POST-POSTMODERN DIDACTICISM:

THE THEATER OF MORAL INSTRUCTION IN DAVID FOSTER WALLACE’S INFINITE JEST

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DAVID SPENCER

DR. PATRICK COLLIEN – ADVISOR

PROF. MARK NEELY – ADVISOR

BALL STATE UNIVERSITY

MUNCIE, INDIANA

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“If there are real values, and if those real values help sustain human life, then literature ought sometimes to mention them”

— John Gardner (On Moral Fiction, 24)

Can a return to morally responsible fiction salvage the authority of the contemporary novel? In the 21st century, the potential for a serious novel to have a measurable social impact seems intangible. Out of the ashes of postmodernist literature, a new brand of fiction is slowly starting to emerge with morally engaging writers such as Jonathan Franzen, Haruki Murakami, and the late David Foster Wallace making their mark. The current literary landscape is still heavily influenced, however, by postmodernists like Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo who still publish novels consistently, reminding us of their stature. Postmodernism is a slippery term for a movement that, in some ways, emphasized the futility of synthesizing objective truth from overwhelming amounts of subjective information. The formalist experiments which became prevalent in the post-1950s literature of Vladimir Nabokov, William Gaddis, Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, Donald Barthelme, and many others helped create new modes of criticism and led to new inquiries into the effects of mass media, technology, and postcolonial institutions. The idea of a novel following a hero through a conflict with a linear beginning, middle, and end became practically frivolous to a world recovering from a war that redefined conventional notions of morality, justice, and freedom. The rise of mass media and new entertainment technologies throughout the 20th century also coincided with more academic and experimental approaches to the novel with an emphasis on pop culture and hysterical realism. Fragmented narratives, paradoxical double-binds, and destabilizations of authors’ “authority” all raised pertinent
questions about the nature and function of literature in a world increasingly inundated with overwhelming streams of data and information. Conversely, mass-market film and television producers gradually improved their long-form storytelling abilities after World War II while improving their ability to sell these easily-digestible forms to the masses. Literature no longer existed as the only form of commercially reproducible entertainment with the rise of radio, TV, or film, and this realization presumably had a radical effect on artists and critics. Suddenly it became important to identify the type of questions only literature could raise that other forms could not.

The key distinction to make here is that one of the distinguishing characteristics of postmodern literature involved a question about the role of the author. Should it be an author’s responsibility to teach his or her readers how to live? Breaking away from the serious literature of the Modernist movement of the early 20th century (itself a shift away from “capital-r” Realism) boiled down to postmodernists de-emphasizing a writer’s duty to actually solve social conflicts or create a meaningful order out of a disordered existence. This movement away from the moral responsibility of the author arguably culminated in the 1970s with Thomas Pynchon’s frenzied novel *Gravity’s Rainbow* in 1973, sometimes described as the quintessential postmodern novel. This kind of brash, sensory-overloaded, self-indulgent style was notoriously evaluated and attacked by John Gardner in his 1978 critical essay *On Moral Fiction* and marked a turning point for postmodernism similar to how *Ulysses* set a new standard for the Modernist movement. Opponents of postmodernist philosophies commonly felt that critics were being seduced by style at the expense of substance. “The truth is that, in general at least, our serious fiction is not much good” concluded Gardner in his pivotal essay (57). He was not satisfied with the critically-acclaimed postmodernist innovators of his generation because he thought they had abandoned an
artist’s essential moral responsibility. His bold declaration that “serious fiction” of his time was “not much good” challenged the next generation of novelists to generate a serious retort to this kind of disparagement. By making the distinction between serious fiction and non-serious fiction, Gardner’s influential essay claimed that contemporary literature should not be taken seriously if it fails to instill moral order. He boldly concluded that this moral order was conspicuously absent in the majority of postmodernist art.

A diagnosis necessitated a remedy. If Gardner’s diagnosis was to be taken seriously, one could infer that a remedy should be predicated on a renaissance of morally responsible fiction. But what does “morally responsible fiction” look like exactly? Traditionally, it could be defined through classical examples from Virgil or Ovid, or in novels with ethical guidance such as Daniel Dafoe’s *Moll Flanders* or Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa*, but by the 19th century, the purchase of serious literature with an intention to instruct morality or change social behavior was beginning to fray within the academic community. Edgar Allen Poe, for example, described the notion that every work of fiction should contain a moral as “heresy” in “The Poetic Principle”. It was no longer profitable for a 20th century writer to confront serious social or political issues with obvious moral archetypes like the ones used by Charles Dickens. Traditional moral values encountered new challenges and applications in the 20th century that found their way into the minds of serious artists striving to remain relevant and useful to a global society in flux. A postmodern conception of morality is filtered through countless generations of didactic oral narratives, religious morality plays, and even fairy tales taught to children, encouraging the notion that every story inherently has a “moral.” Where do we learn our sense of right and wrong from? Did contemporary readers grown too cynical to believe works of literature could truly be morally instructive?
Storytelling functions in our societies to allow us to refine our definitions of right and wrong while communicating abstract ideas about the nature of the human condition. The distinction between right and wrong cannot be easily defined, however. After all, morality is hard to explain. The history of the novel was established on didactic texts that attempted to communicate universal truths through the prism of long-form storytelling. But artistic morality as its understood through a postmodern lens is exceedingly complex, and it presupposes a number of different beliefs about the function of art and the duty of an artist to uphold standards of decency. Banned books of the 20th century like *Ulysses* were considered by certain courts and critics to be “wholly devoid of moral content” for instance (Lincoln 402). The examination of the evolution of moral literature raises several revealing questions about the ambiguities of a concept such as morality, however. Who ultimately determines morality? Is morality always subjective? Is Gardner right in asserting that literature with a deliberate moral conscience is more worthy of scholarship than literature with no identifiable moral conscience? Answers to these questions are undoubtedly thorny, but it is important to recognize that the development of “morality” is an inescapable aspect of a human being’s expectation of storytelling. Stories with the ability to instruct morality will always touch those who seek guidance from outside themselves. If literature expresses more profound truths than other expressive mediums can, then stories communicate a kind of truth that other modes cannot. Intuitively, we may understand these kinds of abstract truths as morality, or our sense of how to make order out of the unsettling experience of disorder.

