousness. Kayla Webley notes that most people who listened to the debate on the radio assumed that Nixon had won handily, while those who watched it on TV felt the same about Kennedy. In sum, the televisual broadcast of the debates helped Kennedy's image immensely. People wanted to elect a president whom they enjoyed watching, and Kennedy fit that role. Common American lore holds that had the debates of 1960 not been televised, Kennedy never would have made it to the White House. The effect of television on public opinion cannot be understated. These debates helped to define the new vision of American culture as "an atomized mass of self-conscious watchers and appearers," as Wallace puts it in "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" (34). Political prowess notwithstanding, Kennedy won the debate because he was better than Nixon at appearing presidential, and this Americans valued immensely and still do to this day. The power of television is seen in the way it reduces a man, in the eyes of millions, to a mere image of pale

complexion and a sweaty upper lip. Americans were starting to believe in the manufactured hyperreality of their TV sets.

In the story, entrepreneurs of the consumer technology industry jumped at the opportunity to capitalize on people's insecurity about the way they looked on camera. They sought to give Americans a way to appear attractive to their conversation partners without the hassle of getting dressed, fixing hair, applying makeup, and maintaining a pose of genuine interest and attention for the duration of the conference. "High-Definition Photographic Imaging" combined a number of flattering images of a person to create a composite on-screen persona that wore an unwavering expression of earnestness. Quickly surpassing this was the production of actual wearable masks made of polybutylene resin that depicted a caller's best-looking face. Now, to speak of how the whole technology race degenerated into a total indulgence of the country's vanities, entrepreneurs ventured into "aesthetic enhancement," designing masks with "stronger chins, smaller eye-bags, air-brushed scars and wrinkles" (148). As technology improved over a few years, aesthetic enhancement grew increasingly absurd and impervious to the "enormous psychological stress" that naturally emerged from the growing discrepancy between users' videophone persona and actual physical appearance (149). Consumers felt pressure to buy the new full-body two-dimensional cutouts so as to keep from appearing "comparatively hideous-looking" during interfaces, but only before the introduction of "*Transmittable Tableau*," which were simply photographs of really attractive models sitting in fashionable rooms, which people would fit over their cameras, and which were just so ridiculous that they put an end to the whole craze (149). When people were able to just cover their camera lenses with a still image, they were once again "stresslessly invisible," no longer having to worry about doctoring up their appearance or giving the impression of attention and interest, while the

"other end's Tableau reassured them that they were the objects of a concentrated attention they themselves didn't have to exert" (150). Hence, videophone technology no longer offered anything that the classic telephone did not.

As already mentioned, this passage is filled with postmodern irony, as the vain and narcissistic desires of the consumers ultimately increase their own vanity and narcissism. The irony of the passage serves to call attention to the dangers of simulated experience, the distancing effect of technology that is meant to foster closeness, and the inability of consumer capitalism to address humanistic problems.

The development and subsequent demise of videophone technology highlights Jean Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality, which he asserts is an essential effect of postmodern society. In rather simple terms, hyperreality is the condition in which people fail to distinguish reality form simulated experience. In his noted work *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard asserts the critique that society is plagued by experiences that simulate the real and distort people's perception of reality during the process of simulation (Baudrillard, 6). He draws out four critical phases of the process by which simulation "envelops the whole edifice of representation" and morphs an image into an illusion, or "simulacrum": first, an image is essentially a "reflection of a profound reality." Then, it "masks and denatures a profound reality." Third, the image "masks the *absence* of a profound reality," and finally, it "bears no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum" (6). The progression of videophone technology in *Infinite Jest* follows quite closely Baudrillard's paradigm, as the ultimate product, a mere picture of a stranger sitting in a foreign room, is a true simulacrum, bearing "no relation to any reality whatsoever" (6). The development of videophone technology follows the first step, as it provides a "reflection of a profound reality" – people converse not

with their friends, but rather with a virtual representation of their friends, a mosaic of pixels on a screen. It is more than fitting that Baudrillard chooses the verb "masks" when describing the following two steps of simulation, as it evokes the image of consumers strapping masks to their faces in the interest of appearing prettier and thus less real than their actual face. Whereas the physical masks cover and pervert one's face, the onset of aesthetic enhancement "masks the absence of a profound reality" (6). Giving someone the image of a "stronger chin, smaller eye-bags, [or] airbrushed scars and wrinkles" endows that person with qualities that s/he lacks, or, in Baudrillard's terms, "masks the absence of a profound reality." The final stage of videophony is the simulacrum, the Transmittable Tableau, which essentially mocks the whole concept of reality.

