The Crowd and the Individual: David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest and Don DeLillo's

Mao II on the Place of the Novel in the Age of Television


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1.  <u>Introduction</u>

Both Don DeLillo and David Foster Wallace want to write fiction that is engaged with problems of society.  In *Introducing Don DeLillo*, Frank Lentricchia writes, "[u]nlike these new regionalists of and for the Reagan eighties, DeLillo . . . offers us no myth of political virginity preserved, no "individuals" who are not expressions of—and responses to—specific historical processes" (Lentricchia, 3).  DeLillo explores the historical and technological processes that influence individual consciousness in late twentieth-century America, vituperating many, but focusing on the media and especially television.  He wants his work to be influential, believing that "American writers ought to . . . be more dangerous" (in Annsberg).  Like DeLillo's, Wallace's work has also dealt with the influence of television on how Americans self-understandings and how they relate to art and politics, work and leisure.  He too aspires to influence his readers and society, admitting that "every writer wants his book to change the world" (in Stivers).  Although they both have similar projects, the two authors have differing conceptions of the work the novel can and should do in contemporary society.  DeLillo began publishing in the early seventies and falls into the class of writers Wallace describes as the "postmodern founders"—a class that has heavily influenced Wallace's own writing.  Yet Wallace believes that

> what's been passed down from the postmodern heyday is sarcasm,
> cynicism, a manic ennui, suspicion of all authority, suspicion of all
> constraints on conduct, and a terrible penchant for ironic diagnosis of
> unpleasantness instead of an ambition not just to diagnose and ridicule but
> to *redeem*" (Wallace in *RCF*, 147, emphasis mine).

It is because he has been so influenced by postmodernism himself that Wallace needs to respond to this trend and to criticize it. This thesis will explore Wallace's goals in his fiction, the problems he sees in the work of his postmodern forefathers and authorial contemporaries, the aspects that he retains from the work of writers like DeLillo. Wallace cannot help but "diagnose and ridicule" with his (post-)postmodern brethren, but he ultimately wants to create a novel that will at the same time redeem. *Infinite Jest*, I argue, creates a space for redemption in the cynicism of a postmodern society.

2. Television and the Postmodern Dilemma in Wallace's "E Unibus Pluram"

In 1993, as he was embarking on the writing of his novel *Infinite Jest*, Wallace wrote an essay called "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" that outlines what he believes to be the effects of television on contemporary fiction. Certain young writers, he says, have created a new genre called "Image-Fiction" (*Fun*, 49), which places its characters in the world of the myths of pop culture, usually with specific reference to TV. Wallace himself falls into this category, as is demonstrated by his short story collection, *Girl with Curious Hair* which includes the story "My Appearance," about the narrator's interview on "The Late Show" with David Letterman. Yet he uses this essay to criticize as well as endorse the project of Image-Fiction's writers. Because the essay both supports and critiques the work of writers with whom Wallace associates himself, and because he developed the ideas in it as he commenced writing *Infinite Jest*, I consider this essay to be a manifesto for one of the projects Wallace has set for himself in *Infinite Jest*: revising and redeeming this genre of fiction. In this chapter I will outline the important

points of the argument in "E Unibus Pluram," focusing on the issue of the loss of authority in postmodern thought.[1]

Wallace uses his essay to demonstrate the difficulty of critiquing TV culture, which he believes leads to an addictive pursuit of entertainment and the undermining of faith in values, and to try to posit a solution for those problems. I will explore the reasons social critique is so difficult for contemporary fiction writers and illustrate the way in which Wallace hopes to distinguish himself from Don DeLillo. He doesn't completely succeed in finding a solution for the problems of a television society in this essay, but he does outline an argument that shows his faith in the ability of literature to make social changes. Wallace is more idealistic than DeLillo in that he still believes it is possible to redeem the social work of literature in a postmodern world.

Wallace's two main theses in this essay are 1) that "a certain subgenre of pop-conscious postmodern fiction . . . has lately arisen and made a real attempt to transfigure a world of and for appearance, mass appeal, and television" and 2) that "on the other hand, televisual culture has somehow evolved to a point where it seems invulnerable to any such transfiguring assault" (*Fun*, 49-50). The reason it's necessary to "transfigure" this world of television, rather than simply changing it by purging ourselves of TV, is that denial is not possible. It would take much more than a movement in American fiction to purge society of television, and considering his fascination with it in *Girl with Curious Hair*, Wallace wouldn't even want to do so. And so by "transfigure" I take Wallace to include both the ideas of critique and change—a dialectic, in a sense—where the change

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[1] It's important to note that "postmodern art" does not denote just anything that was written after, say, 1960. There are plenty of works—novels, poems, paintings, movies—written in the last thirty to forty years that do not fall under the category of postmodernism; the ones that do deal in various ways with the loss of the ability to establish absolute truths.

doesn't mean an denial of TV in our culture but a coming-to-terms with; a way to understand ourselves that allows for the existence of TV and mass appeal and the deliberate proliferation of desire upon which the two depend, but is able to move beyond the effects thereof.