Returning to the initial question, what is missing from literature of the last few decades? Is it “wrong” for a work of literature to serve no moral function? Epistemologically, the objective conceptions of right and wrong are problematic. Where does one’s sense of right and
wrong come from? From Aristotle to Tolstoy, critics have passionately tried to nail down how art ought to function in a “morally” decent society. Should art merely captivate our sense of imagination, or should it inspire action and help modify behavior? During the 20th century, many traditional definitions of decency dissolved however, and artists played an important role in dramatizing and articulating these dissolutions (consider the depiction of sexuality in Joyce’s Ulysses, or the depiction of mind-altering drugs in William S. Burrough’s Naked Lunch).

Following in the footsteps of radical artists such as Nabokov and Barth, younger novelists started to experiment with using new-fangled literary forms to destabilize a reader’s sense of reliance on authority. Readers that engaged with these texts had to start making their own assessments about which pieces of information could be considered reliable and which ones could not, just as the notion of “media literacy” became important with the rise of mass media technology. Moral directives overlapped with clichéd advertising slogans and this apparent commodification of morality made it harder for serious readers to take didactic art seriously. As a result, John Gardner assessed the literary landscape of the late 1970s as being “[full of] dramatization without belief or else opinion untested by honest drama” (65). The emerging postmodern writers of the 1960s and 1970s may have believed that something was fundamentally wrong with contemporary culture, yet they were criticized for not articulating guiding ethical principles on which to base their drama and formal experiments. Gardner observed that though these kinds of writers were “quick to preach causes of one sort or another, and quick to believe slogans, including literary slogans, they’re short on moral fiber—the special moral fiber, part character, part knowledge, of the artist” (66). In Gardner’s view, socially responsible fiction should instruct the reader to create order out of a disordered existence; socially irresponsible fiction merely describes disorder without remedy. “J.P. Dunleavy, Ron
Sukenick, James Purdy, Stanley Elkin, John Barth, and a good many more of our writers concentrate, to a greater or lesser extent, on language for its own sake” Gardner argued (70-71). What kind of literature could arise out of these apparent weaknesses? While the early postmodernists were historically significant and formally influential, it is hard to argue that their work should be held in higher esteem than fiction that can synthesize both postmodernist structural experimentation and the belief that fiction should instruct us on how to live in a new world order of the 21st century. If a story is to have true artistic merit, Gardner stressed that the story must use linguistic tools only to point towards a moral center, that is to say an author must always use the tools of language address the question: “What is the best way for a human to live?”

“The modernists and early postmodernists—all the way from Mallarmé to Coover, I guess—broke most of the rules for us, but we tend to forget what they were forced to remember: the rule-breaking has got to be for the ‘sake’ of something”

—David Foster Wallace (“A Conversation with David Foster Wallace” 5)

One American writer who sought to address this question of “the best way to live” in his fiction was David Foster Wallace. Wallace is often considered a literary descendent of the postmodernists of the 1960s and 1970s, yet his legacy ought to center on his synthesis of postmodern structural experimentation united with Gardner’s call for producing morally responsible fiction. Though Wallace was influenced by postmodern novelists in his formative years and used some of their techniques in his writing, there exists a fundamental morality at the
heart of Wallace’s structural experiments which Gardner would have to commend. Wallace’s experimentation with sentence structure and story structure were not just demonstrations of “showing-off,” they were used encourage a self-conscious questioning of one’s reliance on artistic forms designed to be consumed passively. It’s easy to remain submissive while messages, moral or otherwise, are spoon-fed to you, similar to how easy it is to remain passive while a television transmits messages demanding little or no interpretive effort from the viewer. Texts that demand concentrated effort from the reader are most likely not as pleasurable to read as more easily-digestible texts, but Wallace was keenly aware of this risk. Through fostering this skeptical attitude towards the text, Wallace created a deliberate opportunity for his readers to then make a choice about how to construct meaning out of what is available. Sometimes described as a principal figure in a new chapter of postmodernism (or “post-postmodernism”), Wallace’s work confronts the lack of social empathy and moral responsibility Gardner observed in writers like William Gass, Thomas Pynchon, or William Gaddis—ironically all novelists that Wallace has professed a certain admiration towards. Wallace’s most remarkable achievement was in utilizing unconventional structural arrangements to actually bolster the effect of his self-conscious morality. His greatest example of this type of “morally responsible fiction” is his magnum opus, the 1,079 page Infinite Jest (1996), which could be described as a didactic story self-conscious skepticism from readers towards the objects they dedicate themselves. Wallace’s aspiration to write “morally passionate, passionately moral fiction,” as he phrased it in a 1996 essay on Dostoyevsky, allowed him to transcend these morally uncertain literary styles.

What are the possible solutions that Infinite Jest can offer an individual who feels trapped within him or herself in the information age? “I don’t think I’m talking about conventionally political or social action-type solutions,” Wallace explained to Larry McCaffery in a 1993
interview in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*. “That’s not what fiction’s about. Fiction’s about what it is to be a fucking human being.” Wallace consciously worked to cultivate this morally responsible attitude in *Infinite Jest* and in his later works. The real answer depends on how the reader chooses to participate in the construction of meaning. The idea of what a novel could do was challenged repeatedly in the 20th century, and *Infinite Jest* was heavily influenced in its scope and quantity of data by large texts such as *Ulysses* (1922), *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), William Gaddis’ *The Recognitions* (1955), John Barth’s *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960), and Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* (1962). Yet, Wallace’s book breaks away from the traditions of these postmodern novels by performing moral instruction. Like a confessional story told at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting (which is a recurring storytelling medium within *Infinite Jest*), Wallace’s book is carefully designed to communicate a message about how to live rightly in the contemporary world. The book avoids direct didacticism, instead experimenting with a presentational style that works to seduce the reader into trusting the text as a source of entertainment before subversively grounding the multi-layered plotlines with a self-conscious message.