The psychological impact of simulated experience should not be understated. Technology has the uncanny ability to simulate a real experience in the interest of making reality seem better than it actually is. The initially skyrocketing demand only encourages entrepreneurs to capitalize on consumers' insecurities. When people are unhappy with their own reality, as they were when discovering their own faces to appear "furtive" and "unlikable," they are at first excited to discover that their reality can be augmented to fit their desires (147). Thanks to "sheer entrepreneurial verve," people were ultimately able to conference with their friends via the image of a model that bore no resemblance to the actual caller, and thus "no relation to any reality whatsoever," a "pure simulacrum" (6). Simulated experience plays a pervasive role in postmodern fiction that seeks to reflect the way people interact with one another during a time of rapid technological innovation. Videophony fosters a belief in the hyperreal, giving people an artificial sense of agency over the way they exhibit themselves to other people. Entrepreneurs originally designed the masks so that people could convey to their interlocutors that they were

interested in what they had to say. Their motives quickly responded to the wants of the consumers, who felt the need to improve their own image, if technology could oblige.

Furthermore, it is ironic that videophony, an apparatus meant to foster communication, actually stifles it. When conversing in the realm of hyperreality, people lose the ability to empathize with one another because the experience is different from talking with friends in person. During a videophone call, one talks to a mere representation of one's friend. People thus see the technology not as a medium to connect, but as an opportunity to deceive. People began to thrive in the masking and perverting of their own reality and reveled in the creation of their own simulacrum. As a result, the technology ended up drawing people further away from one another and further into themselves. Just like the boys of E.T.A., most people hide their vulnerabilities behind a mask that they hope is more socially acceptable. In other words, people become (and interact with) simulacra, flat and prettified. After a while, they don't know any other way to present themselves.

Lastly, in the videophony passage, the author calls attention to the workings of the maximalist form by conducting a logical, economic analysis of emotional problems. In short, Wallace is careful to show how the postmodern technique of including exhaustive, comprehensive, technical information fails to answer the essential psychological questions at the heart of the whole dilemma. First, it is unclear why this passage even exists, given that it does not discernibly advance the plot or reveal character. *Infinite Jest* can be construed as a pastiche of various writing styles, and the overly informational is one of the more pervasive. The hundreds of endnotes clearly reflect this, as they give the reader more information than is necessary for an understanding of the plot, but still a wealth of insight into the world of the story. The passage serves to highlight the theme of simulated experience and its damaging effect on

people. Wallace does so indirectly, in the voice of a humorously precise economist. For example, the narrator discusses what the "classically annular shape" reveals about the long-term viability curve of advances in consumer technology: after a momentous advance in technology, i.e. videophony, entrepreneurs fill the market-niches created by unforeseen disadvantages of the product, i.e. "people's stressfully vain repulsion at their own videophonic appearance" (150). The ensuing innovations then undercut the original function of the advance, as when the Tableau allows people nothing more than the classic telephone has. Thus, the curve closes and the fad ends. The irony here is that economic trends are clearly not the focus of the passage. The long-term viability curve's "annular shape" reflects the reader's experience of the passage. The reader begins reading the long-winded title question of why something failed, and ends with equally long-winded questions of why the passage failed to properly treat the real issues at stake. Wallace illustrates the logical thought process of corporations that seek to provide immediate solutions to deep-seated issues in American consciousness. The final sentence alludes to this discrepancy between the passage's form and content:

> Even then, of course, the bulk of U.S. consumers remained verifiably reluctant to leave home and teleputer and to interface personally, though this phenomenon's endurance can't be attributed to the videophony-fad per se, and anyway the new panagoraphobia served to open huge new entrepreneurial teleputerized markets for home-shopping and –delivery, and didn't cause much industry concern. (151)

Concluding on a final note of cold economic analysis, the narrator blatantly points to the bigger issues that the videophony fad reveals about American life. A form of technology that is meant to bring people together actually drives them further apart. The narrator speaks of the "new panagoraphobia" not as a serious problem with the way corporations manipulate people

psychologically, but rather as a new opportunity for corporations to continue practicing their methods. Entrepreneurs now seek to capitalize on the damage that they have wreaked with their previous inventions. Ending with the reassurance that the "new panagoraphobia" "didn't cause much industry concern" is clearly ironic, as the industry's lack of concern only reflects the huge amount of concern that *should* be given to the people of America who are now rendered agoraphobic as a result of the industry's practices. The people are now in the midst of a serious obsession with the hyperreal and consequently are not just reluctant but *afraid* to interact with one another, after seeing what simulation could offer.

