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"Becoming" David Foster Wallace: Media, Metafiction, and Miscommunication

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“Becoming” David Foster Wallace:
Media, Metafiction, and Miscommunication

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by

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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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Dedicated to

*Nathan Shockey for keeping me on track,
something with which I've always struggled*

and

*All the people I've met at Bard who have
defined both my experiences and the person I've become*

Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1:	
Diagnosing Alterity in <i>The Broom of the System</i>	7
Chapter 2:	
Absurdity, Irony, and Transitioning Away from Postmodernism	28
Chapter 3:	
The <i>Infinite Jest</i> Chapter: Media, Addiction, Freedom, and Sincerity	52

**“Becoming” David Foster Wallace:
Media, Metafiction, and Miscommunication**

Gordon Hugh Willis IV

What does it mean to “become” an author, particularly one with a mind like David Foster Wallace (1962-2008)? One of Wallace’s primary motivations in writing and reading fiction is to experience what others experience, as he said in 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery, “I guess a big part of serious fiction’s purpose is to give the reader, who like all of us is sort of marooned in her own skull, to give her imaginative access to other selves.”¹ Reading good fiction is like walking through the labyrinth of someone else’s mind, learning the specific ways the maze will unfold. Of course, as Wallace says, this is purely imaginative, and literature can only communicate experience to the extent that language can allow. Wallace is keenly and painfully aware of the fact that one can never truly step into the mind of another, only imagine what they are thinking based on the choices they make when writing. The bounds of the mind, the fact that we can never truly empathize with one another, tug at the strings that connect Wallace’s heart and mind, and the fact deeply saddens and perplexes him. These emotions are at the forefront of Wallace’s fiction—it is no surprise many of his characters, from his first novel *The Broom of the System* (1987) through *Infinite Jest* (1996) and into his later works like *Oblivion* (2004), suffer from intense loneliness. As his writing became more ambitious with time, he finds an extreme lack of sincerity and authenticity in U.S. culture. I will argue that Wallace explores the space

¹ McCaffery, Larry, and David Foster Wallace. "An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace." In *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, 21-22. University Press of Mississippi, 2012.

between individuals, the world that separates our minds, and investigates the limits of empathy, communication, and authenticity to find an accurate definition of what “sincerity” truly means.

Some scholars, such as Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelley in their essay “David Foster Wallace’s Nihilism,” tend to read Wallace as a pessimist, which is unsurprising given his dark stories and mortally imperfect characters. This reading is due in no small part to his suicide in 2008, and his constant struggles with depression throughout his life. I find optimism instead, not in his characters or the worlds he creates, but in the potential he always saw for redemption in humanity. His stories are indeed dark, but there is a hope present throughout that the world does not need to be this way. When I say redemption, I do not mean any christian-fundamentalist notion of original sin or anything like that. What I mean is a redemption from the modern world around us—mostly media and marketing—which warps how we communicate and interact with others. Failure of communication is a theme that pops up in many of his works, such as his short story collections *Oblivion* and *Girl with Curious Hair* (1989). While he was critical of contemporary phenomena like television and mass marketing, this was simply because he wrote about the world around him. He was not a luddite who demanded technology be branded as evil, but was a man who saw the world as a whole as in need of repair, stating, “All I’m saying is that it’s shortsighted to blame TV. It’s simply another symptom. TV didn’t invent our aesthetic childishness here any more than the Manhattan Project invented aggression. Nuclear weapons and TV have simply intensified the consequences of our tendencies, upped the stakes.”² Perhaps in a different time he would have wrote about misguiding propaganda or the problems with novels of chivalry. Whatever the case, Wallace acted as a medium between man and media,

² McCaffery, Larry, and David Foster Wallace. "An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace." In *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, 23. University Press of Mississippi, 2012.

interpreting it rather than condoning or condemning, but the media itself—television, commercials, and so on—was never his main target. His focus has always been on humanity.

During his undergrad at Amherst College, he wrote *The Broom of the System*, his first novel. In this novel, I find the initial seeds of thoughts he would later flesh out in fuller detail, which makes it an ideal place to start with an investigation into Wallace. The most prominent theme of the novel, which I investigate in the first chapter, is alterity, the idea of otherness. Many of the characters serve as mouth-pieces for particular philosophies of alterity, giving the book a dialogic feeling, as if Wallace himself was experimenting with various approaches to the problem of representing the impossibility of uniting the “Self” with the “Other.” The first chapter is devoted to finding and exploring Wallace’s diagnosis of alterity—to what extent can people interact? To this end I will compare several philosophies of alterity with other American works, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson’s (1803-1882) essay “Nature” and William Gaddis’ (1922-1998) novel *Carpenter’s Gothic*, and even philosophical works such as Ludwig Wittgenstein’s (1889-1951) *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. The various philosophies Wallace presents can be thought of as attempting to diagnose the problem he saw with interpersonal interaction. The novel operates in absurdism and irony, which he later wrote negatively of for being purely critical of other ideas while never positing anything itself. However, just because the *The Broom of the System* is mostly Wallace formulating questions on alterity rather than answers does not mean there are no meaningful and original thoughts to be investigated, but the novel is also important because the themes and ideas first in development here later become the focus of entire volumes of his work.

The second chapter is primarily analysis of Wallace's short stories, drawn from the collections *Girl with Curious Hair* and *Oblivion*, and their relationship to postmodern writing practices, particularly absurdism and irony. Wallace wrote *Girl with Curious Hair* after *The Broom of the System*, meaning he had already diagnosed the problem with alterity—I conclude the first chapter with Wallace's belief that empathy is limited. In these two collections, he investigates to what extent people can empathize. In stories such as "Girl with Curious Hair," Wallace examines perspective and humanity and how these factor into interpersonal relations. He also investigates the effects of mass marketing on people in "The Suffering Channel" and "Mister Squishy." I examine the short stories in this chapter with the essay "E Unibus Pluram," Wallace's manifesto of contemporary literature, television, and his views on postmodernism. By looking at his short fiction with regard to this essay, we will find what Wallace sees as the solution to alterity and postmodernism—sincerity. The final section of the chapter focuses on "Good Old Neon," Wallace's quintessential work of metafiction. I find in this final story a careful meditation on what it means to be sincere. Wallace does not insert television or marketing into this story as he usually does, making this the best piece of his fiction to find his thoughts on sincerity and authenticity. All of these stories are similar in their philosophizing about the nature of interpersonal communication. None of the stories individually find a precise answer, but they all angle towards one, allowing a reader to decipher what was happening in Wallace's mind. This answer is that, while whole and complete empathy is unattainable, partial empathy is very possible, and the fact that this partial empathy exists is astounding. My hope is that by the end of the second chapter, the inner working of Wallace's mind are made more obvious. This,

paradoxically, somewhat proves the idea that, if we try hard enough, we can understand one another on a deeper level.

In the final chapter, I look at Wallace's magnum opus *Infinite Jest*. In this novel, I argue that Wallace is not diagnosing problems with alterity, like in *The Broom of the System*, or investigating the limits of empathy, like in *Girl with Curious Hair* and *Oblivion*. Instead, Wallace is more interested in finding a remedy for the issues with alterity discussed in chapters one and two. I believe this remedy is the same sincerity Wallace writes about in "Good Old Neon." To find what he is precisely saying about sincerity, I start by looking at the idea of freedom in *Infinite Jest*. Wallace manages to talk about American freedom intellectually, and I put his ideas in conversation with ideas put forth by Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997) in his essay "Two Concepts of Liberty" (1958). I then go on to discuss instances in the novel of the two types of liberty both Wallace and Berlin bring up, and how this bears on Wallace's stance on freedom. The ideas of freedom and sincerity are intertwined with his typical thematization of media, but he also emphasizes the idea of addiction in *Infinite Jest*. Through these concepts, Wallace builds his own version of America in the novel which questions the most basic aspects of humanity; what do we mean when we say "freedom" in America in the modern age? How do media and addiction affect both freedom and sincerity? And how are freedom and sincerity connected? These are not easy questions, and as such the answers are not straightforward, but Wallace is able to, if not answer them, at least point in the direction of the answer.

Ultimately, Wallace's fiction revolves around how humans interact with one another. How can we define our relationships? To what extent can we empathize with one another? Is true communication even possible given the bounds of language? Wallace chooses to address the

questions at the center of being human in a world distorted by other humans. To understand an author, or any other person for that matter, is to become them, if only for an instant. By reading Wallace, a reader can attempt to jump into his mind and see the world as he sees it. He sees a bleak world around him drained of humanity and replaced with marketing clichés and meaningless relationships, but for all this, his literature was ultimately optimistic. It saw a world that could be redeemed from itself, one that could turn its flaws into virtues through authentic communication and sincerity. I have “become” David Foster Wallace in the sense that, the more I read him and understood his literature, the more I understood him as a person (this could be helped by the fact I look somewhat like him, especially when I wear headbands akin to his signature style). I do not profess to possess a complete understand of Wallace’s mind, but empathizing with him to this small extent is entirely the message his literature tries to send. Wallace’s message to the world seems hopeful if this is possible. He never expected people to be reading each others thoughts. All he wanted was for people to try to relate to each other and express themselves genuinely. By understanding each other, even to the small extent Wallace saw as possible, the nihilistic America he saw becomes more optimistic. The small idea of understanding others and being understood was, to Wallace, incredibly deep, and throughout his works of literature he investigated every conceivable corner he could find of this idea, and what he found was, as I read it, hopeful.

Chapter 1:
Diagnosing Alterity
in *The Broom of the System*

In his fiction, David Foster Wallace frequently grapples with the concept of alterity and the relationship between the Self and the Other. To Wallace, there exists a psychic barrier between individuals which can never be fully penetrated, though it remains possible to at least partially understand the Other through interpersonal interaction and communication. The interpersonal barrier exists between human minds— in other words, true empathy between the Self and Other cannot not exist. The resulting solitude and isolation is not in itself unique to Wallace’s thought, but is a core concept for his grasp of everyday human interactions. Here, I operationally define the “Self” as a mind to which one has essential access, i.e. their own. An “Other” is a mind that one can access only in a very limited capacity, or not at all—the mind of anyone else. In his first novel, *The Broom of the System* (1987), Wallace explores the idea of interpersonal connection and miscommunication. In the novel, Wallace investigates multiple ideas of alterity, trying to diagnose the cause of what he would later view as an American failure in sincerity. Rather than a single unified philosophy of alterity, Wallace presents a multitude of characters and their thoughts on the subject, as though he explores various concepts of Self and Other and presents them for consideration throughout the text. There is no one “right” answer, rather Wallace’s approaches to the problem from a variety of different and sometimes conflicting viewpoints and strategies. The plot revolves around a couple, Lenore Beadsman and Rick

Vigorous, and their various interactions with strange people with even stranger minds. Lenore is an intelligent young woman who is the center-point of the various strange people in her life. Most problems presented to her are notably external, coming from other people rather than internal strife. Rick, an insanely jealous boyfriend with a myriad of personal image problems, obsesses over Lenore and their relationship. Lenore needs distance from Rick, while Rick tries to get as close as possible to Lenore. As a result, Rick tends to increasingly objectify Lenore as the novel progresses. The two separately see a therapist, Dr. Jay, who analyzes the connection (or lack thereof) between them. Jay's ideas are presented as a kind of distorted psychosexual philosophy, loosely similar to typically Freudian ideas. Lenore's sister and her family also struggle with communication and interpersonal relationships, and are prescribed by their family therapist to put on a play which describes their struggles with disconnection. Through the medium of the play, Wallace presents ideas on alterity that involve defining oneself via external objects and self-reliance. Finally, we have Norman Bombardini, a recently divorced and alarmingly obese CEO and building owner, who posits his own thoughts on alterity, and his insane solution to never needing an Other to be satisfied with life. Wallace uses the various characters in *The Broom of the System* to philosophically grapple with the concept of alterity. The ultimate goal of this grappling, whether Wallace was aware at the time or not, is to approach the root cause of an overwhelming failure to communicate and relate to others that becomes the major unifying theme of many of his later works.

Dr. Jay's Terrible Therapy

Wallace frequently and deliberately changes his narrative style throughout the novel. There several primary prose styles he uses to delve into his character's thoughts. The book is split into two main parts, then into individual chapters, and then into individual sub-sections labelled alphabetically, each of which possesses its own narrative style. Some sections are written in only dialogue without denoting who is speaking, some sections are straightforward third person narrative modes in which characters move in and out of the scene or multiple people are involved, and other sections are written in the first person entirely in a character's head, and some others still are written as courtroom-style transcripts of conversations. Wallace tends to stray further from first person narration when he wants the context of his character's heads to remain convoluted. In the most extreme form of this technique, pure dialogue without any narratorial interjection, both the characters and the reader need to analyze the dialogue in order to understand the motives behind what the characters are saying. Wallace frequently uses this style when Lenore and Rick are together but not effectively communicating. One of the earlier scenes where Rick and Lenore are together talking starts as thus,

“Are you bothered by speculations about whether it bothers me that you never tell me you love me?”