In order to understand the effects of television on literary fiction, Wallace must first spend some time painting a picture of his televisual culture. Television in the '60s, he explains, was once a medium of the American values of "paternal strength and manly individualism" (Mark Crispin Miller in *Fun*, 65), represented by 1960s "paternalistic sitcoms" and the "lone-gunman westerns" that came before them (*Fun*, 65). Yet by the '60s, "the world of small business had been . . . superseded by what C. Wright Mills called 'the managerial demi-urge' and the virtues personified by . . . Dad were in fact passé" (Miller in *Fun*, 66). In other words, TV was presenting pictures of society in which middle-class men still had control over most decisions in their lives, whether familial or in business, where in reality feminism was beginning to gain momentum while corporations dissolved the power of the individual entrepreneur. Television, according to Wallace (and Miller) was representing values that were already obsolete. This may not have been a problem with the westerns—if everyone doesn't know they're escapist, at least viewers don't imagine them to be a picture of contemporary reality—but the sitcoms purported (and still purport) to represent actual *situations* that exist in the world. In presenting themselves as accurate portrayals of society while in truth being nostalgic and escapist, the sitcoms were hypocritical. This was especially true considering the nature of network television programming, which depends on the monolithic power of its own

corporate structure in order to disseminate its images and thus disallows any "manly individualism" within this structure.

Hypocrisy, which manifested itself in many arenas besides television in the U.S. of the '60s, was doomed to be exposed. Wallace credits the fiction of the day as having "exploded hypocrisy" by casting paranoia as central to our "corporo-bureaucratic weave" (Thomas Pynchon), exploring American narcosis (William S. Burroughs), illustrating the deforming effects of abstract capital (William Gaddis), satirizing politics (Robert Coover) and as Don DeLillo does, exposing "image, signal, data and tech as agents of spiritual chaos and not social order" (*Fun*, 66). Socio-political events—notably Watergate and Vietnam—were also instrumental in uncovering the hypocrisy of the government and the media. For these and other reasons, the audience that TV wanted to attract became cynical about any sort of authority, whether moral, political, intellectual, or religious. And so there had to be "a gradual shift from oversincerity to a kind of bad-boy irreverence in the Big Face that TV shows us" (59). No longer could television engender the audience's trust through supposed sincerity and passion; in fact, as a result of the audience's distrust of the medium's ability to provide anything truthful, TV has had to flatter us "for the very boredom and distrust it inspires in us" (Miller in *Fun*, 59). And to do so, Wallace says finally, television has to become increasingly ironic, scorning itself so as to shield itself from scorn.

TV's self-reflexive irony wouldn't be a problem for Wallace if irony weren't precisely the technique Image-Fiction writers want to use in order to transfigure television culture. It worked, he says, originally. Irony was used to explode hypocrisy in the '60s and '70s. I would argue with '70s television critic Harlan Ellison that even on

TV, on shows like *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* and *Laugh-In*, irony worked successfully to combat the performed sincerity of the westerns and sitcoms (Ellison, 36-40).  The problem is that irony is "*still around*," still "the dominant mode of hip expression," and although it served a purpose at first, irony is "an almost exclusively negative force" (*Fun*, 67), having over time created in American culture a certain "jaded weltschmerz, self-mocking materialism, blank indifference, and the delusion that cynicism and naïveté are mutually exclusive" (63).

The cynicism that results from the exposure of hypocrisy and the constant undermining of authority is a salient feature of postmodernism.  Although it could be argued that a break with the authority of tradition characterizes any historical change, this break's feeling of finality, which appears (to some theorizers of the postmodern) to be the ultimate break with tradition, and the pervasiveness of cynicism and irony are specific to postmodernism.

It would be impossible to discuss all the definitions that have been put forth for postmodernism in the past quarter decade; for this study I will focus on its deconstructive aspects in an effort to show that the cynicism, irony and feeling of futility that Wallace senses in the Image-Fiction writers of "E Unibus Pluram" characterizes much of late twentieth-century thought.