The encyclopedic explication of the way profit-seeking entrepreneurs perpetuate the insecurities of Americans serves to call attention to the urgency of such problems. These issues are pressing and must be talked about honestly, and cannot simply be covered up with a mask, the way Hal Incandenza and the rest of the E.T.A. student body are "shown how to fashion masks of jaded irony at a young age where the face is fictile enough to assume the shape of whatever it wears" (694). People in *Infinite Jest* don masks, literal or figurative, in the hopes of increasing their likability, social relevance, and thus quality of life. "And then it's stuck there," covering up one's real identity and shielding one from ever truly connecting with someone, for fear of judgment (694). The mask drives people away from each other and further into themselves. When simulation becomes more appealing than reality, numerous characters in the book ultimately must face what it is that they dread about reality. From the very beginning, the novel shows countless instances of communication stifled by some external system of influence. Wallace strives to give the reader a sense of the pressing need to communicate honestly and openly. The numerous instances of communication failure serve to show the reader how precious true connection really is, especially in an age when simulation abounds, offering easy ways to

improve one's image, but the price is alienation, loneliness, and despair. The maximalist form is an effective way of establishing a sustained connection between reader and writer. The reader is admitted into the immense world of the text and comes to empathize with characters who need that empathy more than anything else.

Masks, as mentioned above, are prevalent in *Infinite Jest*. Wallace uses the practice of mask wearing to articulate a meta-commentary on the problem of postmodern irony. Those in the novel who wear masks do so in search of a quick fix to deeper psychological problems. As seen in Hal and his friends and in the users of videophony, the masks afford only short-term relief of anxiety, and ultimately prolong and deepen the problem. Perhaps the most ironic case of this phenomenon is seen in the character of Joelle van Dyne, an Ennet House resident and recovering cocaine addict, former girlfriend of Orin Incandenza (the eldest of the family), host of Mario's favorite radio show, *Sixty Minutes More or Less with Madame Psychosis*, and star of the lethally entertaining film *Infinite Jest*. Although she is referred to throughout as The Prettiest Girl of All Time, Joelle hides her face with a linen veil. The veil is not her unique style, but rather an emblem of her membership in the Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed. It remains unclear to the reader whether or not Joelle is truly deformed. During an altercation with her parents, her mother accidentally douses Joelle's face with acid. Evidence indicates that the acid is not what prompted her to wear the veil, however. During her stint at Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House (sic), a conversation she has with Don Gately both elucidates and further complicates Joelle's puzzling affliction. Joelle says to a befuddled Don Gately, "I'm so beautiful I drive anybody with a nervous system out of their fucking mind… I am so beautiful I am deformed" (538). Here, Joelle is neither conceited nor facetious. She is telling the truth. Joelle's beauty intoxicates everyone who catches a glimpse of her. As the star of the film *Infinite*

Jest, she leaves every viewer catatonic, with no desire or will power to look at or think about anything else for eternity. Her beauty has always been a source of angst for her. From a young age, she was sexually abused by her own father. Through college, her beauty was so intimidating that she repelled every male who came across her, "the prettiness getting visibly worse day by day" (298). In short, her stunning looks literally stunned all, ironically depriving her of social contact. Only Orin Incandenza has the courage to pursue her, and their relationship ends with his father's interest in depicting her in film, which only amplifies her paralyzing effect on people.

It is not until Joelle meets Don Gately at Ennet House that the reader fully understands the irony of her condition, and the purpose that this irony serves in the grand scheme of the novel. It is blatantly ironic how she is unanimously beautiful, yet she identifies with the "Hideously and Improbably Deformed" and covers her face with a veil. Equally ironic is how she has a mesmerizing effect on people across the continent, yet she is suicidal. Having been raised by abusive and oppressive parents, and having inadvertently repelled everyone in her path, Joelle van Dyne is severely delusional and depressed, resorting to a linen veil and freebase cocaine as her primary coping mechanisms. In a straightforward analysis of her condition, most readers might point to the idea that one's outward appearance does not correlate with one's happiness. Her beauty, being repulsive, in fact increases her vanity and lowers her self-esteem. When her rampant drug use lands her at Ennet House, Joelle becomes acquainted with Don Gately. The two hold a complex discussion on their approaches to their respective recovery processes. As it turns out, the philosophy of the Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed is much different from that of Alcoholics Anonymous. When Gately casually asks Joelle why she wears the veil, she expounds on the crucial differences inherent in the rhetoric of U.H.I.D. She talks at length without giving a satisfactory answer, leaving Gately (and the reader)