“Maybe sometimes.”

“Well you shouldn't be. I know you do, deep down. Deep down I know it. And I love you, fiercely and completely—you do believe that.”

“Yes.”

“And you love me.”

“...”

“It's not a problem. I know you do. Please don't let it bother you.”

“...”³

³ David Foster Wallace, *The Broom of the System*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 103

These are the first lines of subsection /c/ of Chapter Seven. In the section above, we see Wallace actively denote silence using ellipses. These ellipses can be read as Wallace giving the readers an understanding of which character is talking, by going in a standard one-two dialogue format without skipping a speaker. However, the primary function of the ellipsis is to actively denote and give significance to the silence. Significantly, Lenore is silent after Rick asks her if she loves him. We know he pauses to let her speak, but she declines to answer. The section quoted is a simple example of a place where Wallace does not detail his characters' thoughts. Both the reader and Rick need to analyze what Lenore doesn't say in order to understand Lenore's thoughts. The audience will most likely understand that Lenore does not love Rick, while Rick doesn't understand at all. We can see the miscommunication happen and understand the characters better because of it.

We can also see through Rick's first line, quoted above, just how convoluted his thoughts are with regards to Lenore. Rick attempts to prompt Lenore to speak to him about personal, "deep down" feelings of love. Rather than talking to her about his own feelings, he prompts Lenore to speak to him, attempting to get Lenore to enter his Self, rather than attempting to penetrate into her Other. Rick cannot connect with Lenore by communicating his thoughts, making their relationship an emotionally one-way street, but because Lenore also withholds her feelings, any possibility of a channel of meaningful communication is destroyed. All connection breaks down between the two. Much later, in a meeting with the decidedly unhelpful therapist Dr. Jay, Rick discusses a dream he had about Lenore and a hyper-masculine friend of hers whom is concerned about named Andrew Lang. This dream prompts Jay to introduce his personal philosophy of alterity to Rick. In the dream, Rick and Lang are both naked. Lang draws a picture

of Lenore, using a beer-bottle-shaped pen, which then becomes the real Lenore. Lang then hands her the pen and turns around so she can sign his bottom⁴. This is nightmarish distortion of the first scene in the novel, which takes place about ten years before the rest of the events. Dr. Jay's interpretation of the dream primarily revolves around Rick's insecurities, stating:

Jay: [...] She is *signing* the Other, putting herself on, in, the Other who set her free through membrane permeation. She puts herself inside a Network. [...]

Jay: [...] You have, I think, truly perceived a valid need in an Other. You are striding, in my opinion.

Rick Vigorous pauses.

Jay: And why are you and Lang naked in the dream, Rick? Why is the validating pen in the shape of a beer bottle, with all of that image's attendant phallic and urological overtones?

Rick: And then why, in this context, does Lenore grasp Lang's member as she signs? Is the member supposed to be the symbol of membrane-penetration?⁵

Now might be a good time to mention that Rick finds himself in possession of a micro-penis, and Wallace suggests that his intense need to metaphysically penetrate Lenore's psychic membrane is intimately tied to his inability to penetrate her physically and sexually. Dr. Jay's analytic approach is allegedly derived from the fictional Dr. Blentner's "hygiene theories," which both contrast and intersect with classically Freudian, psychosexual concepts. It is later revealed that Dr. Blentner is a fictional character created by Dr. Jay, but the ideas themselves are important with regard to interpersonal relationships in the novel. Jay states that there are Selves and Others, and that every Self wishes to penetrate or be penetrated by an Other. This section of the novel lays the groundwork for the rest of the theories on alterity Wallace considers, all of which involve the need for some form of permeation with an Other in order to achieve a fulfilled life.

⁴ David Foster Wallace, *The Broom of the System*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 324-325

⁵ Wallace, *Ibid*, 344-345 (All italics in original)

Dr. Jay's theories are the most direct, and metaphysical, about this permeation. The main differences between the various theories Wallace presents through his characters are manifest in how Selves and Others interact. In Jay's schema, the key concept in this dynamic is hygiene. In a therapy session between Lenore and Jay, slightly before the meeting between Jay and Rick quoted earlier, Jay explicates:

Jay: [...] Don't you see that perceiving your own natural desires and inclinations and attractions as somehow being directed at and forced on you from outside, from *Outside*, is a truly classic instance of a malfunction in a hygiene-identity network? That it's exhaustively reducible to and explainable in terms of membrane-theory? That a flabby membrane is unhealthily permeable, lets the Self out to soil the Other-set and the Other-set in to soil the Self?⁶

Jay's theories promote independence and individuality, but still the need for an Other. According to Jay, a flabby metaphysical membrane is equivalent to not existing, because, if one lets too much of the Outside into the Self and too much of the Self into the Outside, there is no boundary between the Self and the world. Alternatively, if a membrane fails to let anything in or out, then that Self ceases to be a part of the world, and there is little reason for its existence. An ideal membrane creates a truly identifiable Self while selectively letting the world inside and letting the Self out. Wallace takes these theories a step further through Jay's character, who theorizes that this membrane is innately sexual, and that the pinnacle of human interaction comes in the form of intercourse. There are problems with the fact that this theory seemingly applies to heterosexual intercourse alone, but that is outside of the scope of this paper.

The concept of a permeable membrane representing a connection between an individual and the world has long-standing precedent in American literature. The transcendentalist Ralph

⁶ Wallace, *The Broom of the System*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 330

Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) posed a similar idea in his essay “Nature” (1836), in which he describes himself walking into the woods. Here he experiences the transcendentalist ideal of experiencing the sublime through the natural:

In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel nothing can befall me in life,—no disgrace, no calamity, (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.⁷

Emerson’s metaphor of transparency represents the ideal state of the transcendentalist subject, a part of nature but still separate from it. The eyeball is transparent but not invisible, indicating that Emerson’s subject is still visible and identifiable in the metaphor. However, the fact that Emerson is partially transparent allows the trees to be seen through him, thus making the images a part of him, which Emerson refers to as the “Universal Being” circulating through his Self. But he is an eyeball, meaning that, in addition to being observed, he can also observe and witness the world around him; he is a being meant to observe the world and be a lens through which one views the world. While Emerson is concerned with human-nature interactions, Wallace writes of human-human interactions. Wallace’s descriptions of semipermeable membranes is not unlike Emerson’s metaphor of transparency. The perfect state is neither impermeability nor total permeability—in Emersonian phrases opaque or invisible—but an in-between of partial permeability.

The other major difference between Emerson’s and Wallace’s ideas is the time and landscape with which they are writing in. The transcendentalists did not reject society, but thought of nature as a more idealistic space, a place where one could be free of humanity’s strifes

⁷ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature” in *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*, ed. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001), 29

and troubles, if only momentarily. Wallace, on the other hand, embraces society. Society is where we exist, after all, so we are confronted with the need to negotiate internal problems while bombarded with external forces—people, culture, media, and so on. Emerson continues, “The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental; to be brothers, to be acquaintances,—master or servant, is then a trifle or a disturbance.”⁸ Emerson says that interpersonal connections mean nothing in nature, which is where one can find true self-fulfillment from within rather than without. Wallace says essentially the exact opposite—he is interested in what it is like to be brothers or acquaintances, to be a boss or a subordinate. The two authors, of course, are separated by almost two centuries, and the American physical and social landscape has changed drastically in that time. Where Emerson choose to provisionally ignore society, Wallace and his readers cannot and do not do such a thing. Society and interpersonal connection is central to Wallace’s writings—he does not think of the social realm as objectively good or bad, only acknowledges that we cannot escape from it and need to deal with it, for better or for worse.

The Spaniards and Their Family Theater

As opposed to the sexually inspired theories of Dr. Jay, a much more family-friendly theory on alterity emerges from the Spaniard family, consisting of Lenore’s sister Clarice, her husband Alvin, niece Spatula, and nephew Stonecipher (called Stoney). Through Rick’s inner thoughts, we learn that Alvin had cheated on Clarice with his receptionist, which led to marriage

⁸ Emerson, *Ibid*

counseling and eventually family therapy.⁹ The exact therapeutic practices the family undergoes vary from nerf-club fighting to sculpting perceptions of each other out of clay—Wallace describes the therapy abstractly, possibly to illustrate the often surreal nature of psychological counseling. On the night Lenore visits the family, they are putting on a living-room play in which they describe their issues and how they can be resolved. The play starts with the Spaniards wearing masks of themselves while the young Stoney begins with a speech directed at a television recording of an audience. In it, Stoney discusses how the family members identities were reliant on the fact that they were members of a family, not truly individual people: “The people who were in the family thought of themselves more as [...] members of the family than as real people who were special individual people.”¹⁰ He goes on to describe this as a good thing, because the family member’s thoughts and emotions felt like part of something bigger than them. But if something bad, such as a father or husband cheating on his wife with a receptionist, started to strain the familial relations, the identities of the individual family members would be affected, so they apparently attached themselves to external things, symbolized in the play by a Visa Gold Card, an expensive watch, a teddy bear, and a cut-out book. Wallace uses capitalist imagery to demonstrate the typical commercial pressure constantly weighing down on families in the modern day. Each object is stereotypical of what a given member of the family might attach themselves to—a wife with a credit card, a businessman husband with a fancy new watch, and children with commercial toys. Alvin goes on to describe the troubles with attaching themselves to external objects: “The problem [...] was that in making their own sense of self and rightness-

⁹ Wallace, *The Broom of the System*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 170-171

¹⁰ Wallace, *Ibid* 167

with-themselves-as-people depend on things outside them, the family-members were letting themselves in for riskiness and trouble. Things couldn't be people, not even the people they belonged to."¹¹ Wallace, by mentioning that "things can't be people," introduces a concern that he will later elaborate on in *Infinite Jest* and other later works—the role of media and commodities in the constant formation of identity. To Wallace, television commercials, mass commercial products, and other forms of advertising media are incredibly important. The modern age is filled with advertisements and products, and when individuals are constantly surrounded by these objects and stimuli, they risk losing touch with other people. Wallace was not so much objectively against this aspect of capitalism and modernity, but saw a need to clarify the risks inherent in it. The play ends with the Spaniard family members talking about how they need to talk with one another and understand their identities as personal, not purely as familial.¹² Here Wallace gives another possibility for exploring alterity and interpersonal communications, when young Spatula delivers the closing lines of the play: "They found out that what they needed to get their feelings of being themselves from was *themselves* [...] because that's what they were. The easiest thing in the world is what they saw."¹³

This is an incredibly important line in this novel about interpersonal relationships and communications breakdown. All the characters in *The Broom of the System* struggle with communication in some sense, and Wallace points out that people need to find some sort of self-reliance for true self-fulfillment—not things or other people, even family, but in themselves. This seems to contrast with Jay's theories, wherein people need to open themselves up and connect

¹¹ Wallace, *Ibid*, 170

¹² Wallace, *Ibid*, 167-173

¹³ Wallace, *Ibid*, 173 (all italics in original)

with other people in order to find fulfillment. But the two theories of alterity are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Individuals, according to Spaniard family theater, need to find their “sense of self” internally, within themselves.¹⁴ Jay, on the other hand, discusses self-actualization in a way not dissimilar to Maslow’s hierarchy-of-needs. The hierarchy-of-needs is a psychological theory of motivation that people require certain basic needs, such as food and water, to be fulfilled, before they move to more “profound” needs, such as self-esteem and love. A deep consideration of Maslow is beyond the scope of this paper, but in essence the Spaniard family addresses one specific issue in finding a sense of self, that being an internal self-identification, while Jay addresses higher order issues regarding meaningfully connection with others.