In the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, while events like Watergate and Vietnam were undermining popular trust in the ability of the government to represent the will of the people and fiction writers and "comedy hours" were exposing the hypocrisy of the media, there was a similar loss of faith in many other traditional paradigms of thought.   In the opening to his famous *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991),

Fredric Jameson writes that "[t]he last few years have been marked by an inverted millenarianism, in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by senses of the end of this or that (the end of ideology, art, or social class; the 'crisis' of Leninism, social democracy or the welfare state, etc., etc.): taken together, all of these perhaps constitute what is increasingly called postmodernism" (in Docherty, 62). While the belief that humanity progresses toward a *telos* through Enlightenment reason has been put into question at least since Nietzsche (Habermas in Docherty, 51-60), this doubt has become much more widespread and powerful. With such indeterminate fields as fractal geometry and chaos theory in mathematics, non-linear dynamics in the physical sciences, Barthes' "death of the author" and Derrida's "*différance*" in literary theory, Foucault's "emphasis upon discontinuity and difference in history and his privileging of 'polymorphous correlations in place of simple or complex casuality'" (Harvey, 9), David Harvey is able to say that "[m]odernist sentiments may have been undermined, deconstructed, surpassed, or bypassed, but there is little certitude as to the coherence or meaning of the systems of thought that may have replaced them" (Harvey, 42). Thinkers in the second half of the twentieth century have generally begun to doubt whether anyone could know an essential truth about anything. This undermining of inherited values and paradigms could be characterized as the killing off of the authority of the past—patricide, in a sense, but a patricide so complete, so thorough, that it has simply ended tradition rather than allowing a new one to spring.

Traces of anti-essentialism can be found in intellectual thought as early as Kant, and the early part of the twentieth century saw the rise of Einstein's Special and General Theories of Relativity with respect to time and space, Saussure's relativism with respect

to language and Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle.  However much of the art and social

theory of the high modern period was characterized by attempts to establish

comprehensive "truths," at times specifically in refutation of this relativism.  The high

modernist writers for example—Joyce, Eliot, Stein—wanted to create works of art that

would be understandable only in relation to their own terms, or the terms they set up

within themselves.  The work would ideally become an entity unto itself, as Stephen

describes in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*:

> temporal or spatial, the esthetic image is first luminously apprehended as
>
> selfbounded or selfcontained upon the immeasurable background of space
>
> or time which is not it.  You apprehend it as *one* thing.  You see it as one
>
> whole.  (Joyce, 212)

This is Stephen's first of three requirements for a work of beauty: wholeness.  That the

aesthetic image must be "selfbounded" separates it from other referents in the world, and

it is in this way that the object of beauty—the work of art—can only be comprehended as

a thing unto itself.  We can understand the necessity of separating the art object from the

rest of the world as a result of relativity—the idea that all knowledge, all understanding,

is dependent on the positioning of the subject and object with respect to each other.  If the

artist wants to create a work that has meaning, it must include all terms within itself

because to refer outside itself would be to allow a destabilizing interplay of the subjective

experiences of the reader, author and world, and the art object.  Stephen's "wholeness"

becomes an attempt at closure.  High modern art was, in this sense, an attempt to

repudiate the destabilizing forces that relativism summoned into a world of

Enlightenment reason.

Postmodern art, on the other hand, will not only accept the futility of establishing an ultimate Truth, but will situate itself within culture, rather than in a (supposed) separate reality of its own creation. Postmodern art combines the elitist and the popular, the high and the low, as in Warhol's gallery displays (high) of his mass-produced prints of Marilyn Monroe (low). Some postmodern art "reacts to the austere autonomy of high modernism by impudently embracing the language of commerce and the commodity" (Eagleton in Harvey, 7), as Warhol's did, but other works—Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, for example—embrace the language while avoiding the methods. That is to say, while Warhol's art is a representation of the emptiness of commodity culture, a "contrived depthlessness," to use Eagleton's term (in Harvey, 7), Pynchon's novel attempts to reflect on, in addition to simply reflecting, the effects of commodity culture. In both cases, the art has become interconnected with the rest of society; it is discursive. Where the modern work of art was supposed to stand only for itself, as an art object separate from society, the postmodern work of art admits that it is a cultural and even societal nexus point, which will always already be focusing and proliferating the meanings created by a particular historical moment.