scratching his head. Reciting U.H.I.D. dogma, Joelle says that members of the fellowship wear veils because they "declare openly that they wish to hide from all sight" (534). Gately does not understand why one would join a fellowship just to hide, since AA would encourage the opposite, urging those who have "been hiding away in the dark all their life" to "Come In and join a fellowship where everybody's equal and everybody can Identify because they all spent their whole life hiding also, and you join a fellowship so you can step out of the dark and into the group and get support" (534). As a live-in resident at Ennet House, Gately has followed the AA path to recovery so scrupulously that it comes out in his everyday language. When talking to Joelle, he regurgitates the AA emphasis on accepting one's problem before joining a supportive community. The capitalized "Come In" and "Identify" are straight from he AA handbooks that Gately has memorized. The veils are a notion of solidarity and community; Gately, however, insists that they show a refusal to accept one's problems, noting how AA encourages members to "finally step out of the cage and quit hiding" (534). The use of the word "cage" subtly reflects Lewis Hyde's metaphor for irony, again evoking Wallace's "E Unibus Pluram" essay. Wallace concurs with Hyde when he claims that irony is "the voice of the trapped who have come to enjoy their cage" (*A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, 67). If Wallace is alluding to this complex, then Gately sees Joelle's veil as her way of ironizing her emotional turmoil to avoid exerting the effort necessary to fully recover.

To Gately's AA-infused logic, Joelle retorts with a convoluted explication of the U.H.I.D. rationale for the veils. Joelle explains that they are not simply hiding in plain sight, but rather are hiding their compulsive *need* to hide. For those who are hideously and improbably deformed, "the urge to hide is offset by a gigantic sense of shame about [the] urge to hide" (534). Joelle describes the tormenting feeling of being the object of stares whenever she attends a social

function. The stares increase her self-consciousness and yearning to hide from onlookers. Gately then draws a connection for the reader, wondering, "Is this like this thing they talked about about people hating their faces on videophones?" (534). Those who used the videophones were appalled by their appearance and proceeded to buy different forms of visual augmentation, including physical masks, which clearly only indulged their vanity issues rather than solving them. Still, Joelle claims complete awareness of the irony of attempting to solve vanity issues with a superficial cover-up, saying,

> You're still a human being, you still want to live, you crave connection and society… you know that hiding yourself away out of fear of gazes is really giving in to a shame… you know that you can't help how you look but that you are supposed to be able to help how much you *care* about how you look… and you're so desperate to feel some kind of control that you settle for the *appearance* of control. (534-535)

Here, Joelle shows that she and the members of the U.H.I.D are not the fools seen in the videophony passage, who jump at the opportunity to cover their flaws with a mask. She is committed to improving not just her looks, but rather her feelings about her looks. However, she is still sadly misguided, her efforts still superficial. She claims to "crave connection and society," but her wearing of the veil is an attempt to deceive others. Joelle states that she and her fellow U.H.I.D. members wear veils to "*hide* [their] deep need to hide." The quandary that unites them all is their crippling need to hide from others. Ironically, they try to resolve this issue with more hiding, which drives them further away from the "connection and society" that Joelle says she wants. The U.H.I.D. takes AA's emphasis on community and misinterprets it. AA allows participants to join a community that helps them become happy, functioning, productive citizens of the world. The program provides a support system that values each person's individual

struggle and efforts to recover. U.H.I.D., on the other hand, is a support system that functions on solidarity at the expense of individuality, encouraging the deformed to hide what makes them different. They achieve a sense of community by wearing identical masks in solidarity, but these masks do far more harm than good. A fellowship for the deformed should encourage its members to embrace their own unique ailments and bond over how these ailments give them a sense of identity. Instead, members are taught to conceal their deformities from one another. In doing so, they wear masks that isolate them from everyone else outside the Union. Joelle describes the purpose of hiding their need to hide as "the need to *appear* to other people as if you have the strength not to care how you *appear* to others" (535). Joelle's language would be shocking to Gately, but he keeps expressing how he cannot understand a word she's saying, "talking like a fucking English teacher" (537). Anyone used to the AA experience would see clearly that in trying hard to deceive others, Joelle is only deceiving herself. The italics on the word "*appear*" tell the reader that U.H.I.D. is wholly concerned with fixing how people see them, rather than fixing how its members feel about themselves. An AA member would certainly cringe at their efforts to appear "as if [they] have the strength not to care." They make no effort to actually build strength. Their only concern is looking like they have strength. Wearing a veil only manipulates the views of others and ignores the more pressing problem of the wearer's self-esteem. Like the masks for videophone conferences, the veils provide a superficial and thus insufficient solution to a serious personal struggle. By wearing the veils, let alone calling themselves "Hideously and Improbably Deformed," Joelle and her fellow members let their vanity define them for the rest of their lives.