In terms of narrative style, Wallace writes about the Spaniard family in third person limited—he does not enter the heads of the characters but does describe their actions. In fact, the narrator primarily describes their actions, not straying at all from the reality of the situation presented. Lenore watches the family play the entire time, and the only other audience is pre-recorded. The narrator is not aligned with any one character in particular, but merely watches and reports on the actions of the people present. Whenever Wallace switches to this particular narrative method, the third person narrator’s perspective becomes quite limited in scope. The reader must decipher what the characters think through their dialogue and actions. This narrative style works for this section due to the limited communication and interaction between all the characters. Basically, the characters are isolated in their own heads, but the communication is still semi-effective. If communication were wholly effective, one would expect the characters to discuss issues and thoughts rather than stage them via a play, indicating that the characters

¹⁴ Wallace, *Ibid* 172

struggle with open communication. In the sections where Wallace provides no expositional narration, the characters do not effectively communicate, thus the narrator is entirely missing, providing no insight into thoughts. The third person narration makes it much easier for the reader to decipher what characters are thinking. In this way, Wallace draws the reader into the novel by making them work more or less to delve into characters inner thoughts, just like the characters must do themselves.

As for the family dynamic itself, the Spaniard's therapist seems to advocate for a method similar to Dr. Jay's partially permeable membrane theory. However, this dynamic of interpersonal relations specifically relates to a family unit, as opposed to Jay's theory, which focuses on individuals. The family's problems do not arise, as in Rick's case, from the inability to penetrate a psychic membrane or to let others into their own membrane. The problem is the permeability of the family members' individual membranes. As stated by Stony, the family members used to view themselves as members of the family and identified as such. This could be seen as a very weak membrane, one that lets too much Other in and too much Self out. The individuals ceased to exist as individuals, so when something happened to disintegrate familial relations, each member suffered an identity crisis. Wallace has the characters physically don masks portraying other family members to show this. However, according to the family therapy, they should not have attempted to fill these holes and mend themselves with external items.¹⁵ Instead, they needed more self reliance—a stronger membrane, so to speak.

¹⁵ Wallace, *Ibid*, 173

Gaddis, Miscommunication, and Making the Reader Work

The whole Spaniard family episode is reminiscent of works by William Gaddis (1922-1998). In his novel *Carpenter's Gothic* (1985), Gaddis depicts a small family who experiences a plethora of miscommunications. Gaddis's dark novel focuses on Elizabeth Booth, a young woman married to Paul Booth, an uncaring and selfish man. Unlike Wallace's densely populated novel, Gaddis's novel stays within the Booth's claustrophobic home, built in the titular carpenter's gothic style, and the readers only see the few characters who pass in and out of the house: Liz Booth, Paul Booth, Liz's brother Billy, and the homeowner and Liz's one-time lover McCandless. Gaddis writes in a third person narrative voice, not letting his narrator get too close to the character's minds. Gaddis's narrator stays on the surface and only observes the characters' actions. Like *The Broom of the System*, *Carpenter's Gothic* is mostly dialogue, without denoting which character is talking at any given moment. The reader needs to work to understand the characters and recognize their speech patterns and phrases, much more so than in Wallace. The narrator never leaves the house, seeming almost hesitant to even stray onto the driveway; there are constant descriptions that evoke the confinement of space such as, "The refrigerator door banged against the counter" and "He scattered the mail with one hand, had the phone up in the other."¹⁶ This gives the entire novel a claustrophobic feeling, which mirrors Liz Booth's mind as she is constantly berated and ignored and twisted by the three men around her—she is subjected to verbal assault whenever any man is around. They all act like they care for Liz (with the exception of Paul, who barely even tries to pretend), but she is continually interrupted and talked over. The narrative itself flows freely from dialogue into description, using only ellipses most of

¹⁶ Gaddis, *Carpenter's Gothic* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 70

the time to differentiate between the two; Gaddis uses no quotation marks throughout the novel, only em-dashes to denote speaking.

The worst man by far is Paul, who constantly contradicts himself and blames any problems on Liz. When Paul receives a call from Acapulco, he angrily does not accept it. Two pages later, Liz tells him the calls they received that day, one from someone Paul has been waiting for who happens to be in Acapulco, to which he replies, “Sitting right here you were sitting up there [upstairs] phone ringing when I came in why the hell didn’t you tell me! Told you I’ve been waiting to hear from him, I pick up the God damn phone you heard me turn down a call from Acapulco why didn’t you wait, where you...”¹⁷ Clearly Liz could not have known that the one moment she went upstairs Paul would receive a call from Acapulco, or even that a call from Acapulco would be coming in, yet Paul blames her nonetheless. Paul distorts the situation, shutting out any communication or connection with Liz. This is a common theme throughout the book. McCandless, who shows the most love and attention to Liz, still goes on for pages-long rants about religion and science, completely dominating the narrative space of the novel. When any other character is present, Liz’s dialogue is condensed down to unfinished lines while others dominate the conversation. Frequently, the men in her life are smoking while she repeatedly asks them to stop due to her asthma, ultimately dying of an asthma attack at the end of the novel. The men in her life kill her, collectively, through a lack of listening and a lack of communication, which Gaddis equates with death. Wallace does not kill any characters for lack of connection in *The Broom of the System*, but he lets their lives fall into ruins all the same. Lenore’s experiences parallel Liz’s, as she is completely dominated on the page by Rick. At the end of the novel,

¹⁷ Gaddis, *Ibid*, 73

Lenore is surrounded by nearly every character Wallace introduced, including Candy Mandible, Walinda Peahen, Peter Abbot, Dr. Jay, Mr. Bloemker, Mr. Beadsman, Rick Vigorous, Andrew “Wang Dang” Lang, Alvin Spaniard, Judith Priethht, Norman Bombardini, Neil Obstat, Jr., Sigurd Foamwhistle—all shouting and vying for her attention. If any of these names are unfamiliar to this essay, it is because there is such a plethora of characters in the novel that they do not all warrant discussion, but Wallace decides to place them all in this penultimate 13-page scene.¹⁸ This last scene feels quite similar to *Carpenter’s Gothic*, where the scenes are a mess of miscommunications and claustrophobic actions.

The narrative styles of the two authors are unique, ignoring typical literary conventions, such as quotation marks, to instead write in their own style. Gaddis is more extreme than Wallace in this regard, but Wallace still plays with dialogue and exposition. The reader must delve deep into the novels in order to understand what is happening in the minds of the characters, the authors and narrators give very little information into the realm of thoughts. Again, the reader tends to be more aware of what the characters are thinking than the other characters they interact with. The reader is made frustratingly aware of the fact in both stories that characters simply cannot see things as the others do—Gaddis accomplishes this through the intense degeneration of Liz’s physical and mental health via the men’s lack of communication, and Wallace through his characters rather blunt descriptions of alterity.

¹⁸ Wallace, *Broom of the System* (New York: Penguin Book, 1987), 444-457

Norman Bombardini and His Infinite Self

Returning to Wallace, another strange theory of alterity comes from Norman Bombardini, the owner of the building in which Lenore and Rick work. Norman Bombardini is a supporting character who is small in terms of his role in the story, but very large in terms of physical size. He is described at a later point in the book as unable to enter a restaurant, and being forced to eat on the sidewalks. Bombardini is so gargantuan because he is trying to become obscenely fat, not in any rational sense of obesity, but a completely original category all for him—Infinite size. He is a wealthy CEO of a company, but apparently his obesity caused marital problems. He either went insane or into a depression, deciding he no longer wanted anything to do with other people; his resolution is to eat literally everything. He starts with food, but is seen gnawing on tables and biting at waiters. His plan is to physically consume the entire universe—every single atom—in order to reconcile the difference between Self and Other. If there is no Other, then there remains only the Self which can be comprehended. Bombardini’s plan evokes Wallace’s absurdism. The plan, though thought-provoking, can only ultimately end in failure. Wallace uses this absurdity to demonstrate the futility of not confronting this loneliness present in theories of alterity. When discussing his failed venture at Weight Watchers, Bombardini states:

A full universe [...]. We each need a full universe. Weight Watchers and their allies would have us systematically decrease the Self-component of the universe, so that the great Other-set will be physically attracted to the now more physically attractive Self, and rush in to fill the void caused by that diminution of Self. Certainly not incorrect, but just as certainly only *half* the range of valid solutions to the full-universe problem. [...] Rather than diminishing Self to entice Other to fill our universe, we may also of course obviously choose to fill the universe with *Self*.¹⁹

¹⁹ Wallace, *Ibid*, 91

But, Wallace points out, this is impossible. Humans cannot escape interpersonal connections and external bombardment from media in the modern age. Bombardini tosses around the idea of leaving select corners of the universe alone, allowing Others to occupy the space. Wallace intends for Norman to be taken as a madman, but the theory he presents is unique vis-a-vis the philosophies of alterity posited by other characters. In short, the Self might theoretically be able to subsist without an Other, but the reality of the situation is much more difficult to face. Wallace is pointing out that, whether perfectly ideal or horribly imperfect, we all live in the world and need to confront present issues. For all of Wallace's background in philosophy, *The Broom of the System* is more interested in confronting the social implications of alterity rather than the philosophical ones, though in his later short stories he writes about alterity more abstractly.

These ideas presented by Bombardini intersect in an interesting way with the ideas of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), who is mentioned several times in the *The Broom of the System*. Lenore and Lenore's grandmother, whom we will call Lenore the elder (throughout the novel Wallace only refers to her as "Lenore," with no differentiation between the main character Lenore other than context), are both hobbyist philosophers, who primarily draw their linguistic ideas from Wittgenstein. One of Lenore the elder's prized possessions was an autographed copy of *Investigations*, by Wittgenstein.²⁰ This project will not profess to accurately and intricately analyze Wittgenstein's ideas, but rather filter some thoughts Wallace presents through a surface level understanding of Wittgenstein's philosophy derived from *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922): "In logic, nothing is accidental: if a thing *can* occur in a state of affairs, the possibility of

²⁰ Wallace, *Ibid*, 40

the state of affairs must be written into the thing itself.”²¹ For Wittgenstein anything that is logically possible is possible, but logically possible things derive from facts. To Wittgenstein, “The world is the totality of facts, not things. The world is determined by the facts, and by their being *all* the facts.”²² This is an interpretation of reality based on thoughts rather than purely on observations of physical phenomena—the exact kind of philosophy which led writers to abandon realism for modernism. So what does this have to do with Bombardini? Wallace juxtaposes absurd but logically valid arguments with the cold reality of impossibility. In philosophy, an argument is considered valid if it follows logically, but an argument is considered sound if it follows logically *and* the premises are true. For example, the premise that Bombardini can consume all matter is false. Wallace does not necessarily disagree with Wittgenstein that the world is based on facts which can be stated through language, but rather shows that there is more in his interpretation of the world than facts alone. Bombardini’s thoughts are real in that they affect him and affect those around him. Perhaps Wittgenstein would agree with this, as it is a fact that Bombardini wishes to grow to infinite size. However, it is not possible for him to actually grow to infinite size. We can never understand others and are alone in the universe, a fact that Bombardini defies but Wallace makes evident he cannot ignore.

According to Lenore’s interpretation of Lenore the elder’s philosophy during a therapy session, her grandmother’s philosophy is best summarized here,

If there’s nothing about me but what can be said about me, what separates me from this lady in this story Rick got[...]? She’s exactly what’s said about her, right? Nothing more

²¹ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Kegan Paul, 1922), 2.012

²² Wittgenstein, *Ibid*, 1.1-1.11 (Italics in original)

at all. And same with me, seems like. Gramma says she's going to show me how life is words and nothing else. Gramma says words can kill and create. Everything.²³ There is nothing that is extra-linguistic, only what is said and can be said. Wallace enters the metafictional here: Lenore truly is nothing more than a character in a story. All that ever will exist of her is written down, and she is nothing more than words. But, within the diegesis of the novel, she is very much real. She interacts with other characters and lives. So what is "real" to Wallace? It would seem to be anything that can be said or written down, but also what can be thought. It is unclear to what extent Wallace agrees with Wittgenstein in that he does not give any heed to whether or not things can exist that are extra-linguistic, and there is not much in his prose to give a clue. Most philosophical thought throughout the novel comes from his characters, not him or his narrator, and these thoughts can contradict each other. But it would seem, given Lenore's metafictional thoughts about herself, that Wallace does give credit to the idea that things that do not physically exist, such as fictional characters and stories, are "real" in the sense that they can affect the world deeply, even if they are only words.