The book centers on the various connections to the character James O. Incandenza, an avant-garde filmmaker and creator of the Enfield Tennis Academy. James’ middle son, Hal, features in many of the book’s scenes and is heavily interested and influenced by his father’s film career. Several other characters in the book articulate this dissatisfaction with previous artistic modes of the 20th century. Joelle van Dyne, described as the “prettiest girl of all time,” is the ex-girlfriend of the oldest Incandenza son, Orin, but she ends up being an artistic muse for Orin’s experimental film-making father. Her beauty is considered dangerous (she hosts a radio show under the alias “Madame Psychosis”). The narrator for Joelle’s sections reflects on Jim
Incandenza’s film work, mirroring Wallace’s own criticisms of traditional postmodern authors on page 740:

The man’s Work was amateurish, she’d seen…Was amateurish the right word? More like the work of a brilliant optician and technician who was an amateur at any kind of real communication. Technically gorgeous, the Work, with lighting and angles planned out to the frame. But oddly hollow, empty, no sense of dramatic 
towardness—no narrative movement toward a real story; no emotional movement toward an audience…Joelle thought them more like a very smart person conversing with himself…The lampoons of ‘inverted genres’: archly funny and sometimes insightful but with something provisional about them, like the finger-exercises of someone promising who refused to really sit down and play something to test that promise. Even as an undergrad Joelle’d been convinced that parodists were no better than camp-followers in ironic masks, satires usually the work of people with nothing new themselves to say.

These commentaries may very well be Wallace’s opinion of Barth, Pynchon, and Gaddis before him—writers who created complex texts written by a “very smart person conversing with himself.” Jim Incandenza taking the “risk of appearing amateurish” to make his work more emotional or human reflects Wallace’s own documented thoughts on the generation of postmodern novelists that came before him. Consider the following quote from Wallace’s essay “E Unibus Plurum: Television and U.S. Fiction,” from A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do
Again: “The new rebels might be the artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists” (p.81). In this vein, the messier or less refined a text appears, the more emotionally raw it will seem to a reader. Wallace appears to believe that this structural playfulness is overcompensating performed by authors with “nothing new themselves to say.” He plays with boundaries and form in *Infinite Jest* for a specific, self-conscious reason: to urge the reader to transcend the boundaries of self-obsession and addiction in favor of compassionate and selfless engagement with others. Surpassing the boundaries of self can be near-lethal, so a reader should first carefully contemplate why one would want to escape his or her own reality.

Why couldn’t Wallace just write a straight-forward novel of less than a thousand pages to more cogently express his moral ideas? Is the subversive approach entirely necessary? The answer depends on Wallace’s audience. Casual consumers of fiction may not be turned off by the presentation of a morally inspiring story. The values Wallace wants to articulate, however, could be misconstrued by media-savvy and academic audiences as insipid or overly sentimental, so Wallace deliberately conceals his message within a more blatant and frenzied spectacle of an information-overloaded plot set in a near-futuristic dystopia. The general readership for a book like *Infinite Jest* also presupposes that the type of person to most likely start, finish, and intellectually engage with *Infinite Jest* will also more than likely distrust a book with a didactic reputation. If the reader feels as if he or she has uncovered these virtues while having some tangible stake in the effort it took, then they will not only consider a particular principle more sensitively, but they will also potentially take ownership of the ideas contained in the principle. Stylistically complex material can convince a reader that one has come up with the “message” of the book on one’s own. Then those ideas may even start to influence the behavior of an affected
Wallace’s edifying purpose must be subversive if it is to be successful, especially considering the audience of “serious” readers he addresses himself to, demonstrated by the inclusive narrator of page 694 directly including the reader within the idea of “we (who are mostly not small children)” during a moralizing and speculative section late in the book.

Wallace’s moral ideas are contained within a story that on the surface seems to be meant to entertain, but carefully reveals itself to be instructing a morality over the course of 1,079 pages. In an interview with Michael Silverblatt in April of 1996, Wallace stated that one of his goals for Infinite Jest was to set up a conversation with the reader, “particularly a conversation about loneliness.” Wallace expanded by asserting that his number one goal was to write “a sad story about the state of America.” Thus, pain and loneliness are two reoccurring elements of the characters’ conflicts. Because of this, the driving conflict of the story is a primarily an internal conflict with the self—how can one overcome pain and loneliness without resorting to debilitating shortcuts like sports, drugs, or TV? Complementing this primary conflict, there is an external conflict that drives the plot development linking the interconnected relationships of the characters in the form of a film cartridge entitled “Infinite Jest.” This bootleg film is utilized by a group of Quebecois-separatist terrorists who begin disseminating the film to various unsuspecting media consumers. Any viewer of “Infinite Jest” becomes incapable of desiring anything other than the film in question once they’ve viewed it. Viewers desperately lose all sense of time and volition and risk becoming lost in a psychic void enslaved to either a never-ending loop of watching “Infinite Jest” or demanding more of “Infinite Jest.” “This I was saying: this is why choosing is everything” says one of Infinite Jest’s characters, Rémy Marathe, on page 318. An individual must “choose with great care in loving,” because if they choose
recklessly, Wallace’s text argues that they could end up trapped in an infinite loop within their own dislocated psyche.