The numerous ironies at play in this scene serve to draw the reader's attention to Wallace's meta-commentary on irony in postmodern fiction. Joelle van Dyne, devoted to the

tenets of U.H.I.D. as Gately is to those of AA, utterly fails to get anywhere with Gately in this conversation. By regurgitating the rhetoric she has come to live by, she leaves Gately and the reader just as confused about the veil as they were in the first place. U.H.I.D.'s whole philosophy is derived from a rhetoric that is meant to deceive. Whereas AA requires sincerity and refutes irony for it to be effective, U.H.I.D. uses clever logic to rationalize the veils. Consequently, members like Joelle go around regurgitating the philosophy not because they believe in it, but because the logic of hiding their need to hide is satisfactory for them. This practice depicts them as the trapped who have come to enjoy their cage. The stoic Gately says that they should "step out of the cage and quit hiding," but U.H.I.D has simply found a way to revel in their cage of insecurity (534). To carry out the principles of the Union, "You feign acceptance of your deformity. You take your desire to hide and conceal it under a mask of acceptance" (535). They haven't found strength, so they pretend, fooling themselves and everyone else. The effects are evident in this conversation, as Gately can hardly follow the complex logic of the Union's philosophy. As Joelle is well aware of Gately's limited verbal prowess, it becomes increasingly clear that her explanation is not meant to inform him, but rather to reassure her that she is correctly interpreting the U.H.I.D. method of manipulation. It is ironic that she is being calculating, self-conscious, and self-serving at a halfway house, where people are supposed to come together to empathize and help one another. As a result, neither can glean any benefit from the interaction. Wearing a veil to avoid assessing her insecurity, and justifying this decision using logic that Gately cannot comprehend, Joelle only draws attention to herself and leaves Gately, and everyone else who sees her, perplexed and unable to empathize. Similarly, late postmodern authors employ irony to avoid finding a solution to the problems they ironize. As a result, the irony only calls attention to the author's knack for irony and fails to satisfy the reader.

Gately, who follows the AA program devoutly but still seeks a God to believe in, looks to Joelle to hear her perspective and hopefully gain some insight on how to cope with addiction and depression. When Joelle regurgitates her U.H.I.D. dogma, though, she only does so to help herself and manipulate Gately into accepting the workings of the Union. Likewise, when a reader opens a work of postmodern fiction hoping to find answers to pressing humanistic questions, s/he might be disappointed when the author just offers irony whose only purpose is to draw attention to the author's own skill sets. Gately wants to work hard to overcome his problems, whereas Joelle just wants to show him that she's found a logical way to avoid the hard work. In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace wants to do the hard work. Thus, this scene and numerous others serve to illustrate metaphorically the stagnation of postmodernism. Like Gately, the reader doesn't want to hear Joelle's elaborate justification of her mask-wearing habit – the reader just wants to know what's behind the mask.

In this conversation and throughout the novel, Don Gately's fervent conviction in the principles of Alcoholics Anonymous, and resulting frustration with the Joelle's manipulative justification of her allegiance with U.H.I.D., come as a result of his understanding of what exactly the AA program demands of its participants and how it succeeds. In his first few AA sessions, Gately begins to see that the reason why AA works, the reason why it can give miserably depressed people, if they "Keep Coming," "a whole new unique interior spiritual castle," is that it not only encourages but requires a commitment to sincerity (365). This essential mode of AA's operation is crucial to understanding the very apparatus of *Infinite Jest*. To read *Infinite Jest* is to experience something of an AA program. Methods of style and form, pertaining to the book's relationship with the reader and its claim to infinitude, inform one's reading of it with respect to the AA experience.