Bombardini's case is never resolved. He never grows to infinite size or finds a connection to another person, and he ends the novel eating himself to death, shaking an entire building with his stature. According to Dr. Jay, to whom Bombardini is apparently a client, at the end of the book he is, "having at the rear wall of the whole building with his... his stomach. [...] He is demanding [...] 'admission to Ms. Beadsman's space.'"²⁴ Ultimately he finds himself longing for an Other, in this case Lenore, for purely sexual reasons, which Wallace makes clear throughout the novel through gross attempts at seduction, and attempts to gain "admission to her space"

²³ Wallace, *Broom of the System* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 119-120

²⁴ Wallace, *Ibid*, 454

through still physical means, literally attempting to force his way through a building to her. While Bombardini's ideas may be "real" in the sense that they affect him and his life, that does not necessarily make them good. Wallace brings the reader back to reality, showing that any amount of thought does not help bridge the gap between people, but that does not mean we should be content with being alone like Bombardini. In an interview with Larry McCaffery in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* (Summer 1993), Wallace states one of his intentions in regards to his fiction, saying, "We all suffer alone in the real world; true empathy's impossible. But if a piece of fiction can allow us imaginatively to identify with characters' pain, we might then also more easily conceive of others identifying with our own."²⁵ Wallace explicitly states the feeling of isolation he captures in his writing; true empathy is impossible. But fiction, despite its status as mere words, can help us connect.

Wallace strongly advocates for a "semi-permeability" throughout *The Broom of the System*. At the end of the novel, Wallace seems to conclude that being completely open with others is impossible. Whether we want to or not, people cannot realistically communicate all of their inner thoughts and emotions. However, we can still communicate some of these internal experiences, and we can still comprehend some as well. A complete lack of connection, such as in Bombardini's case and Liz's case in *Carpenter's Gothic*, leads to a worse existence, period. Wallace, even in his later literature, is not afraid to make this bold claim. Wallace finds himself, and by extension humanity, stuck between the impossibility of complete communication and the tragedy of non-communication, but through *The Broom of the System* he has set the bounds of his

²⁵ McCaffery, Larry, and David Foster Wallace. "An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace." In *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, edited by Burn Stephen J., 25. University Press of Mississippi, 2012. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt24hzc6.8>.

exploration into interpersonal connection. In his later works, many of which are explored in the following two chapters, Wallace works within this more narrow scope of what is possible and preferred for human interaction while navigating the modern world.

Chapter 2:

Absurdity, Irony, and Transitioning Away from Postmodernism

Absurdism and irony have been making their way into prominence in works of fiction since the latter half of the twentieth century. David Foster Wallace is one of the latest in a tradition of ironic critique and analysis of American culture through his fiction, something he saw as essential to postmodern fiction. The way Wallace sees it, as he states in his 1993 essay “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” “Early television helped legitimize absurdism and irony as not just literary devices but sensible responses to a ridiculous world.”²⁶ Absurdism and Irony, to Wallace, become the quintessential literary techniques in a world indulged and saturated with television. He looks to authors before him, such as Gaddis, Pynchon and DeLillo, and analyzes what their works have contributed to U.S. fiction. Wallace is concerned, first and foremost, with American culture in his writing. Most of his fiction and non-fiction are cultural critiques or musings about how philosophy connects to everyday life. *Infinite Jest* and *The Broom of the System* are good examples of this—they are novels that highlight the problems of American culture as well as borderline-existentialist investigations into what it means to be human in a setting defined by this very culture. This chapter deals primarily with Wallace’s short stories “The Suffering Channel,” “Girl with Curious Hair,” and “Mister Squishy”; how he uses irony and absurdity to display and critique cultural phenomena and how this affects interpersonal connections. The last section of the chapter looks at Wallace’s metafictional techniques in “Good

²⁶ Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram,” in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1997), 65

Old Neon” and how they dissolve the barrier between author and reader, allowing a more intimate connection to be established.

Absurdism, Humor, and Suffering

It would be difficult to argue that reality is not absurd in the modern age when one looks at our technology and society. Absurdism was one strategy by which the existentialists dealt with the dread that pervaded much of their philosophical movement. Camus claimed that the absurd was something to be embraced, stating, “Happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth.”²⁷ To him, the absurd was to be happy despite the meaninglessness of the world—in other words, happiness and nihilism are not incongruous. Postmodernist writers, such as Gaddis, Barth, Pynchon and DeLillo, have taken this idea of the absurd and applied it to fiction. While these writers are not using absurdism to deal with the vague nihilistic dread of existentialism, they are using it to cope with what they saw as nihilistic and insensible—modern American culture. This nihilism more directly addresses the world as it is, rather than philosophic Truth. As Wallace said, absurdism became a sensible response to an insensible world, and the postmodernists saw U.S. culture—mostly marketing and television in particular—as utterly ridiculous and strange. A provisional postmodern definition of absurdism might be: A literary device used to demonstrate the ridiculousness of an element of life via a created reality in which the nonsensical aspects of life are emphasized and made even more ridiculous. In this sense, the absurd functions as a rebellion against the standard contemporary conventions of a culture.

²⁷ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus in Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (London: Penguin Books, 1975), 378

One of Wallace's best pieces of absurdist fiction is "The Suffering Channel," published in his short story collection *Oblivion*. In this short story, Skip Atwater, a salaryman for *Style* magazine, starts with a pitch to his associate editor. The first three lines of the story set the tone, "But they're shit.' 'And yet at the same time they're art. Exquisite pieces of art. They're literally incredible.' 'No, they're literally shit is literally what they are.'"²⁸ As it turns out, the potential article is about Brint Moltke, a humble and quiet man with a tragic backstory of lavatorial abuse which gave him the ability to quite literally shit out replicas of famous works of art. His wife, Amber Moltke, pushes the poor man into the spotlight. The story is crude, hilarious, pointed and absurd, targeting corporations, vain and shallow employees furthering their corporations fundamental flaws, and the infamous "fifteen minutes of fame," first mentioned by Andy Warhol, which is so sought after in Wallace's America.

The first two targets of Wallace's satire in "The Suffering Channel" are corporate America and immoral employees. Wallace has concocted an absurd situation and placed it into the equally absurd world of marketing and consumer culture. The reader must remember that this is not a story about a man with Brint Moltke's superpower—the bulk of the story is an attempt to figure out how to sell that power. Whole pages are dedicated to an executive intern and a head intern discussing the logistics of demonstrating proof of the man's abilities, including pitches about possible statues to be produced. The key to this absurdist representation is the namesake of the story, the so-called "suffering channel". The suffering channel, in the story, is a TV show running from five to one in the morning, depicting pictures and videos of profound human anguish, back-to-back and non-stop. The two interns decide that the piece would be best

²⁸ Wallace, "The Suffering Channel" in *Oblivion* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2004), 456

displayed live on this channel. Wallace is clearly critiquing corporations for their profiting off of the suffering of others, as perpetuated by the various employees of the company, whom Wallace makes vain and without morals.

Wallace depicts Amber Moltke as using her husband for her own gain—her own fifteen minutes of fame. When the decision to display Mr. Moltke on the suffering channel is made, the two interns say, “‘It’s apparently totally the wife’s show, in terms of publicity. The artist guy is scared of his own shadow—according to Laurel, he’s sitting there flashing Skip secret signs like No, please God, no.’”²⁹ Throughout the story, we see Skip failing to interpret these very signs being flashed to him. Mrs. Moltke pushes her husband, who is extremely insecure about his ability, to be filmed during the most private of human acts and have it broadcast live. The giant white limousine sent to pick up the Moltkes is described as looking, to Skip, as, “‘The hearse of the kind of star for whom the whole world stops dead in its tracks to mourn.’”³⁰ Clearly, the hearse would be for Mr. Moltke, the figure being exploited by everyone. Equally clearly, Mr. Moltke would not be mourned for by the whole world. His fifteen minutes of fame would be forgotten nearly immediately. The *Style* magazine in the story lives off of quick and ever changing human interests, meaning Skip, the man behind the scenes who has the most to gain off of this story, would be moving onto the next profitable person. It is fitting that he is the one who interprets the limo as a hearse, but a very profitable hearse.

One element of Wallace’s absurdism is the story’s lack of a direct climax. In fact, Wallace is quite fond of leading up to what could be a climax and then ending the story, leaving the

²⁹ Wallace, *Ibid*, 529

³⁰ Wallace, *Ibid*, 530

reader with a feeling of frustration, such as in “Girl with Curious Hair” (1989) and “Good Old Neon,” (2004) which are discussed elsewhere in this chapter. “The Suffering Channel” ends after a scene of embarrassment has been set up for Brint. He sits on a commode which itself sits on a ten foot platform of tempered glass, for viewing purposes. The cameras are ready, and the crew is making last minute adjustments. And then the story ends. Brint Moltke’s suffering is not shown, but left to the imagination of the reader. Wallace’s stories tend to have no need for climaxes because they are already so full of interconnections that end up tangled around the reader, until the reader is finally released from the dark worlds that Wallace creates. It operates similarly to how Wallace himself describes Kafka’s funniness,

Franz Kafka, after all, is the story writer whose “Poseidon” imagines a sea god so overwhelmed with administrative paperwork that he never gets to swim or sail, and whose “In The Penal Colony” conceives description as punishment and torture as edification and the ultimate critic as a needled harrow whose coup de grâce is a spike through the forehead.³¹

Wallace is funny in the same absurd and extreme way, taking his critiques, making them literal, and adding in an element of sardonic irony aimed at contemporary American culture. However, Wallace’s works can feel much more cynical due to this lack of a concluding punchline. In his stories, the joke is a funny concept, such as society taking advantage of an artist who shits out art without regard for his feelings. However, there is no redemption for any of the characters. Wallace’s stories portray a simple, bleak reality depicted absurdly. As Wallace puts it, “The claim is that Kafka’s funniness depends on some kind of radical literalization of truths we tend to treat as metaphorical.”³² Wallace does something similar with his fiction, like in “The Suffering

³¹ Wallace, “Some Remarks on Kafka’s Funniness from Which Probably Not Enough Has Been Removed” in *The David Foster Wallace Reader* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 2015), 850

³² Wallace, *Ibid*, 851

Channel.” He sets his reader up for a punchline, a climax, and then ends the story. This is key to reading Wallace’s absurdist fiction. He builds a darkly funny world then denies the reader any form of comfort—a black humor where the funniness is overwhelmed by the very premise of the joke until it disappears altogether. Wallace argues that humor is not something to “get,” but rather a form of escapism from reality, at least in the modern American context. Stories such as “The Suffering Channel” defy this escapism, being both crudely funny and absurd, all the while making the reader face the bleak reality that is being depicted. It is for this reason both Wallace and Kafka are not primarily thought of as humorists, and why readers take their comedy so seriously.

Curious Irony and Sincere Subjectivity

In this sense, Wallace’s absurdism functions as a special kind of irony, which he describes as, “exploiting gaps between what’s said and what’s meant, between how things try to appear and how they really are —[...] the time-honored way artists seek to illuminate and explode hypocrisy.”³³ Wallace’s absurdism critiques U.S. culture by using it as his setting. This strategy might work with any culture, but Wallace’s interest with overabundant media leads him to stay within the bounds of the US. Take, for example, “Girl with Curious Hair.” In this story, a young Republican with sociopathic tendencies, usually burning people, finds himself fallen in with a crowd of punk rockers. Once the reader gets far enough into the story, they might assume the girl with curious hair is Gimlet, who, “only has hair at the center of her round head, and it is very

³³ Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram,” in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1997), 65

skillfully sculptured into the shape of a giant and erect male penis.”³⁴ Obviously, one way to describe this hair, among others, would be “curious.” However, she is not the titular girl with curious hair. Instead, this is how Wallace’s narrator, deigned Sick Puppy by his punk-rock friends, refers to a small blonde girl at the classical concert they all attend. The story ends in the lobby as the girl’s father has been stopped by some of the punk-rockers, and Gimlet is running her hand through the girl’s curious hair as Mr. Wonderful, another punk-rocker, is doing something to the girl’s father with a shiny object. While exactly what is happening is never explicitly stated, the rest of the story makes it obvious that it is something malevolent. The final sentence of the story is, “And here’s what I did.”³⁵ The reader never learns what the narrator does, and Wallace gives the reader no specific hints, but the reader must assume the worst due to the narrator’s sociopathic tendencies. Here is another instance of Wallace denying the reader a punchline just like in “The Suffering Channel.” Whatever might have happened after this scene, which is built up to be a climax, the reader cannot know. In both instances, Wallace has constructed an absurd or potentially absurd situation, then refuses to deliver on the joke, and like any dark comedy, the lack of a punchline makes the entire premise all the darker in hindsight.

In a story about clashing cultures (rich, white youth and punk-rocker rebels), the joke about who has the curious hair must be interpreted as stemming from the subjective viewpoints of the punk-rockers, Sick Puppy, and the rest of the crowd attending the concert. When Gimlet remarks that the girl has curious hair, she is under the influence of copious amounts of LSD. Clearly, under her altered perception, the young girl’s hair might have appeared quite curious.