*Infinite Jest* shifts between the central plotlines of two possible moral heroes: the sixteen-year-old, cannabis-addicted, tennis/lexical prodigy Hal Incandenza and then the square-headed, overweight, twenty-nine year old, recovering addict Don Gately. Along with an extensive number of supporting characters within the Enfield Tennis Academy and residents at the Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House (where Don Gately is a “live-in staffer,” after completing the recovery program), the common thread between all of the characters is their compulsive actions, which are rooted in methods to transcend the ever-present influences of pain and loneliness. Critics have noted that by “upending the notion of a traditional story line and by parodying both traditional and postmodernist conventions, Wallace takes the chance that his readers will abandon (in confusion, frustration, despair, disgust) his 1,079 page opus” (Cioffi 162). Like a teaching instructor who lectures for too long, the student may tune out (or drop out) altogether. But the structural disruptions of separation and return emphasize that the reader has a choice. A reader is not hooked into the book *Infinite Jest* in the same way that characters within the book are hooked to the film “Infinite Jest.” One is not powerless to stop or restart the story, but if one chooses to stick with the author until the end, he or she will be free to make an educated choice to carry meaning with them into their own lives.

Temporal instability reveals itself as a central theme of the book, as various manipulations and distortions of time permeate every main character’s experience of the world around them. When the reader experiences these instabilities, the reader is confronted with a choice of how to synthesize any leftover threads. An arrangement of a scene that disrupts a reader’s expectation of conflict resolution or linear plot progression is meant to make the reader
question their own synthesis of events and data. A frequent interstitial disruption is the all-night conversation that takes place between a Quebecois-French quadruple-agent (three hidden layers of allegiance) named Rémy Marathe and a cross-dressing government “Unspecified Services field operative” named Hugh M. Steeply. They discuss the philosophies behind pleasurable arts and compulsive spectation while trying to locate the original “Infinite Jest” master film cartridge. The story jumps around in time with every scene break, as Wallace deliberately disrupts the normal flow of time from the conventional linearity of beginning, middle, and end. Critic Omer Rosen observes that “Wallace's stylings are interruptions—Brechtian reminders that what you are reading is a construction, that behind it is a man, with his own point of view, who has obsessively constructed the world you are experiencing as whole.” Wallace’s presentational style (and the ridiculousness of Marathe and Steeply’s interactions) reminds the reader that what he or she’s reading was invented—the final responsibility of constructing a moral world is the reader’s (Max, “The Unfinished”). This “alienation effect,” or distancing of the reader from the verisimilitude of the story, serves to promote a more critical reading without just getting sucked into the thrust of the plotlines.

Wallace’s struggle to identify new artistic forms for expressing complicated 20th century moral responsibilities resonates with the work of German theorist and playwright Bertolt Brecht. Brecht’s legacy of experimentation in European theatre focused on education through entertainment and is a direct contrast to Expressionism and Stanislavsky’s Realism. Brecht wrote that Expressionism and Realism were incapable of exposing human nature and thus had no educational value. He theorized that his artistic forms were capable of provoking a moral revolution in society. Brecht’s objective was to persuade his audiences to ponder, with a sense of critical detachment, the moral dilemmas presented before them. Like Wallace, Brecht wanted
his art to educate its audience through entertainment. Brecht created moments in his plays where he used the technique of involving “missing time” within the story to encourage the audience to adopt a more critical attitude towards the episodic structure with a loosely-knit plot. Two generations later, Wallace utilized this same technique in *Infinite Jest*. Near the end of *Infinite Jest* where Hal’s stream-of-consciousness narration compares his own introverted father’s films to the work of Brecht by describing how his father “hadn’t wanted skilled or believable acting to get in the way of the abstract ideas and technical innovations in the cartridges, and this had always seemed to me more like Brecht than like Bresson” (*Infinite Jest*, 944). Brecht spent much of his career defending himself “against accusations that he was a Formalist, an artist obsessed with form at the expense of social content” (Mumford 50). This overlaps with the reputation of the creator of the “Infinite Jest” film cartridge James O. Incandenza in Wallace’s text—a filmmaker who developed the reputation for experimenting with form, using unconventional cinematography techniques and subversions of an audience’s traditional relationship to a film for the purpose of encouraging the “babble of crowds every member of which was the central and articulate protagonist of his own entertainment” (*JJ*, 836 [Hereafter, citations for *Infinite Jest* will be abbreviated “*IJ*”]). If a work of art can induce its consumer to examine their very own role in the relationship created between the artist and the consumer, then the work could thereby inspire the individual recipient of the ideas in the work to act upon those ideas. Brecht alleged that if an audience could be intellectually involved in his work, then critical distance was needed—the audience had to be alienated. Brecht called this *Verfremdungseffekt* (translated as “defamiliarization effect”, “distancing effect,” or “estrangement effect”). This would be brought about “in the form of a distanciation, the resituating of an event or character out of the customary circumstances, in order to let it be considered less self-evident” (Mueller 61). Brecht’s
experiments with new modes of theatre were not meant for effortless consumption, but were meant to appeal to reason and moral rightness. In Brecht’s mind, passive audiences would be disposable and meaningless audiences, thus rendering a work of art that’s only meant to entertain to be, on some level, pointless. Only an active and engaged audience can instill a work of art with meaning in this philosophy.

Brecht’s entire body of artistic theory is usually summed up in the phrase “epic theatre.” This term represents a mode of literature and performance that emphasizes “telling something about the past, as opposed to drama with its present-tense, dialogue-based showing, and the lyric genre that emphasizes its author’s subjective thoughts and feelings” (Mumford 76). Brecht started to develop his ideas about “epic theatre” after a period in the early part of the 20th century, where a more matter-of-fact method took hold in the European arts. This new style and structure of feeling was referred to as Neue Sachlichkeit (‘New Sobriety’ or ‘New Objectivity’). Parallels can be drawn between modernist and postmodernist authors’ responses to naturalism or didactic literature of the late-19th century. While experimental authors such as Joyce or Pynchon used their literary experiments to reveal underlying political pressures and document macro-level movements within their respective homelands (Ireland and America), Brecht, like Wallace, created artistic works that aimed to teach an individual how to make humanistic meaning out of 20th century complexity and chaos. Brecht’s ‘epic theatre’ “connoted a type of art that contains reportage as well as giving prominence to narration and an observing narrator figure who draws attention to the causes of events” (Mumford 77). Brecht wanted to create a modern form of theatre that would demonstrate the complexities of class war and in 1935 wrote:

The stage began to be instructive.
Oil, inflation, war, social struggles, the family, religion, wheat, the meat market, all became subjects for theatrical representation…And as the ‘background’ came to the front of the stage so people’s activity was subjected to criticism.