Numerous passages in *Infinite Jest* give detailed descriptions of Boston AA procedure and protocol. AA groups from all around the metro-Boston area come together for "speaker meetings," where recovering alcoholics stand at a podium to deliver a speech and 'share their experience, strength, and hope'" (343). Gately quickly learns that certain types of attitudes garner the respect of seasoned members, while some expose serious weaknesses in the speaker. An important observation is that "Boston AA is very sensitive to the presence of ego" (367). People can easily sense when a speaker is being egocentric or dishonest, trying hard to give the audience what he or she thinks they want to hear, all of which are telltale signs that that speaker has not submitted wholly to the recovery process, is still at serious risk of relapse, and has a very long and hard path ahead of him indeed. Gately once sat through a painfully embarrassing speech with one such type, who was so clearly "performing," "pretending to be at ease," "desperate to impress and amuse them," that everyone in the audience cringed with discomfort, yet still applauded enthusiastically and shouted "cries of 'Keep Coming' [that were] so sincere it's almost painful" (368). Sitting in the auditorium, watching this person struggle mightily to put on a performance, Gately sees clearly the essence of what AA asks of its participants:

> The thing is it has to be the truth to really go over, here. It can't be a calculated crowd-pleaser, and it has to be the truth unslanted, unfortified. And maximally unironic. An ironist in a Boston AA meeting is a witch in church. Irony-free zone. Same with sly disingenuous manipulative pseudo-sincerity. Sincerity with an ulterior motive is something these tough ravaged people know and fear, all of them trained to remember the coyly sincere, ironic, self-presenting fortifications they'd had to construct in order to carry on Out There, under the ceaseless neon bottle. (369)

As Gately realizes, sincerity is inseparable from the process of rehabilitation, as renouncing addiction requires renouncing insincerity. The narrator claims that the addicted person is by definition insincere, an ailment that led these people to lives of addiction in the first place. Addiction requires of the addict an insincere position: to survive "Out There," in the throes of addiction, the seasoned veterans recall having to constantly put on certain "self-presenting fortifications" in order to avoid confronting their own troubles. This is why they can discern a newcomer like a "witch in church" – their guards are still up, they are still performing, and thus still being dishonest with themselves and everyone else. They have yet to submit completely to the recovery process. In private correspondence, scholar Tom Clayton described the AA environment as a "utopia of sincerity," "bounded by rites and customs," where the "material conditions for survival depend utterly on the sincerity of the discourse, a discourse that also cuts across class and racial lines" (March 6, 2015). The ability of AA members to police their own borders, to maintain the culture of sincerity, to keep insincerity out or initiate the insincere into sincerity, is crucial to their physical wellbeing as recovering addicts. These conditions of survival hold the community together, and only when the community is intact are individuals able to persevere.

The institutional sincerity of the AA meeting is one of two forms of sincerity at play in this passage, the other being that of Wallace's prose style. The passage above depicts Wallace's particular style when writing about AA. In these passages and elsewhere throughout the novel, Wallace attempts to affect a sincere style. In doing so, he exhibits a deep concern with the ethics of sincere writing. As was observed in the section on "videophony," though, he also at times adopts a self-conscious and densely rhetorical narrative voice, writing under various guises and displaying similar methods of performance and "fortifications" we saw in new AA members, not

to mention Joelle van Dyne. The question of Wallace's prose, then, is whether one can write with such calculated rhetoric and still be sincere. The language of his AA passages indicates a more casual, nonchalant, and conversational style. With colloquial phrases like "the thing is" and "same with," Wallace crafts a narrator that can identify with the tough and uneducated Don Gately, who has no tolerance for pretentiousness, as seen in his early conversations with Joelle van Dyne. In an earlier scene, the conversational narrator reflects Gately's sentiments about the Ennet House resident Geoffrey Day, "who taught something horseshit-sounding like social historicity or historical sociality at some jr. college" (272). Further, the narrator broods, "it takes great patience and tolerance not to want to punt the soft little guy out into the Comm. Ave. ravine" (273). The language reflects Gately's lack of education and his days as a bully. However, the narrator goes on to show how AA has increased his compassion and awareness, saying, "except who is Gately to think he can know who wants [recovery] and who doesn't, deep down" (273). The language is a mix of a suspicion of affectation and a determination to trust others, and not to judge them by their facades. AA teaches the more experienced members to do their best to tolerate the "self-presenting fortifications" of newcomers, because to dismiss them would be to send them back Out There, to the imprisonment of their vices and the insincerity that they demand. Further, by adopting the conversational narrative, Wallace demonstrates an evasion of the serious pretentions entailed in being a narrator. Creating a narrator requires a certain performance of the author. A narrator often presumes to know everything about the world of the story, or does not know as much as the author knows. Any AA member would recognize this type of authorial performance as insincere and toxic to recovery efforts.