³⁴ Wallace, “Girl with Curious Hair” in *Girl with Curious Hair* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989), 59

³⁵ Wallace, *Ibid*, 74

The reader must ask if it would still appear curious to her without the influence of the drug. It would seem as though it would, since the narrator, who was not on LSD, continues to refer to her hair as “curious.” Wallace never explains why the girl’s hair is curious—there is no description of any remarkable characteristics other than it being blonde, which in itself is not particularly “curious.” The curiosity here must refer to its difference from the punk-rocker’s own strange looks. To an average reader, the girl’s hair is probably quite normal, and Gimlet’s hair would be curious, but Wallace positions the reader’s viewpoint with that of a sociopathic group. While it might be argued that there is no such thing as a “standard viewpoint,” it can be reasoned that such “non-standard viewpoints” can be used in situations in which the narrator experiences reality differently than the typical reader, such as mental disorders, non-human consciousnesses, and so on. This is Wallace’s absurdism at play. While intuitively the reader judges the group of punk-rockers as non-normal, they are quite normal to themselves. Wallace is interested in the various sub-cultural groups that emerge from American culture, whether this be rich white youths or heavily drugged punk-rockers or simply the average concert attendees. There is no “normal” in this story, because normality is subjective with regard to group experience.

Wallace’s absurdism in this story critiques normality as subjective. In a culture with such a plethora of distinct sub-cultures, who can say what is the norm and what is a fringe-case?

As Lionel Trilling (1905-1975) said in his 1969-1970 lectures, later collected into *Sincerity and Authenticity*, “the personal self to which the American would wish to be true is not the private, solid, intractable self of the Englishman.”³⁶ In this instance, Trilling is discussing a tendency towards sincerity in Americans which is different from sincerities among other nations.

³⁶ Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 113

To Trilling, the American is sincere with respect to the perceived opinions of the public. This seems to be the kind of sincerity present in “Girl with Curious Hair.” The narrator and Gimlet are not insincere when they refer to the girl’s hair as curious—they genuinely believe it to be a curiosity. They are able to be sincere because they perceive their own public opinion as one that identifies the girl’s quite average hair as curious, while hair such as Gimlet’s is quite normal. In Adam Kelley’s essay, “Dialectic of Sincerity: Lionel Trilling and David Foster Wallace,” he argues that Wallace uses this new, socially aware sincerity: “In place of this understanding [of sincerity] is the embrace of a range of learned behaviors that connect one to one’s community, and the adoption of a new set of values that can be held sincerely without that sincerity presuming the rejection of communal and institutional influence in order to maintain oneself as authentic and apart.”³⁷ An example of this in “Girl with Curious Hair” can be seen through self-affirming titles like “punk-rockers” and “young republicans.” When one identifies with groups such as these, they also identify with certain beliefs of the groups, like what qualifies hair as curious. The individuals in these groups can be seen as both sincere *and* punk-rockers or young republicans, or as sincere *and* as an average nondescript concert-goer with his daughter. With the acceptance of normality-as-subjective comes the truth of sincerity-as-subjective.

Watching Watching and Boring the Reader

The subjectivity-as-part-of-mass-culture discussed above is part of what Wallace is talking about in “E Unibus Pluram” while discussing Don DeLillo’s 1985 novel *White Noise*: “Murray, by watching and analyzing, would try to figure out the how and whys of giving in to

³⁷ Kelley, “Dialectic of Sincerity: Lionel Trilling and David Foster Wallace,” Post 45 (October 2014)

collective visions of mass images that have themselves become mass images only because they've become the objects of collective vision.”³⁸ Wallace was incredibly interested in the double-voyeurism of watching watching. By watching those who are watching, one becomes a part of the layered act of watching as well. The act of watching watching contributes to the culture as much as the direct observer does. In an era of mass media, whether the televisual culture of DeLillo and Wallace or the contemporary internet culture, one must contest with what the media is showing, the media itself, and the other individuals who watch the media. But if one is watching the watchers, they themselves become a part of the trend, and this can theoretically continue ad infinitum.

The specific moment in *White Noise* Wallace discusses in “E Unibus Pluram” comes early in DeLillo’s novel. In this scene, Jack and his friend Murray have driven out to the most photographed barn in America. Murray, a professor obsessed with media, pop culture and modernity, has this to say about watching the tourists photograph the barn, ““Being here is a kind of spiritual surrender. We see only what the others see. The thousands who were here in the past, those who will come in the future. We’ve agreed to be part of a collective perception. This literally colors our vision. A religious experience in a way, like all tourism.””³⁹ DeLillo, throughout all of *White Noise*, investigates the relationship between the individual, the family, and mass media. The most photographed barn in America is a kind of metonym for the consumption of mass media as such—people watch it because it is watched, and because it is watched more people will watch it. Murray refers to the experience as a “spiritual surrender” and

³⁸ Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram”, p. 49

³⁹ DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 12

a “religious experience.” The religious references most likely serve to emphasize the way being part of a collective vision makes one feel spiritually aligned and included. Wallace notes, in “E Unibus Pluram” again, that,

Those of us over 21 can remember all those interchangeable old commercials featuring groups of pretty people in some ecstatic context, all having just way more fun than anybody has a license to have, and all united as Happy Group by the conspicuous fact that they’re holding a certain bottle of pop or brand of snacks — the blatant appeal here is that the relevant product can help [the viewer] belong.⁴⁰

But, as both Wallace and DeLillo demonstrate, it adds just as much confusion and obscurity.

Throughout *White Noise*, confusion and misinformation are constantly being discussed and spread. In the novel, a highly toxic material is released into the air by a crashed train car.

Immediately, misinformation is conveyed through the radio. Symptoms of exposure to the material are constantly being updated, and improbable rumors make their way around the townsfolk. By the end of the book’s chapters about the toxic event, a man holding a tiny television is seen walking around, preaching about the low amounts of media coverage of the incident, saying,

“Shouldn’t the streets be crawling with cameramen and soundmen and reporters? [...] Do they have to have two hundred dead, rare disaster footage, before they come flocking to a given site in their helicopters and network limos? What exactly has to happen before they stick microphones in our faces and hound us to the doorsteps of our homes, camping out on our lawns, creating the usual media circus? Haven’t we earned the right to despise their idiot questions?”⁴¹

The television preacher complains about the lack of media coverage, but not for any reason other than the denial of a personal satisfaction for him and his town. This personal satisfaction is the

⁴⁰ Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram,” in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1997), 55

⁴¹ DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York: Penguin Books), 162

ability to be annoyed with media coverage. In the preacher's mind, all the suffering caused by the toxic event was for nothing if there is no media coverage. Where is the town's fifteen minutes of fame? In Wallace's words, "DeLillo exposed image, signal, data, and tech as agents of spiritual chaos and not social order."⁴² The television preacher is not lamenting the lack of accurate and reliable information being spread around, but instead laments that he and his town are being ignored.

In "E Unibus Pluram," Wallace speaks at length about irony, which he identifies as the main critical power of postmodern fiction in reaction to a televisual culture. He says, "It's not one bit accidental that postmodern fiction aimed its ironic crosshairs at the banal, the naïve, the sentimental and simplistic and conservative, for these qualities were just what '60s TV seemed to celebrate as distinctively American."⁴³ Wallace viewed irony as the only applicable response to the television culture because of television's already self-referential aesthetic (he identifies commercials specifically as masterful self-referencers). he claims that irony is a special type of rebellion for postmodern fiction—it pointed to the problems of a televisual culture while being able to live within that very same culture. To return to the metaphor of watching barn watchers watching the most watched barn in America, irony is capable of existing within the string of watchers while also critiquing them by being aware of its position as a watcher and being self-deprecating. Irony does not profess to transcend the culture it stems from, but it does not celebrate that culture, either. However, as Wallace later says, "Irony, entertaining as it is, serves an almost exclusively negative function. It's cynical and destructive, a ground-clearing. Surely

⁴² Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1997), 66

⁴³ Wallace, *Ibid*, 66

this is the way our postmodern fathers saw it. But irony's singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisy it debunks."⁴⁴ To Wallace, postmodernist irony has overstayed its welcome. It has critiqued society and culture, but then what? It becomes a tyranny that is resistant to critique itself because it doesn't actually say anything. Still, Wallace is a gifted ironist whose use of the literary tactic rivals that of the "postmodern fathers."

One of Wallace's most direct critiques of Postmodernism's ironic response to television culture is in his short story, "Mister Squishy." (2000, *Oblivion*) This story is, frankly, dense and oppressive with technical jargon, seemingly endless sentences and paragraphs, and even bits of math and chemistry. By the end of this story the reader feels genuinely exhausted. This writing practice does not make the story particularly enjoyable, but the boringness is what makes the story genius. In "Mister Squishy", a Market Research team is selling a new type of soft confection called *felonies!* For a bulk of the story, Schmidt, a by-all-means average middle-aged man, is keeping his specific Focus Group busy and bored in a post-sugar rush low (*felonies!* apparently being extremely sugary) with a speech of almost complete irrelevance. He goes into the minutia of marketing and manufacturing, so much so that the reader cannot always tell where Wallace is going on a tangent and where Schmidt is digressing, due mostly to the complete lack of actual dialogue. Members of the Focus Group are literally falling asleep by this point. A single sentence in the story reads as follows:

Meaning, in other words, without anyone once ever saying it outright, that Team Δy's real function was to present the Reesemeyer Shannon Belt test data that R.S.B. could then turn around and present to Client as confirming the soundness of the very OCC that R.S.B. had already billed Client in the millions for and couldn't turn back from even if the actual test data turned out to be resoundingly grim or unpromising, which it was

⁴⁴ Wallace, *Ibid*, 67

Team Δy's unspoken real job to make sure never happened, a job that Team Δy accomplished simply by targeting so many different focus groups and foci and by varying the format and context of the tests so baroquely and by facilitating the different TFGs in so many different modalities that in the end it was child's play to selectively weight and rearrange the data in pretty much any whatever way R.S.B.'s MROP division wanted, and so in reality Team Δy's function was not to provide information or even a statistical approximation of information but rather its entropic reverse, a cascade of random noise meant to so befuddle the firm and its Client that no one would feel anything but relief at the decision to proceed with an OCC which in the present case the Mister Squishy Company itself was already so heavily invested in that it couldn't possibly turn away from and would in fact have fired R.S.B. if its testing had indicated any substantive problems with, because Mister Squishy's parent company had very strict normative ratios for R&D marketing costs (= RDM) to production volume (= PV), ratios based on the Cobb-Douglas Function whereby $[RDM(x)/PV(x)]$ must, after all the pro forma hemming and hawing, be $0 < [RDM(x)/PV(x)] < 1$, a textbook formula which any first-term MBA student had to memorize in Management Stats, which was in fact where North American Soft Confections Inc.'s CEO had almost surely learned it, and nothing inside the man or at any of the four large US corporations he had helmed since taking his degree from Wharton in 1968 had changed; no no all that ever changed were the jargon and mechanisms and gilt rococo with which everyone in the whole huge blind grinding mechanism conspired to convince each other that they could figure out how to give the paying customer what they could prove he could be persuaded to believe he wanted, without anybody once every saying stop a second or pointing out the absurdity of calling what they were doing collecting information or ever even saying aloud — not even Team Δy's Field Researchers over drinks at Beyers' Market Pub on E. Ohio together on Fridays before going home alone to stare at the phone — what was going on or what it meant or what the simple truth was.⁴⁵

Wallace is deliberately boring the reader, or at least trying to performatively demonstrate the terrible world of market analysis. There are overabundances of adjectives, redundant repetitions, digressions of drinking stories, and after all this the simple truth is, "That it made no difference. None of it."⁴⁶ "Mister Squishy" becomes a kind of sardonic self-joke, simultaneously mocking

⁴⁵ Wallace, "Mister Squishy" in *Oblivion* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2004), 44-45

⁴⁶ Wallace, *Ibid*, 45

itself and the world of marketing analysis. However, the true joke comes from the twist at the end of the story, where the reader learns that the group of market analysts was actually being monitored to analyze the human impact of market analysis and field research, with the ultimate goal of “no more facilitators to muddy the waters by impacting the tests in all the infinite ephemeral unnoticeable infinite ways human beings always keep impacting each other and muddying the waters.”⁴⁷ The sentence quoted above is formatted so that it says basically the same thing read forwards or backwards, repeating the same phrases at equal distances from the midpoint where Wallace repeats the word “infinite.” This formatting demonstrates how the story is written from a very flawed human perspective, where the narrative itself muddies the waters of what could be a straightforward story by impacting itself through digressions and irrelevant facts. It reads almost like a wandering thought pattern, jumping from topic to topic haphazardly. This extreme wall-of-information prose style also allows Wallace to slide in specific details about the characters, hidden amongst the factual information. There is nothing remarkable or exceptional in any detail, but we learn of Schmidt’s father’s service in the military, past work experiences, passions, desires—the profoundly human details of life. This is a story of the infinite ways in which humans interact with each other, as well as the ways everything interacts with humans in a market driven society. Wallace’s long sentences, though full of digressions, are always relevant to what is being discussed. He weaves between human and marketing elements. This is where Wallace defines himself beyond the “postmodernist fathers” in how he utilizes irony. He emphasizes the human element of all things, delving often-times into the most private moments of character’s lives. There’s a sincerity here, and not just between reader and characters. Wallace

⁴⁷ Wallace, *Ibid*, 64

establishes the most authentic discourse with a reader he possibly can through his fiction, unafraid to write about basic human desires that are usually unsuitable for discussion, such as when he writes about Schmidt's masturbatory habits. In his metafiction, he takes this a step further, directly addressing the reader and even projecting a version of himself into the story.