*(Brecht on Theatre, 71-72)*

By instructing his audiences to critically examine their own relationships to the art they consume, Brecht was subversively attempting to persuade audiences to critically examine their relationship to the larger social and political forces of society. Social and political change could then be inspired by artistic forms, thus validating the art’s purpose or meaning.

*Infinite Jest* aspires to be challenging to get through, but not so tedious that a reader will want to abandon the text. Wallace attempted to subversively persuade readers to critically examine their relationship to the text in a way so as to foster a moral conversation between author and reader. Such a narrative strategy also further draws attention to what scaffolding the “real author” is operating on. Wallace’s most noted structural gimmick has been his use of fictional endnotes. The 388 endnotes that follow *Infinite Jest*’s chronological ending further jar the reader into re-examining his or her relationship to the text. These endnotes are analogous to how Don Gately describes James O. Incandenza’s ghost appearing late in the story, appearing “oddly segmented and deliberate, as if more effort than necessary were going into them somehow” (*IJ*, 829). These endnotes have been strategically placed, though misinterpreted by critics such as David Letzler, who commented that some of the more playful and metafictional endnotes act in a way “to separate [the narrator’s] voice from that of any real or implied author” (Letzler 305). Letzler comments that the endnotes are just used “for storytelling or parodic
purposes, as may be seen in authors ranging from Swift and Pope to Borges and Joyce, most notably in Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*” (Letzler 305). But to reduce Wallace’s exhaustive details to being utilized merely for parody or to complicate storytelling undermines the moral objective inherent in the book. Wallace himself explained in correspondence with his editor Michael Pietsch that using the endnotes served the following purposes:

…to make the primary-text an easier read while at once 1) allowing a discursive, authorial intrusive style w/o Finneganizing the story, 2) mimic the information-flood and data-triage I expect’d be an even bigger part of US life 15 years hence. 3) have a lot more technical/medical verisimilitude 4) allow/make the reader go literally physically ‘back and forth’ in a way that perhaps cutely mimics some of the story’s thematic concerns.

(Max, “The Unfinished”)

The endnotes serve the purpose of allowing for a “discursive, authorial intrusive style” that can mirror the postmodern world that readers must live morally within. Wallace’s aversion to “Finneganizing” the text harkens back to his educational background of reading Joyce and the proto-postmodern *Finnegans Wake*, yet Wallace realizes how important it is to not completely alienate the reader from the text. Most readers, like Wallace, seem to dismiss *Finnegans Wake* as not worth the effort it takes. *Finnegans Wake* can potentially be fulfilling, but only if you have the devoted patience and energy to play along from start to finish. This notion resonates with a tennis philosophy analysis that a narrator makes within *Infinite Jest*, that it “all tends to get complicated, and probably not all that interesting—unless you play” (268). When one plays
along, a moral instruction should become apparent—the author will teach you if you let him. Structural gimmicks such as including a flood of endnotes work to teach the reader how to start making meaning out of seemingly disparate pieces of evidence. Wallace needs the reader to participate in his twisting narrative if it is to hold up under any kind of subjective scrutiny. The reader is being taught that they must consciously put some of the pieces together if they want satisfactory resolutions.

The form of *Infinite Jest* continually puts the reader in situations that emphasize the constructed and manufactured nature of the text itself. Wallace frequently structures passages to emphasize the circular relationship inherent within the experience of separation and return. The various narrators habitually create macro-level meta-commentaries which are strategically planted amidst exorbitant displays of micro-level descriptions. During a massively detailed sensory description of what’s happening on the street during the scuffle that leads to Don Gately being shot by the gang of Canadians, the narration reads: “The two guys chasing Lenz around the Montego are unarmed but look coldly determined in a way Gately recognizes. They’re not wearing coats either but they don’t look cold. All this appraisal’s taking only seconds; it only takes time to list it” (*IJ*, 609). The time it takes to list these micro-level details draws attention to the narrator’s limitations—a narrator can only describe what he takes the time to appraise and signify.

Wallace slowly builds the narrative up to a moment of high tension only to insert an aside, meta-commentary, a run-on sentence, or an intrusive endnote to separate the reader from the constructed literary moment. Wallace’s purpose in manipulating the reader in this way is not meant to be obnoxious or clever, but to be didactic. In a long extended phone call between Hal and his older brother Orin placed within endnote 110 is a useful example showing Wallace
gradually building over the course of 14 pages (pages 1007-1021) a state of high tension or “chaotic stasis” ([IJ], 996) and then abruptly truncating it. By the time Michael Pemulis disconnects the phone in Hal’s dorm room, Hal is getting dressed with one hand, being pressured by Pemulis, and on the verge of an important discovery with Orin about Quebecois-separatist politics. The passage never pointedly ends, but instead stops in the middle of Orin’s sentence (“which is where she moved beyond my depth back into 1(a), if you remember, when she raised this *samizdat*-word in connect—’” ([IJ], 1021]). The effect is that the reader is left feeling alert and ready to act “because the reader never experiences an end to the narrative, only separation and return” (Carlisle 189). This is a subversive didactic technique by Wallace, constantly prodding, poking, and pushing the reader to start participating and actively engaging in the construction of the story. If readers can confront the fact that the story they’ve been reading is being deliberately manufactured to point to this audience participation, then they can question their own role in the completion of the story. Wallace promotes a sense of activity in the reader’s mind because he wants to reader to take action with the text and engage in its multifarious plot possibilities. The various structural disruptions and temporal instabilities continue this experience of separation and return. As Wallace separates the reader from scenes just as they have reached an apex of intensity, it then becomes the responsibility of the reader to project meaning beyond these scene breaks. Sometimes a narrative thread isn’t returned to for hundreds of pages such as Ken Erdey’s separation from the narration on page 27 and subsequent return on page 209. The lesson, however, is that it’s not only the responsibility of the author to construct meaning out of the seemingly disparate parts of *Infinite Jest*, but a joint responsibility between author and reader.
This dynamic between the author and the reader is the lynchpin at the heart of the book’s moral function. If Wallace can set the appropriate conditions for the reader to engage in the creation of meaning in the story, then he can also by extension set the reader up to use lessons learned from the text in their own day-to-day existence. In order to encourage moral activism for his anti-didactic audiences in regards to choosing very carefully what one devotes him or herself to, Wallace must first set up a scenario where the reader very carefully chooses to devote him or herself to Wallace’s story. Only once a reader has carefully chosen this literary devotion can he or she begin to recognize the “meta-relevance” and identification necessary to fully appreciating the depth of Infinite Jest’s central instruction—the only way to escape the self through devotion while not simultaneously harming the self is to dedicate oneself to something that can mutually reciprocate and redeem the devotion. In other words, only another trusted human being is worthy of true devotion. All other possible objects of devotion (entertainment technology, drugs, sports, religious leaders, 12-step organizations, etc…) will gradually gain control over a person’s sense of selfhood and autonomy until they destroy that person’s sense of self. That is, unless they are directly and explicitly expressed through a mutually self-sacrificing person. Wallace believes tennis, for instance, could be an appropriate object of dedication, but only if one uses it to help connect him or herself to other human beings.