It is clear from the seriousness of AA's scorn of the insincere and ironic speakers that Wallace would not want his readers to think of him as one of these types. This is clearly true

given the embarrassed reactions of the audience to the newcomer who was so clearly "performing" that "even the true morons among them see right through the guy" (367). Wallace, clearly not wanting to be the new guy up at the podium whose reluctance to submit to AA's program will likely send him back "Out There, under the ceaseless neon bottle," addresses head-on the dilemma of sincerity and the narrative construct. But how can an author construct a narrative voice and avoid the façade? Does Wallace avoid performance, or is he simply "performing the absence of performance?" It seems that the most satisfactory answer is that consciously calling attention to the conundrum of sincerity is in itself sincere. Wallace knows very well the limits of the medium, which force the author to impose numerous presumptions upon the reader. Through the constant switching of narrative voices, he presents his ethical concern with sincerity for the reader's analysis. Over the course of the novel, Wallace finally establishes his credibility as an author by pinpointing the limitations of the very notion of credibility. As Samuel Cohen posits, "the key to getting past endless ironic self-consciousness is to be conscious of it – to critique the critique, to be meta-aware of the meta-awareness" (72). By consciously offering his entire 1,079-page novel to ethical evaluation, Wallace achieves sincerity in its most rigorous form.

Lastly, the act of reading *Infinite Jest* places the reader metaphorically in the AA meeting room to confront the endless, infinite process of addiction and recovery. The reader is prompted to identify with the recovering addicts, for whom each second of every day can feel excruciating. In the passage about the importance of truth in AA speeches, the narrator ascertains two starkly places, "here" and "Out There" (369). "Here" is in AA, under the rules, boundaries, and expectations of the society of sincerity. "Out There" is the world of addiction, where insincerity reigns supreme. Wallace presumes that many readers live "Out There," addicted to various

pursuits, whether they may be drugs, alcohol, sex, power, sports, fame, or anything else, and were unaware of this sincere "here," with its community-oriented devotion to betterment and peace. The reader was also presumably unaware that this world "Out There" is a threat to the sincere society in "here." To reach "here," however, requires an initial addiction and subsequent abandonment of that addiction. The point is that achieving sincerity involves a big commitment, and comes at a serious cost. Those who enter the AA program do so knowing that it never ends. One is not simply an alcoholic and then a non-alcoholic; one is always recovering. Similarly, those who open *Infinite Jest* know that they must put in a substantial amount of time and effort if they are to reap any of its benefits. *Infinite Jest* is not, strictly speaking, a book about sincerity; it's about the *pursuit* of sincerity, which is infinite and infinitely at odds with the temptation of all that exists Out There.

Coda

"Then it's the memories of our betters that are keeping us on our feet."
~LCD Soundsystem

In September of 2008, David Foster Wallace took his own life at the age of forty-six, having endured an ongoing battle with severe depression and addiction throughout most of his adult life. Knowing this, it is hard to suppress the urge to read his work as a projection of his own turmoil, but necessary to try to do so nonetheless. To let his personal life inform our interpretations of his work might be unfair to him as an artist and a person. We see from his fiction, nonfiction, and various interviews that he was about as humble as a person can be, especially considering his soaring talent and ambition. One does not have to read much of his prose to find his constant challenging of his own credibility for the sake of honesty. He would likely cringe at the thought of his own life imposing itself on the reader's experience of his literature. Out of fairness to the author, it is imperative that we not let our knowledge of his depression sentimentalize our enjoyment of his work. Those who strive to pay homage to him in any capacity – and I am one of them – must exercise extreme caution to avoid the territory of sensationalism. Spinning his life into a glamorous story of a "tortured genius" or other familiar archetype would over-simplify his complex private life, which should be left alone in literary discourse. This type of iconography, which is by definition the morphing of a person into an idol to be worshipped, is something that Wallace sternly warned against in *Infinite Jest* and other works.