Sincerity and Good Old Metafiction

Metafiction, as I will be using the term in this section, is fiction that is not only aware of its nature as fiction, but embraces, acknowledges, and utilizes this self-awareness. The quintessential piece of Wallace's metafiction would be "Good Old Neon," published in *Oblivion* (2004), but first appearing in Bard's own *Conjunctions* #37 (2001). In this story, the protagonist Neal believes that he is a fraud and cannot truly show himself to the world, always picking and choosing exactly what to say and how to act in order to be liked by others. By the end of the second paragraph, the narrator (whose name is so unimportant that it is only mentioned in a side-note to the reader; and I will refer to him as the narrator to better capture his role in the story) tells the reader directly that his life story, afraid he is boring us, will become much more interesting once we reach the part where he kills himself. The suicide promised in the story is constantly mentioned. It looms over the entirety of the text. In no uncertain terms, the narrator tells the reader that he has already killed himself and is merely recounting the events leading up to this suicide for the reader. Something that makes the piece metafictional is that it addresses the reader directly. The reader never needs to question why the "you" is used, which can be confirmed through the fact that the narrator changes to the present tense when addressing the reader and past tense when discussing events that happened in the past. It is not an epistolary

short story, intended for another character in which the reader is voyeuristically reading. The “you” is undeniably the reader. The other metafictional aspect of the story comes at the very end, when a character named “David Wallace,” a persona of David Foster Wallace, is introduced. The purpose of this character is to establish a direct link between reader and author, dissolving the boundaries between fiction and reality, but this will be discussed later.

In this story, Wallace investigates a common theme of his—empathy between people. This is most obvious considering the narrator considers himself a fraud. By “fraud,” he means, “Pretty much all I’ve ever done all the time is try to create a certain impression of me in other people.”⁴⁸ In school he studied hard for good grades and batted a mind-blowing .418 in high school baseball, all of which was done just to impress his classmates. Another example he gives is when he succeeded in feeling-up an apparently highly-desirable classmate, Angela Mead, in middle school. The fraudulence does not come from any lie he tells about this incident, but that he was, “not even really feeling the soft aliveness or whatever of her breast because all I was doing was thinking, ‘Now I’m the guy that Mead let get to second with her.’”⁴⁹ The hesitant qualifiers before feeling, “even really,” are not used to imply a hesitancy but a lack of reality perceived by the narrator. He did not feel anything in the moment, or feel whatever-it-is that ones supposed to feel (emotionally) when feeling someone else up (physically). He was only concerned with the public perception of the event, not the affective reality of his experience or Mead’s. The narrator expresses regret about not seeing her for the person she was, mentioning

⁴⁸ Wallace, “Good Old Neon” in *Oblivion* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2004), 418

⁴⁹ Wallace, *Ibid*, 418

that she was a totally respectable and kind girl who is now a veterinarian, a career Wallace uses to exemplify her empathy.

This all demonstrates the sincerity that the narrator believes he does not feel. He only sees people as means to an end; that end is, paradoxically, to be seen by people as an impressive person. The narrator is interested in paradoxes, naming a few and even coming up with one of his own, the fraudulence paradox: “The fraudulence paradox was that the more time and effort you put into trying to appear impressive or attractive to other people, the less impressive or attractive you felt inside — you were a fraud.”⁵⁰ Wallace was a hard-core grammarian, which can be seen in his essay titled “Authority and American Usage” (1991), in which he responds to a dictionary and goes on to discuss the state of the English language, conservatively arguing for stringent rules with regard to excluding dialects from academic writing. Because of this, he would know that the proper way to write the sentence quoted would be “the less impressive or attractive *one* felt inside.” The “you” here serves as a reminder that the narrator is directly addressing the reader, but also shows that the narrator is projecting his feelings onto the reader. The fraudulence paradox is primarily how he feels, but he knows that he is not the only one who feels this way, thus the “you” serves as both a self-reflective projection of his insecurities but also as a direct address to any reader who also feels the same. Paradoxically, the narrator transcends his fraudulence and directly empathizes with a fairly basic human plight via the fraudulence paradox — what do others think of me? The fraudulence paradox serves to show that the narrator’s perceived fraudulence is actually just an extreme concern with sincerity, or at the very least a concern with whether or not what he feels is sincerity.

⁵⁰ Wallace, *Ibid*, 423

That being said, the narrator is portrayed as a selfish and calculating person, not necessarily a “good” person who concerns himself with the feelings and well-being of others, only self-advancement. Despite this, the narrator is an empathetic character. In a recollection of his therapy sessions, the narrator recalls talking with an analyst and setting himself up for an obvious diagnosis. He tells the analyst that he feels he is a fraud and cannot open up to people, which he believes will be met with the analyst diagnosing that the ability to confess that he is a fraud shows that he is not a fraud after all. The narrator then goes on to delay revealing what the analyst actually says for eight whole pages, only to reveal, with disappointment, that the analyst said exactly what was predicted, “So it turned out I’d been right in predicting what his big logical insight was going to be. [...] inside I felt pretty bleak indeed, because now I knew that he was going to be just as pliable and credulous as everyone else.”⁵¹ Therapy was the last way the narrator tried to deal with his fraudulence before deciding to kill himself. This harkens back to concepts Wallace first experimented with in *The Broom of the System*, particularly the idea that people can never truly connect. The narrator’s perceived fraudulence is nothing more than a feeling that he can never express himself to people, despite an apparent ability to understand others deeply, shown through his extraordinary skill with manipulating others. This frustration is described as the same experience of death the narrator has been promising to unveil to the reader at the end of the story, only to have it revealed as,

The truth is you already know what it’s like. You already know the difference between the size and speed of everything that flashes through you and the tiny inadequate bit of it all you can ever let anyone know. As though inside you is this enormous room full of what seems like everything in the whole universe at one time or another and yet the only parts that get out have to somehow squeeze out through one of those tiny keyholes you

⁵¹ Wallace, *Ibid*, 428

see under the knob in older doors. As if we are all trying to see each other through these tiny keyholes.⁵²

This passage connects the ideas of death, empathy, and also the experience of simply being a sentient being. The narrator describes what it is like to think, a vast amount of information that language can never really convey from person to person. The paradox of conveying this dilemma through language is acknowledged in the story itself, but never solved. This paradox does seem insolvable, but that's precisely the beauty of it. Wallace acknowledges that this story, his entire body of literature, and even all of literature as a whole cannot ultimately share what is in another's mind. And yet Wallace still attempts to at least partially empathize with his readers, and attempts to let readers empathize with him. The only way for humans to convey their feelings is through language, but any language is never quite enough in the end. Language is chronological, in that words are conveyed one-after-another, and imprecise, while many thoughts and feelings can happen simultaneously and without words. It is like the reverse of platonic ideals. The platonic ideal is a theory that there are vague "ideals" for words. Think of what the word "tree" stands for. Theoretically one could add infinite adjectives to describe an exact tree, straying from what the ideal of the word "tree" means. But even if one were to describe a twenty-seven meter tall brown thick oak tree covered in decaying bark and lichen, there are infinitely more precise ways to describe the same tree. Wallace argues that this applies to thoughts and feelings as well—they are so vague and unique that one, even with, say, just for example, a thousand page behemoth of a book, could not precisely convey a feeling or a thought.

Earlier on in the story, the narrator briefly mentions that, "despite appearances this isn't even really about me. All I'm trying to do is sketch out one little part of what it was like before I

⁵² Wallace, *Ibid*, 448

died and why I at least thought I did it, so that you'll have at least some idea of why what happened afterward happened and why it had the impact it did on who this is really about.”⁵³

Many side characters are introduced throughout the text, including the analyst, the narrator's step-sister, various lovers the narrator has attempted to establish relationships with, teachers, et cetera. Once the reader reaches the actual suicide of the narrator, the suicide itself (performed via a car hurtled into an abutment at lethal speeds) is relegated to a footnote, ending with,

Not only your whole life but every single humanly conceivable way to describe and account for that life has time to flash like neon shaped into those connected cursive letters that businesses' signs and windows love so much to use through your mind all at once in the literally immeasurable instant between impact and death, just as you start forward to meet the wheel at a rate no seatbelt ever made could restrain — THE END⁵⁴

Again, the narrator is equating death and existence, using the idea that one's life flashes before their eyes in the instant before death, and stating that it is somehow similar to the vast amounts of information that pass through one's head due to the firing of billions of neurons every instant of existence. Wallace then goes on to end the story with “THE END” in all caps, and yet the story itself continues for another two pages. It is in these two pages that the who-this-is-really-about is revealed as David Wallace, a persona of the real-life-person David Foster Wallace.

David Wallace the character is not the same as David Foster Wallace the writer, evident through biographical differences like where the two went to high school. However, the David Wallace in the story is certainly a projection of the real Wallace into the story—why else would they share the same name? Of course this isn't enough to say it is part and parcel of Wallace the real live human person. Once the character Wallace is introduced, he is

⁵³ Wallace, *Ibid*, 427

⁵⁴ Wallace, *Ibid*, 499

Idly scanning class photos from his 1980 Aurora West H.S. yearbook and seeing my photo and trying through the tiny keyhole of himself, to imagine what all must have led up to my death in the fiery single-car accident he'd read about in 1991, like what sorts of pain or problems might have driven the guy to get in his electric blue Corvette and try to drive with all that OTC medication in his bloodstream [...].⁵⁵

The narrative voice shifts mid sentence here, changing from “my photo” and “my death” to “the guy.” Neal is no longer with us after this last “my death,” the narrative is now in David Wallace’s head. While it could be argued that the narrative was always in Wallace-the-character’s head, imaging the “pain or problems,” that is not the case here. If that were true, why did the second person also disappear? And for that matter why did the narrative voice switch from first person to third person? It’s more likely that the reader has jumped from Neal’s mind into David Foster Wallace-the-writer’s mind, directly writing about his persona and characters, which is why the second person disappeared. There is no need to address the reader anymore once the bounds of the story itself have blurred, leaving only the reader and David Foster Wallace looking at the same piece of writing.

The story itself is very aware that both Wallace-the-character and Neal are projections of Wallace-the-writer’s mind, similar to Lenore’s self-aware musings of whether she was only words, stories, in *The Broom of the System*. While Wallace-the-character is wondering what went on inside Neal’s head, the new narrator states, “with David Wallace also fully aware that the cliché that you can’t ever truly know what’s going on inside somebody else is hoary and insipid and yet at the same time trying very consciously to prohibit that awareness from mocking the attempt or sending the whole line of thought into the sort of inbent spiral that keeps you from

⁵⁵ Wallace, *Ibid*, 450

ever getting anywhere.”⁵⁶ Wallace here seems to be self-aware of the theme that runs throughout many of his works that deals with alterity and the impossibility of true and complete empathy, calling it “hoary and insipid”. Despite this acknowledgment, Wallace still attempts to think and write this story, regardless of the impossibility of the task. And yet, at the end, we find that, “The realer, more enduring and sentimental part of [Wallace] commanding that other part to be silent as if looking it levelly in the eye and saying, almost aloud, ‘Not another word.’”⁵⁷ This is a powerful note to end on, cutting Wallace’s thoughts short on the project of wondering what happened in Neal’s head before his suicide. Whether it is cut short because it cannot be done or because enough has already been said, or more likely a combination of both, it does not really matter. The story itself acknowledges the impossibility of the task, but just because it is impossible does not mean it is useless to think about.