As another example, consider how Gately and Marathe illustrate this selfless moral view and function as moral compasses for the reader. Don Gately devotes himself to defending his fellow residents at the Recovery House (who in turn visit him in the hospital reciprocally) much like the character Rémy Marathe explains his selfless devotion to his equally devoted wife in a conversation with recovering cannibinoid-addict Kate Gompert on page 778. Gompert declares (while inebriated) that the double-agent Rémy Marathe pulled himself “out of a clinical
depression by being a freaking hero” (*IJ*, 778) after he makes a selfless choice to rescue a no-skull woman from being hit by a truck where “the great gift of this time today at the hilltop above the Provincial Autoroute is I do not think of me”. This recalls Gately’s selfless choice to attempt to rescue Green and Lenz from the Nucks, and the bureaucrat’s selfless choice to console the child he plowed through in *Wave Bye-Bye to the Bureaucrat*. Marathe describes a page later that choosing his love for this woman and risking his own life by saving her that “I had chosen. My choice, this was love. I had chosen I think the way out of the chains of the cage. I needed this woman” (*IJ*, 780). Might the key to being free and not enslaved to substances be sacrificing yourself to someone else—to not always succumb to infantile pleasures, and, thus, become an adult? When Marathe realized that he “needed this woman,” and that without her, there was “only pain and not choosing,” he doesn’t try to become infinite (like Jim Incandenza), but accepts his finite choices in life.

Marathe’s moral compass is selflessness—to give yourself up to any kind of higher power is exceedingly dangerous, so you must choose wisely. For Marathe, the decision is binding, but a binding choice that he has complete awareness of with no hiding and no secrecy. If you are in a cage, then you must understand what binds you before you can escape the cage. This calls back earlier in the book to the meditative Lyle, the towel-dispenser guru within the weight room of the tennis academy, telling the academy student Lamont Chu that “You might consider how escape from a cage must surely require, foremost, awareness of the fact of the cage” (*IJ*, 389). The cage cannot be ignored, so you must confront it at all times if you are to transcend its limitations. “It chains me, but the chains are of my choice” says Marathe. Before saving his future wife, Marathe was bound by “other chains:…the chains of not choosing.” Now he is bound, but he is not deluding himself into thinking he is free. He is not convincing himself
that he is boundless and infinite. The concept of infinity is appealing, but it is not real. A human being is bound to a finite existence. Certain entertainments and substances provide a momentary sense that man can transcend and touch “infinite jest,” as the central symbol of the book is the “Infinite Jest” cartridge that Marathe, hypothetically, offers to Kate Gompert at the end of their passage on page 762. Marathe offers to show her something attached with the promise that “you would feel more good feeling and pleasure than ever before for you: you would never again feel sorrow or pity or the pain of the chains and cage of never choosing.” Would Kate Gompert accept this promise if it was true? Would the reader? The function of the paralyzing “Infinite Jest” cartridge in the book is to force these characters (and the reader) to come to a decision on whether they would give everything up for infinite pleasure. If they could cease to have to abide by the limits and guidelines of space and time, would they go all in and have no chance to come back to the limited reality they turned their back on in the first place? By being forced to come to terms with this ultimate wager, the characters’ true moral integrity is revealed—some characters can’t hold their head together like Hal, who will lose his mind in some fashion during the Year of Glad, while some characters can muster the fortitude to hold their head together like Don Gately, whose moral heroism is grounded in his ability to sacrifice himself for other people selflessly more often than he selfishly indulges himself. Gately allows himself momentary lapses of shame-ridden self-indulgence, but he doesn’t question the prospect of helping someone else first. He acts first, and is not paralyzed by thought and inaction, such as Hamlet, or Hal Incandenza, or any number of characters who cannot put others before themselves. They cannot stop making selfish choices, and become trapped within the self, infinitely regressing to a state of deeper infantile dependence.
Although Wallace claimed he wasn’t “trying to line up behind Tolstoy or Gardner” (McCaffery 4), his work shows a clear alignment with ideals outlined by both critics. Wallace’s fiction displays an adherence to sentimentality and sincerity unmatched by his postmodern forefathers. Tolstoy writes in Chapter Fifteen of What is Art? that the “degree of infectiousness of art increased by the degree of sincerity in the artist,” (141) and Wallace’s overloaded attempts at displaying sincerity, sentiment, seriousness about the importance of the ideas he writes about in Infinite Jest support this theory that he recognizes that the more sincere he is in the performance of his art, the more infectious the ideas and feelings inherent in the work of art will be. In other words, if the reader feels that Wallace is working so hard to create this story for Wallace’s own intrinsic ends (and not just to impress the reader), the reader will more likely absorb the messages in the story. As Tolstoy writes, “as soon as the spectator, hearer, or reader feels that the artist is infected by his own production, and writes, sings, or plays for himself, and not merely to act on others, this mental condition of the artist infects the receiver” (141). The trap of didacticism reveals itself in Tolstoy’s essay, however, as Wallace carefully internalized Tolstoy’s description of what would happen if the reader felt that the author was not writing “for his own satisfaction” (141). Tolstoy wrote that if the artist “does not himself feel what he wishes to express—but is doing it for him, the receiver, a resistance immediately springs up…and the newest feelings and the cleverest technique not only fail to produce any infection but actually repel” (141). Wallace avoids repelling the reader of Infinite Jest by going out of his way to conceal the didactic message within his own narrative performance: the author wants to portray the idea that he is only writing the story to authenticate his own voice. If the reader felt that Wallace was creating run-on sentences that span for several pages and including meta-linguistic gags to merely demonstrate his skill to the reader, then a serious reader would naturally be
uninterested in such exhibitions. But if Wallace can create such a structure and form for the story that it would appear that the author is practically sorting all of the data out for himself and is “infected by his own production,” then a reader would be more likely to absorb a moral message out of the production. A reader then may feel that they are uncovering truths that were previously concealed within the author’s synthesis of massive amounts of data.