After all, Wallace's struggle to come to terms with his own success as a writer perpetuated his depression. During a promotional book tour for *Infinite Jest*, Wallace opened up

about his complex relationship with his own ambition and success, saying that his ambition "to be regarded well by other people" is what "landed him in a suicide ward" in 1988 (188). The publishing of his first novel, *The Broom of the System*, brought him sudden and unexpected acclaim and did not consequently make him any happier than he was before. This seemingly basic realization that fame and success do not guarantee happiness hit him with great force and led him into a troublesome period in his career. In 1998, two years after *Infinite Jest* was published, Wallace wrote an essay called "The Nature of the Fun," in which he explores the ambition predicament as it pertains to his own writing process. Here, one finds not despair, but youthful, energetic, and elated musings on the joys of creation. In the essay, he urges writers not to let the approval of others ruin the "fun" of the creative process (*Both Flesh And Not*, 198). Throughout his career, Wallace strove to avoid writing out of vanity, instead adhering to the conviction that art should never be seductive, and that the writer's desire to be approved of should never come before the interest of the audience, because writing fiction is "a way to go deep inside yourself and illuminate precisely the stuff you don't want to see or let anyone else see, and this stuff usually turns out (paradoxically) to be precisely the stuff all writers and readers everywhere share and respond to, feel" (198). This approach, Wallace contends, "turns out to be the best fun there is" (199). It thus seems fitting to remember Wallace by the tremendous amounts of fun he had, and shared, with his readers. Even more comforting is the thought that the gift of his work will, truthfully, reach the souls of far more people than he ever could have imagined.

Since his suicide in 2008, there has been a great profusion of homage, to the effect of establishing the legacy of David Foster Wallace. The amount of literary criticism, on the other hand, is relatively limited. Therefore, the purpose of this thesis is to evaluate the merits of his

work and to articulate how his transcendence of irony is good for our culture. I wish to show that *Infinite Jest* is essentially about how to treat one another with decency in an age of ironic detachment. Wallace's pursuit of sincerity should be read as a relentless effort to rejuvenate the role of morality in art. If we are to concur with *Infinite Jest*'s assertion that art informs our attitudes, then Wallace's moral agenda was for the benefit of not just literature, but society as well. Furthermore, Wallace's efforts made him a pioneer of what is today known as the movement of "New Sincerity" or "post-postmodernism." We see his influence manifest in the works of writers like George Saunders, Dave Eggers, and Jonathan Safran Foer, who too have noticed the destructive nature of irony, and thus have pursued sincerity in their own fiction. On his most recent collection of short stories, *Tenth of December*, George Saunders told *Salon* in an interview, "any kind of experiment or edge or irony would have to be subsumed to the emotional purpose of the story before it was allowed in." This type of discipline is certainly evocative of Wallace's approach, always ensuring that his employment of postmodern techniques was for a constructive end. In Eggers' memoir *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, he and his fellow editors at *Might Magazine*, a start-up publication that celebrates youth and freedom, satirize everything in sight, and fail to see how destructive this approach is until they have lost their publication and their own sense of identity. As of 2015, Wallace's influence is in its early stages, and is thrilling to witness.

On a balmy late May morning in rural Ohio, David Foster Wallace stood before the Kenyon College graduating class of 2005 to offer some insights on the merits of living a life of rigorous compassion. He begins with a self-conscious throat clearing to the effect of ensuring the graduates that he does not presume to be empirically wise, and will not proceed to lecture them

on how to live as if he were a man who had all the answers to life's most pressing questions. His ensuing speech is profoundly inspiring and neatly encapsulates the principles he wrestled with throughout his career, mostly pertaining to the conviction that "the most obvious, ubiquitous, important realities are often the ones that are the hardest to see and talk about." And if we fail to simply pay attention to these realities, then we submit to what he terms our "natural default setting, which is to be deeply and literally self-centered, and to see and interpret everything through this lens of self." In our default setting, we allow ourselves to be frustrated and defeated by things that are out of our control and ignore the wants and needs of others. Consequently, we live with "the constant gnawing sense of having had, and lost, some infinite thing." Wallace proceeds to illustrate the familiar patterns of self-centered thinking that people often employ, subconsciously, to maintain a safe distance from other people's lives. His point is one of rigorous compassion, which is so neatly in tune with the themes we have observed in *Infinite Jest* that I need not elaborate any further.

What is especially poignant about Wallace's philosophy is how relatively simple it is. Whereas postmodernism sought to complicate previous notions of the conventions of a certain medium, Wallace merely wants to find out how best to treat one another. To find out, he asks the following question: in a media-saturated and narcissistic society, where irony and cynicism have driven everyone apart from one another, how can an author get through to a reader? How is an author to justify a reader's decision to pick up a thousand-page novel, when it's so much easier and more immediately stimulating just to kick back and flip on the TV? We don't have to read too far – really, just a few pages – before we begin to sense that maybe this cage of irony that once provided so much comfort and safety has gotten a little stale and cramped, and that maybe

there is a refreshing breeze to catch, if only we risk exposure, and just poke our heads out for a bit and try to feel it.

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