If fiction allows Wallace to communicate his feelings or thoughts through his characters to his readers, even if only a tiny bit is squeezing out through the keyhole, his fiction has served its purpose. It is for this reason Wallace resists traditional irony so much in “E Unibus Pluram”—nothing is communicated between an author and a reader. Irony is a critical tool, but does not and cannot posit anything in and of itself. We can see through his other ironic fiction that Wallace is still interested in traditional irony, but he pairs it with more experimental writing practices, such as his metafiction, to say something actual directly to his readers. In “The Suffering Channel”, Wallace directly criticizes corporations with his irony, in “Girl with Curious Hair” and “Mister Squishy”, Wallace explores subjectivity and humanity via absurdism and irony, but in “Good Old

⁵⁶ Wallace, *Ibid*, 451

⁵⁷ Wallace, *Ibid*

Neon,” he leaves irony behind for a story that, in contrast, is much more real and authentic. His direct communication with the reader that he establishes at the end is his rallying cry; say something true and personal, and you will have said something good and worthwhile. *Infinite Jest* deals more with this navigation between trite irony and a need to sincerely communicate something.

Chapter 3:

The Infinite Jest Chapter:

Media, Addiction, Freedom, and Sincerity

Without a doubt, *Infinite Jest* (1996) is widely considered to be Wallace's magnum opus, slingshotting him into the eyes of the nation, garnering attention from *Rolling Stone* magazine and the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*. When contemporary readers think of Wallace, they often think of *Infinite Jest* first. This one-thousand seventy nine page book, almost one-hundred of which are notes and errata, makes any reader the David to its Goliath. Wallace's maximalist tendencies reach their peak within these pages, and the format of the book is borderline antagonistic to the reader, forcing them to continually flip to the back for notes, some of which are wholly useless and others of which contain genuinely important plot points. Two main themes can be distilled throughout the text, though the sheer volume means that, naturally, much must be ignored in this paper; the two themes are freedom and sincerity. The concept of freedom in America is an issue throughout the book, mostly discussed by a Quebecois terrorist and an American undercover agent. These discussions offer a unique perspective on Wallace's usual concern with humanity; what makes us free, and how free can we be said to be in an era of mass marketing and mass media? These discussions will be placed in communication with Isaiah Berlin's (1909-1997) essay *Two Concepts of Liberty*. Wallace's close look at sincerity in this novel revolves around his typical concern with alterity, communication, and empathy. However, he does not delve as much into the philosophical implications of these ideas like he does in *The Broom of the System*, *Girl with Curious Hair*, and *Oblivion*. Instead, he addresses what he

considers the remedy of failed communications and relationships—sincerity itself. Wallace looks specifically at parts of U.S. culture where he believes sincerity can be found, such as in organizations like Alcoholics Anonymous or institutions like therapy. In these sections, Wallace shows how he believes sincerity is something that can be learned, practiced, and found within oneself.

Freedom and Liberty in an Only Slightly Alternate America

The novel takes its name, *Infinite Jest*, from a fictional movie of the same name within the book. The movie is said to be so entertaining and pleasurable that any who watch it are content to rewatch it over and over again until they die. Wallace builds an alternate North America in *Infinite Jest* where Canada, Mexico, and the U.S. have coalesced into the Organization of North American Nations, or O.N.A.N. for short. A separatist Quebecois terrorist cell, the *Les Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents*, a group of wheelchair bound assassins, plan to acquire the movie and distribute it around America. One of their agents, Rémy Marathe, meets in secret with Steeply, an undercover agent of the O.N.A.N. Office of Unspecified Services, another invention of Wallace in his alternate America. In the conversation, Steeply questions the wheelchair assassin's motives in distributing the entertainment cartridge, which will, as a result, kill many Americans. Ultimately, the topic of freedom arises. Steeply says, "Now you will say how free are we if you dangle fatal fruit before us and we cannot help ourselves from temptation. And we say 'human' to you. We say that one cannot be human without freedom."⁵⁸ Steeply, and by extension Wallace, invokes biblical imagery here. The Infinite Jest cartridge is compared to

⁵⁸ Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1996), 320

the fruit of knowledge, calling it the fatal fruit, that God commands Adam and Eve not to eat in Genesis, a story familiar to everyone who studies western anything. Wallace does not spend much time, however, pondering this comparison. He jumps over any extended philosophical debate about this comparison and freedom simply by stating that to be human is to be free, and to Steeply, true freedom includes the freedom to fall. Marathe counters this argument by invoking multiple types of freedom, stating,

“Always with you this freedom! For your walled-up country, always to shout ‘Freedom! Freedom!’ as if it were obvious to all people what it wants to mean, this word. But look: it is not so simple as that. Your freedom is the freedom-*from*: no one tells your precious U.S.A. selves what they must do. It is this meaning only, this freedom from constraint and forced duress. [...] But what of the freedom-*to*? Not just free-*from*. Not all compulsion comes from without. You pretend you do not see this. What of freedom-*to*. How for the person to freely choose? How to choose any but a child’s greedy choices if there is no loving-filled father to guide, inform, teach the person how to choose? How is there freedom to choose if one does not learn how to choose?”⁵⁹

Marathe separates freedom into two types: freedom-from and freedom-to. These two types of freedom can be compared to the two types of liberty that Isaiah Berlin argues for in his essay “Two Concepts of Liberty.” The difference between the two types of liberty can be simplified as such; freedom-from, which Berlin calls negative liberty, is to be free from coercion by other human beings.⁶⁰ Freedom-to, called positive liberty, is to be free to lead a certain form of life.⁶¹ Negative liberty deals more with personal freedom while positive liberty deals more with governmental freedom, or as Berlin puts it, “The answer to the question ‘Who governs me?’ is logically distinct from the question ‘How far does government interfere with me?’ It is in this

⁵⁹ Wallace, *Ibid* (all italics in original)

⁶⁰ Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 16

⁶¹ Berlin, *Ibid*, 22

difference that the great contrast between the two concepts of negative and positive liberty, in the end, consists.”⁶² The distinction comes from a social effort to preserve as much personal freedom, freedom-from, as possible without allowing for others to infringe upon that freedom, thus a freedom-to do something, but not anything. For example, one is not free-to become a burglar because that would deny others of their freedom-from being burgled.

Applying Berlin’s schema to Marathe’s argument for positive liberty, one can see the problem with Steeply’s version of negative liberty. Are the American citizens really free if the government denies them the choice to entertain themselves to death? In Marathe’s analogy about the father, the O.N.A.N. government would be the parent who does not let their child leave the house because they might be tempted to get into trouble, or perhaps the God who preemptively removes the tree of knowledge from the garden of Eden. Marathe argues that the O.N.A.N. government must be more authoritarian and dogmatic, while Steeply argues for an O.N.A.N. that interferes with its citizens lives as little as possible—freedom-to live a typical American life or freedom-from the compulsion of a government forcing one to live a typical American life. Steeply says, “U.S. citizens aren’t presumed by us to be children, to paternalistically do their thinking and choosing for them. Human beings are not children.”⁶³ Marathe aims to take Steeply’s argument and expose the hypocrisy of American freedom that really is no better than primal chaos, as his positive liberty sees it. It should be mentioned that the O.N.A.N. was formed by what used to be the U.S. government, and as such Wallace uses the O.N.A.N. government to

⁶² Berlin, *Ibid*

⁶³ Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1996), 321

parody the real-world U.S. as opposed to any other governments, even though Canada and Mexico are in the O.N.A.N.

Berlin, in his discussion of the often subtle distinction between positive and negative liberty, brings up their historically divergent developments. While one would love to be a slave to no man, Berlin argues, we can still be slaves to our desires; he separates the self into two parts—a ‘higher nature’ and a ‘lower nature.’ The ‘higher nature’ is, “identified with reason, [...] with the self which calculates and aims at what will satisfy it in the long run, with my ‘real’, or ‘ideal’, or ‘autonomous’ self.”⁶⁴ This is contrasted with the ‘lower nature,’ which Berlin represents as the passionate and more feral nature of man. A proponent of positive liberty, like Marathe, would argue that a society must impose a will, perhaps in the form of a law, upon individual members for the greater good. As Berlin puts it, “it is possible, and at times justifiable, to coerce men in the name of some goal (let us say, justice or public health) which [a population] would, if they were more enlightened, themselves pursue, but do not, because they are blind or ignorant or corrupt.”⁶⁵ Whatever the belief behind positive liberty, whether it is benevolent or not, Berlin points out that the underlying ideology can be used to justify tyranny—to impose a single will upon a society because individual members of a society do not know what is best for them. Marathe, and by extension the entirety of the *Les Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents*, aim to prove that a government needs to impose a will upon the people by releasing the Infinite Jest cartridge, thus making it necessary for the government to suppress this media in order to save its citizens.

⁶⁴ Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty”, p. 23

⁶⁵ Berlin, *Ibid*, 24

The Positive Side of Positive Liberty

Positive liberty, despite being the ideology of the Quebecois insurgent antagonists, is not wholly villainized by Wallace. The narrative in *Infinite Jest* periodically returns to Boston metro Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, following specifically the thoughts of Don Gately, a huge ex-burglar and recovering oral narcotics user. Gately constantly ponders, though he does not necessarily question, the teachings of Alcoholics Anonymous. In one section, Gately is thinking about the fact that there are no Hows or Whys in AA ideology, only repetition,

And you kept getting down on your big knees every morning and night asking for help from a sky that seems a burnished shield against all who would ask aid of it — how can you pray to a ‘God’ you believe only morons believe in, still? — but the old guys say it doesn’t yet matter what you believe or don’t believe, Just Do It they say, and like a shock-trained organism without any kind of human will you do exactly like you’re told [...] and now if the older guys say Jump you ask them to hold their hand at the desired height, and now they’ve got you, and you’re free.⁶⁶

Gately’s description of freedom might seem odd without the distinction of positive and negative liberty. What he describes is wholly positive liberty, a freedom-to live a sober life under the restricting constraints of AA ideology. This unquestioning loyalty to and trust in the experienced members of the program seems antithetical to ideas of freedom, and yet Wallace frames it as a good thing for the addicts. While the experience of recovery is often times portrayed as strange and abnormal, such as in his descriptions of Ennet halfway house residents, Wallace never depicts AA as a harmful thing. This might have to do with Wallace’s inclusion of a subtle negative liberty also present in the Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, brought up when Gately recalls a realization he had at AA once, which is that a member cannot be kicked out,

⁶⁶ Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1996), 351

You're In if you say you're In. Nobody can get kicked out, not for any reason. Which means you can say *anything* in here. [...] Four-year White Flagger Glenn K.'s personally chosen Higher Power is *Satan*, for fuck's sake. Granted, nobody in White Flag much likes Glenn K., and the thing with the hooded cape and makeup and the candelabrum he carries around draws some mutters, but Glenn K is a member for exactly as long as he cares to Hang In.⁶⁷

Wallace points out the negative liberty in Alcoholics Anonymous: no one will stop you from doing anything. This is total freedom-from, within reason, meaning no laws are being broken, but because laws are outside of the jurisdiction of AA in any case, there is total freedom-from within the scope of what AA can provide. Glenn K., a side character whose biggest moment in the novel is in the quote above, is an excellent example of the extent of negative liberty in AA. He can speak and act however he wants because he is free to do so, but others are also free to mutter about him as long as they do not stop him from behaving how he wishes. Wallace seems to hold this kind of a voluntary positive liberty, a social order that rewards those who submit their will in exchange for their own greater good, such as an alcoholic submitting his freedom to drink in exchange for a healthier life, in high esteem. The main reason Wallace lauds voluntary positive liberty while condemning total social positive liberty is because of its voluntary aspect. This seems to address Berlin's problem with positive liberty, which is that it can also be used to justify tyranny. If a tyranny can be freely entered and left, the tyranny must be for one's own good, otherwise subjects of the tyranny would leave or not join at all. Berlin admits that, in certain situations, a Tyranny by a benevolent dictator could be more free than a democracy ruled by harmful leaders, and while Alcoholics Anonymous certainly isn't tyrannical, it does put

⁶⁷ Wallace, *Ibid*, 352

constraints on personal freedoms. However, there are still many aspects of personal freedom in AA, which is often sacrificed in a heavy-positive-liberty society, according to Berlin.

If the extreme of positive liberty is tyranny, the extreme of negative liberty is anarchy. To be individually free from any coercion, one must live outside of law and society, as well as be strong (physically, mentally, spiritually) enough to resist any external coercion. Of course, this is not what Steeply, the undercover American, advocates for in his defense of negative liberty. When Marathe, the Quebecois assassin, asks what keeps the American's negative liberty from becoming utter lawless chaos, using a basic example of two individuals each wanting the same single serving of soup, Steeply replies, "Because a certain basic amount of respect for the wishes of other people is required, is in my interest, in order to preserve a community where my own wishes and interests are respected. OK? My total and overall happiness is maximized by respecting your individual sanctity and not simply kicking you in the knee and running off with the soup."⁶⁸ Steeply's defense of negative liberty relies upon an almost medieval code of chivalry and honor. In this ideal America, overall happiness and social order rely upon the individual to maintain, not the government.