What message exists at the heart of *Infinite Jest*’s exploration of morality? The large book contains numerous morally-centered ideas, some of which contradict each other and some of which complement each other. Two hundred pages into the book, Wallace lays out a litany of “exotic new facts” that you will learn if “by the virtue of charity or the circumstance of desperation, you ever chance to spend a little time around a Substance-recovery halfway facility like Enfield MA’s state-funded Ennet House” (*IJ*, 200). These near-didactic “facts” are a *tour-de-force* of morality that relentlessly confront the reader with harsh truths about the nature of obsession, addiction, and how to live in a more general sense. Some of the “facts” are obtuse, while others are sincerely moving:

“In short that 99% of the head’s thinking activity consists of trying to scare the everliving shit out of itself…That the people to be most frightened of are the people who are the most frightened. That it takes great personal courage to let yourself appear weak. That you don’t have to hit somebody even if you really really want to. That no single, individual moment is in and of itself unendurable”

(*IJ*, 204).
This last example can be viewed as a central organizing morality for the book as a whole. Data comes and goes with varying speeds and temporal instabilities in *Infinite Jest*, but if “no single, individual moment is in and of itself unendurable,” then there is nothing an individual cannot overcome. This is comprehensible in theory, but less understood in practice considering Wallace’s own lifelong struggle with depression and his eventual suicide in 2008. “What’s unendurable is what his own head could make of it all,” Don Gately thinks near the end of the book as he is bound to a hospital bed (*IJ*, 860). “But he could choose not to listen [to his own head]” thinks Gately. While an individual may *feel* trapped by various physical or mental circumstances, one can always choose how to synthesize the data he or she has been presented with. One has a choice to be morally honest about that synthesis or morally abusive. Through the heroic example of Gately (who also refuses painkillers that could reactivate his addictions), *Infinite Jest* offers readers “an oblique form of counsel” (*Max, “The Unfinished”). However, Wallace arranges the book in such a way as to make the reader have to work for this “counsel.” It won’t come easy, nor should it.

Wallace continually stressed in interviews and writing throughout his career that fiction-writing had a special relationship to loneliness. But he felt most people misunderstood exactly how this loneliness was approached by a fiction-writer. “It’s yourself you have to be estranged from, really, to work” he told Larry McCaffery (7). Wallace felt that he had to create a critical distance from his own psychic limitations to help articulate other people’s fear about their psychic limitations. He was quoted in a letter once as saying that “the magic of fiction is that it addresses and antagonizes the loneliness that dominates people.” Asked by McCaffery to clarify this idea, Wallace revised his statement to consider that he felt that his fiction should “aggravate” the loneliness that dominates people rather than “antagonize.” If he felt his role as a fiction-
writer is to aggravate, or disrupt the reader’s sense of “all-is-well” in the world, then he has to do it in such a way that he won’t alienate the reader so successfully that the reader abandons his or her commitment to the book. Discussing the idea that TV helps humans deny that they are lonely, Wallace mused:

…the interesting thing is why we’re so desperate for this anesthetic against loneliness. You don’t have to think very hard to realize that our dread of being trapped inside a self (a psychic self, not just a physical self), has to do with angst about death, the recognition that I’m going to die, and die very much alone, and the rest of the world is going to go merrily on without me

(McCaffery 8)

This dread resonates with Infinite Jest’s James O. Incandenza, who dies alone from a self-inflicted action and then observes as a ghostly wraith how “the rest of the world” goes on without him throughout the story. “I strongly suspect,” Wallace said, “[that] a big part of real art fiction’s job is to aggravate this sense of entrapment and loneliness and death in people, to move people to countenance it, since any possible human redemption requires us first to face what’s dreadful, what we want to deny” (McCaffery 8). If a reader can face what he or she wants to deny (such passages that are styled in an unapproachable manner), then a reader can start uncovering new meaning about their understanding of the self. There is a redemption to be found in Wallace’s Infinite Jest, a book that can be viewed as “aggravating”, if the reader can confront their own dread of loneliness and death through identifying and then consciously separate themselves from the characters of the book, of which the most morally heroic is still a brutish killer and addict. Don Gately comes closest to securing a redemptive resolution to his journey in
the book, but the reader must be sensitive enough to realize that no matter much they identify with a creation of Wallace’s, it will not replace their own sense of anxiety or dread about the things of which they are truly frightened. “Identifying” is always spelled with a capital-I by the narrators of the A.A. and N.A. passages in *Infinite Jest*, drawing attention to its absolute sententious heavyweight importance. Like other sacred and important terms utilized by Boston AA in the book, “Identifying” is absolutely a necessity to succeed in the book’s portrayal of Boston AA and the required daily sponsorship meetings (“The residents’ House counselors suggest that they sit right up at the front of the hall where they can see the pores in the speaker’s nose and try to Identify instead of Compare. Again, Identify means empathize” [IJ, 344]). This emphasis on the nature of “Identification” is where the resolution between *Infinite Jest*’s form and its message reveals its subversive revelation of virtue. If empathy is the basis for morality, then *Infinite Jest*’s emphasis on empathizing with other human beings aligns Wallace’s book with the traditional (pre-postmodernist) notion that one primary function of literature is to train us to empathize with others. Wallace recognizes the inherent difficulty in attempting to transmit a virtuous message to a postmodern audience, and he realizes that the only way the reader can seriously consider adopting and practicing Wallace’s sentimental virtues is if he makes the reader work to qualify which messages are the truly potent ones.

Wallace’s attempts to write subversively didactic and morally redemptive fiction were clearly a complicated risk and wager. By being subversively didactic, he risks being so acutely subversive that his true motive remains hidden for some readers underneath the overt spectacle of the structure and plot. The circular nature of the chronology of the book and the unresolved plot threads act as deliberate techniques to provoke a reader to return to the text after separation occurs and continue studying its form and content for answers. This potential paradox was not
unrecognized by Wallace. In the McCaffery interview, Wallace said that “if you’re going to try not just to depict the way a culture’s bound and defined by mediated gratification and image, but somehow to redeem it, or at least fight a rearguard against it, then what you’re going to be doing is paradoxical” (8). This is the lynchpin holding together Wallace’s mission towards remedying postmodern loneliness. “You’re at once allowing the reader to sort of escape self by achieving some sort of identification with another human psyche—the writer’s, or some character’s, etc.—and you’re ‘also’ trying to antagonize the reader’s intuition that she is a self, that she is alone and going to die alone” (McCaffery 8). This tension between the ‘escape from self’ and ‘the trap of self’ is confronted by *Infinite Jest*’s seductive structure. “You’re trying somehow both to deny and affirm that the writer is over here with his agenda while the reader’s over there with her agenda, distinct” (McCaffery 8). Wallace says that this paradox is “what makes good fiction sort of magical,” and this paradoxical setup is what makes *Infinite Jest*’s didacticism so subversive. The ideas in the story can “magically” come to life only so far as the reader understands his or her own distinct role in shaping the story, yet *Infinite Jest* continues to challenge the reader by presenting an abundance of moral philosophies. The reader must consciously choose to qualify some virtues as more important than others in reading *Infinite Jest*. The book’s overloaded structure trains a devoted reader to successfully synthesize the abundance of messages by practicing the process of making meaning out of what’s provided and what is not. This process may be unsettling for some readers, but Wallace believes in the object of this process’s aim.

The process of recognizing one’s own limitations resonates with the structure of *Infinite Jest*. The story chronicles characters who repeatedly describe themselves as being trapped in a type of cage—trapped by their own compulsions, desire for success, or by the limitations of their own consciousness. As critic Stephen Burn notes, Wallace wrote with this text an “account of a
nation in front of the television” (18), which is a medium that offers a temporary escape from the cage of the self. The book is not just a descriptive account of the contemporary man in the digital age, however, but a guidebook for how to uncover substantive meaning in the digital age. Each of the characters in the story are living obsessive-compulsive existences at the beginning of the 21st century and become paralyzed in time by the various entertainments and addictions. Wallace guides the reader to devote him or herself to remain morally centered while being subjected to overwhelming immoral and insidious technological forces—to transcend these boundaries is the constant goal. Through a subversive form of didacticism, Wallace is ultimately setting the reader up to make an educated and self-conscious choice regarding the reader’s own selfhood.

The overt question being asked of the reader is: Would you watch “Infinite Jest?” More subversively, however, Wallace is pointing the reader towards a more abstract moral question represented through the “Infinite Jest” film cartridge: Would you singularly devote yourself to the perfect work of art if such a thing existed? Common sense should provoke a rational mind to say “Absolutely not!” when faced with the prospect of obligations and attachments to more important devotions such as family, friends, or nature. Yet, the structure and content of *Infinite Jest* are designed to make the reader question the need for pleasure through examining the desire to escape from the self. How much of your sense of self would you sacrifice for pleasure/enlightenment/transcendence? This question of devotion and sacrifice sets the reader up to become skeptical of pleasure-giving agents, because the technology presented in *Infinite Jest* manufactures pleasure-giving agents which are so successful at helping a subject escape the self that they permanently regress one’s sense of self to an infantile state of helplessness. Even if the reader still firmly chooses to believe that she would never watch a paralyzing pleasure-giving
film cartridge like “Infinite Jest”, the reader’s own participation in this moral dialogue should make her aware that she already performs this surrendering of the self on smaller scales.

On some level, every individual that reads for pleasure (or enjoys a work of entertainment, participates in sporting events, eats an excessive amount of candy, etc…) is sacrificing a small degree of his or her selfhood for a few pleasurable moments to escape the self. If Wallace can assume that a reader is reading *Infinite Jest* of her own volition (not someone assigned or forced to read the text), then he can safely assume that he or she is consciously choosing to devote herself to an object that cannot reciprocate that devotion. *Infinite Jest* functions as a text to awaken the reader to recognizing this dangerous tendency all individuals have to willingly give oneself up to something outside of the self. If we must do this, it must be chosen very carefully as the character Rémy Marathe articulates: “This I was saying: this is why choosing is everything” (318). Is it possible that a devoted reader of *Infinite Jest* is also attempting to transcend his or her own paralyzing limitations, analogous to the book’s characters? And if one is indeed using *Infinite Jest* as a tool to escape his or her own limiting reality, then what is he or she trying to escape from? What is the source of this desire to escape? Once a reader can confront these questions, they have a choice regarding how to respond. The text remains as a means of moral support, but the reader is tasked with bringing the ideas to life.
Bibliography


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Further Reading