Media, Addiction, and Sincerity Once Again

Wallace, after the long conversation between Marathe and Steeply, ends up siding with positive liberty. Marathe counters Steeply's defense with the idea of the Infinite Jest movie, "Why make a simple Entertainment, no matter how seducing its pleasures, a *samizdat* and forbidden in the first place, if you do not fear so many U.S.A.s cannot make the enlightened

⁶⁸ Wallace, *Ibid*, 426

choice?”⁶⁹ By enlightened choice, Marathe means the choice that is the best balance of short- and long-term goals.⁷⁰ Essentially, Marathe’s argument revolves around a choice that no one can make intelligently—the fatal fruit that humanity cannot resist, even though it is not in their best interest to partake of it. This is where Wallace and Berlin differ in their interests with regard to liberty and freedom. Berlin is interested in governmental and philosophical issues, while Wallace is interested in personal freedom and its relationship to media and addiction—external forces that can potentially contest one’s free will. Media and addiction are such problems to Wallace because of the fact that they can rob people of the ability to make proper or informed choices—they are tyrannical by nature.

Towards the center of the novel, Wallace finally provides the reader with background information on his alternate America and how it became the way it is. There is no easy summary, as it relies upon detailed exegesis not entirely dissimilar to that used in “Mister Squishy.” In short, cable options were raised from one-hundred to five-hundred, advertising rates dropped, and an obscure marketing company began making commercials so disgusting and uncomfortable that they succeeded in selling products based on self-consciousness of customers. However, the commercials were also so disturbing that they caused viewership to drop, and eventually all television was replaced with the commercial-less InterLace Network, which can probably be described as Netflix, Hulu, HBO, and Youtube all combined—unlimited, uninterrupted, and freely chosen media. This death of advertising also led to the subsidization of years that *Infinite*

⁶⁹ Wallace, *Ibid*, 430

⁷⁰ Wallace, *Ibid*, 429

Jest uses rather than actual time, such as Year of the Whopper and Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment.

This information is given to the reader from a paper written by Enfield Tennis Academy student Hal Incandenza.⁷¹ In a real-world essay about television, “E Unibus Pluram,” Wallace states, “This tension in the Audience between what we do want and what we think we ought to want has been television’s breath and bread. TV’s self-mocking invitation to itself as indulgence, transgression, a glorious “giving in” (again, not exactly foreign to addictive cycles) is one of two ingenious ways it’s consolidating its six hour hold on my generation’s cojones. The other is postmodern irony.”⁷² Postmodern irony already has been discussed in the previous chapter. This is interesting when juxtaposed with a line Hal gives in his essay, “The American Council of Disseminators of Cable was attacking the [Big Four Networks] right at the ideological root, the psychic matrix where viewers had been conditioned (conditioned, rather deliciously, by the Big Four Networks and their advertisers themselves, Hal notes) to associate the Freedom to Choose and the Right to Be Entertained with all that was U.S. and true.”⁷³ Wallace talks of television in both *Infinite Jest* and “E Unibus Pluram” like an enslaver of the subconscious, or a tyrant. In Wallace’s America, media is literally enslaving people, through *Infinite Jest*, and taking away their freedom of choice. However, Wallace has never been one to vilify media like a luddite, so it is unlikely that his point is so simple as television is evil and enslaving the minds of generations. Instead, phrases such as “what we do want and what we think we ought to want” and “The

⁷¹ Who, by the way, is debatably the main character of the novel.

⁷² Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram,” in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1997), 41

⁷³ Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1996), 412

Freedom to Choose and the Right to Be Entertained” should be focused on. Wallace is more interested in how media shapes freedom and choices. He warns of the potential dangers of television without condemning media as whole, advocating for personal awareness and, if that fails, positive liberty-like control.

Wallace inundates his world with non-broadcast ads following the wake of the rise of InterLace. Suddenly all forms of transportation are covered, billboards have multiplied, commercial airliners are flying banners, and, “Smith and Lundine went so far as to get Ford to start painting little domestic-product come-ons on their new lines’ side panels, an idea that fizzled as U.S. customers in Nike T-shirts and Marlboro caps perversely refused to invest in ‘cars that sold out.’”⁷⁴ Wallace brings in ideas of personal authenticity here, calling hypocrites wearing advertisements “perverse” in their rejection of ads on cars. In “Dialectic of Sincerity,” Adam Kelley notes, “In the technocapitalist world of hyper-entertainment presented in *Infinite Jest* as a near-future version of the American present, liberal freedom has irretrievably morphed into a libertarianism that leaves individuals isolated but increasingly without sovereignty over themselves.”⁷⁵ Wallace sees this lack of personal sovereignty as stemming from corporations in this instance, though his example of ads-as-fashion could be directly applied to the real world, not just his “technocapitalist,” semi-fictional society. As Wallace says in “E Unibus Pluram,”

The fact is that TV’s re-use of postmodern cool has actually evolved as an inspired solution to the keep-Joe-at-once-alienated-from-and-part-of-the-million-eyed-crowd problem. The solution entailed a gradual shift from oversincerity to a kind of bad-boy irreverence in the Big Face that TV shows us. This in turn reflected a wider shift in U.S. perceptions of how art was supposed to work, a transition from art’s being a creative

⁷⁴ Wallace, *Ibid*, 418

⁷⁵ Kelley, “Dialectic of Sincerity: Lionel Trilling and David Foster Wallace,” *Post* 45 (October 2014)

instantiation of real values to art's being a creative rejection of bogus values. And this wider shift, in its turn, paralleled both the development of the postmodern aesthetic and some deep and serious changes in how Americans chose to view concepts like authority, sincerity, and passion in terms of our willingness to be pleased.⁷⁶

Some concepts in this quote were discussed at length in the previous chapter, but others can be delved into here. The shift Wallace saw from a sincere positing of values to mostly ironic critiques is the motivation behind much of *Infinite Jest*. Authority, sincerity, and passion become warped into terms of pleasure. Wallace sees that, in an insincere world that places perceived pleasure over actual sincerity, the sound-bite culture of clichés in his *Alcoholics Anonymous* becomes all encompassing. However, Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly note, in their 2011 book *All Things Shining*, that Wallace believes in a sincerity that can be found in encouraging clichés. Citing Wallace's 2005 commencement speech at Kenyon College, "This is Water", they argue, "The central premise of the commencement speech, like much of Wallace's later work, is that simple, apparently uninteresting clichés often hide a deeper truth. [...]

Wallace's principle goals as a writer, it might be said, is to resuscitate the truths living within these clichés, to revivify them and make them vitally relevant again."⁷⁷

I previously quoted Wallace comparing an indulgence in TV with addiction cycles, and that is because Wallace observes the addicting power of television. In *Infinite Jest*, addiction is one of the most prominent themes. Wallace continually cycles between his characters discussing the *Infinite Jest* movie and the addicts trying to get clean at Ennet house. Often times both scenes appear in the same sections. Wallace draws parallels between addiction to substances and

⁷⁶ Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1997), 59

⁷⁷ Dreyfus, Hubert, and Sean Dorrance Kelly. "David Foster Wallace's Nihilism" In *All Things Shining* (New York: Free Press), 37

addiction to media, not because he views them as equally damaging, but because he views the solution to both as the same. In one section, the reader follows Don Gately at a large AA meeting, thinking about what makes a good speaker good and a bad speaker bad:

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 a 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 [...]. This doesn't mean you can't pay empty or hypocritical lip-service, however. Paradoxically enough. The desperate, newly sober White Flaggers are always encourages to invoke and pay empty lip-service to slogans they don't yet understand or believe — e.g. 'Easy Does It!' and 'Turn It Over!' and 'One Day At a Time!' It's called 'Fake It Till You Make It,' itself an oft-invoked slogan.⁷⁸

Wallace's characters are encouraged to repeat these sound-bites until the deeper meaning in them comes to the surface. And, again, Wallace is on the offensive against irony. The phrase "sincerity with an ulterior motive" is something Wallace borrows from Lewis Hyde's "Alcohol and Poetry: John Berryman and the Booze Talking," cited in "E Unibus Pluram." Wallace's solution to a world oversaturated by addiction, media, and other potentially freedom-infringing external forces is total, complete sincerity. The other side of the sincerity that Wallace pushes for is empathy, or more specifically an empathetic ability to receive other's sincerity. In my discussion of *the Broom of the System*, I concluded that Wallace finds total empathy impossible, but he pushes for an attempt at as much empathy as possible. We can understand each other, but only within a limited scope. During one recovering addict's speech during an Alcoholics Anonymous meetings in *Infinite Jest*, Gately notes that, "Everybody in the audience is aiming for total empathy with

⁷⁸ Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1996), 369

the speaker; that way they'll be able to receive the AA message he's here to carry."⁷⁹ AA becomes a kind of metaphor for general communication in *Infinite Jest*. The speaker must be both authentic and sincere, and the audience must be empathetic and ready to listen.

Another of Wallace's sections about gaining sincerity by going through the insincere motions comes from a moment between Hal and his several-years-older brother, Orin, who has been distant from the family since their father, James O. Incandenza, committed suicide via sticking his head in a microwave. Orin calls his younger brother in order to talk about their father because, as a professional punter, he is being interviewed about his family. Hal details his time in therapy after being the one to find their father's body. Apparently, Hal struggles the most with trying to figure out what the grief-therapist wanted, comedically, rather than actually struggling directly with his grief, so his response was to study up on grief therapy: "I went in and presented with textbook-perfect symptoms of denial, bargaining, anger, still more denial, depression. I listed my seven textbook choices and vacillated plausibly between and among them. I provided etymological data on the word *acceptance* all the way back to Wyclif and 14th century *langue-d'oc* French. This grief therapist was having none of it."⁸⁰ Wallace is echoing a sentiment he puts forth in "Good Old Neon," that being sincere is about more than just actions on the surface. Hal, being a kid who memorizes dictionaries, confronts his therapy in the same formulaic way he confronts everything else in life.

After discussing the problem with his school's resident guru, Lyle, he came to the conclusion that, "I'd been approaching the issue from the wrong side. I'd gone to the library and

⁷⁹ Wallace, *Ibid*, 345

⁸⁰ Wallace, *Ibid*, 253

acted like a *student* of grief. What I needed to chew through was the section for grief-professionals *themselves*.”⁸¹ The next time Hal went to therapy, he was ready. Instead of grieving, he, “presented with anger at the grief-therapist. [...] I called him a shithead. [...] [The therapist] got more and more pleased and excited as I angrily told him I flat out refused to feel iota-one of guilt of any kind. [...] that it just by-God was not my fault that —.”⁸² Here Hal pauses, apparently based on a section of grief-therapist-literature he had read that discusses abrupt pauses. Deep down, Hal felt guilty that his first reaction upon entering his house, in which his father had just microwaved his own head with explosive results, was that he thought something smelled delicious. Upon this confession, Hal broke down into tears at the therapy session, and, recounting it to his brother, says, “[The grief-therapist] was ecstatic. By the end I swear his side of the desk was a half a meter off the floor, at my grief-therapist-textbook breakdown into genuine affect and trauma and guilt and textbook earsplitting grief, then absolution.”⁸³ Here, Hal’s originally insincere recitation of what he thought the therapist wanted to hear turned into a genuinely sincere and absolving process, similar to how new AA members are told to repeat clichés until they become true. Again, Wallace advocates for finding a sincerity one may not even know is there. Hal seemed quite unaware of, or at least he was suppressing, what was actually bothering him, and it took him great difficulty to admit it to himself.

To Wallace, sincerity, though innately relating feelings into the external world, relies upon internal authenticity—in other words, the internal and the external must be congruous, or at least be approaching a congruity. When the inner and outer are in harmony, one can successfully

⁸¹ Wallace, *Ibid*, 254

⁸² Wallace, *Ibid*, 255

⁸³ Wallace, *Ibid*, 256

break down the barriers between people, only a little but as much as possible, and truly relate person-to-person. He sees this as the main problem of his generation—people would rather repeat clichés and over-indulge in media than actually relate their thoughts genuinely. Wallace’s concern is that Americans are losing true sincerity and empathy. He found a sincerity in unlikely places, such as behind the very clichés that hide true thought, and urged for people to find it. In this way, the nihilistic version Wallace saw of America could be redeemed; people could relate to and understand one another, and the world at large might become a little less lonely.

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