Wallace has suggested that any story, any creation of narrative in our postmodern (for him, specifically post-'60s) culture, will have to (ironically) point itself out as such if it is to engage with the jaded consumers of TV. My discussion of postmodern culture in general was meant to show that this sentiment, a felt need to demonstrate one's own knowledge that all the authority of traditional paradigms has already been "undermined, deconstructed, surpassed, or bypassed," characterizes late-twentieth-century thought on all levels, from the TV audiences to the ex-war protesters to the fiction writers to the

social theorists teaching at elite universities throughout the Western world.  Linda Hutcheon argues that the reason irony is necessary is that "[t]here is no innocence in our world . . . .  We cannot ignore the discourses that precede and contextualize everything we say and do, and it is through ironic parody that we must signal our awareness of this inescapable fact" (Hutcheon, 39).  Hutcheon believes that irony is necessary for postmodern art to be at all effective, and, more importantly, she has no problem with that.  She believes that postmodern artists and writers must accept the inherent paradoxes in our systems of understanding and that, because there is no ultimate Truth on which to base an argument, postmodern art will only accomplish its political work—its social critique—through irony.

While this notion makes sense at the logical level, it's ultimately not satisfactory for Wallace, as he illustrates this toward the end of "E Unibus Pluram."  First, he must offer the most obvious response to Hutcheon, which would be to eschew irony altogether and simply "declare contemporary television evil and contemporary culture evil" (*Fun*, 69).  If we do so, however, then we'll also have to "invoke instead good old pre-1960s Hugh Beaumontish virtues and literal readings of the Testaments and be pro-Life, anti-Fluoride, antediluvian," according to Wallace (69).  The problem, besides the fact that it would be impossible to return to a state of innocence about our inability to establish unequivocal truths, is that to try to do this would be unproductive because we would be denying the reality of our society.  In addition, "the rise of Reagan/Bush/Gingrich showed that hypocritical nostalgia for a kinder, gentler, more Christian pseudo-past is no less susceptible to manipulation in the interests of corporate commercialism and PR image" (69-70) than the irony of postmodern television.  In Wallace's mind, some form

of cultural self-awareness is necessary. At the end of his essay, he gives an example of the epitome of cultural self-awareness in fiction: Mark Leyner's novel, *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist*.

Leyner's goal in *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist*, according to Wallace, is to create a fiction that is almost indistinguishable from television, yet because the two media are nevertheless different, an irony is created. If this book had been written in the '60s or '70s, the irony would have criticized TV through its absorption of televisual modes of representation, but Wallace argues that the novel has actually taken on the whole objective of television, which is, "finally, to *wow*, to ensure that the reader is pleased and continues to read" (*Fun*,79). And it is by flattering the reader for understanding the irony of the novel's references to TV that the novel pleases its reader. This is image fiction in its highest form, and its highest form turns out to be empty: "both amazing and forgettable, wonderful and oddly hollow" (81). And this hollowness is ultimately where self-conscious irony will take us, Wallace believes, if irony continues to be our only way to criticize televisual culture.

Now, as Wallace admits, there are authors out there who have written ironically about televisual culture and have been successful in their critiques. Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, for example, "sounded, to fledgling fictionists, a kind of televisual clarion-call" (*Fun*, 47). But if DeLillo's style of critique has been successful, and if he's still writing at the time of Wallace's essay, then why can Wallace not be satisfied with the likes of DeLillo? What is it that Wallace finds lacking in DeLillo's apparently perfectly astute fiction?

Wallace believes DeLillo's work has its place ("Irony and cynicism were just what the U.S. hypocrisy of the fifties and sixties called for." (*RCF*, 147)). But he believes that the younger generation of which he's a part does need to revise the project of their postmodern forefathers, creating a fiction that is both diagnostic and critical but at the same time redeeming. DeLillo's 1991 novel, *Mao II*, exemplifies his stance as an earlier postmodernist, portraying a writer named Bill Gray who senses that his ability to effect social change has been usurped by terrorism through the mass medium of TV. In the end, the writer himself becomes a willing victim of a terrorist group, having lost all faith in the importance of his project as a novelist. Gray's cynicism is a political/societal cynicism; rather than being a response to, say, rejection of Marxist and Freudian meta-narratives, his cynicism comes as a result of the pervasive influence of television in our lives and, at heart, the desire to reject it. Although he never explicitly says so, Gray would like to return to a world of innocence before television and the proliferation of mass-produced images because, as he sees it, "[i]n the West we [writers] become famous effigies as our books lose the power to shape and influence" (*Mao II*, 41). *Mao II* itself will not admit of such an easy interpretation. The novel is not nostalgic. It is aware that it would be impossible to return to an Edenic, pre-TV state of society, but instead of attempting to come up with a solution for the novelist's inability to effect change, it laments the passing of an author who tried to hold out against the currents of mass media. It may be telling us that trying to separate oneself like that is impossible for the author and so the novelist may as well give in. If this is the book's answer, it is not encouraging, because to give in to televisual culture would be to write more and more entertaining but empty variations on *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist*.

Wallace has a more optimistic view of the work of art, even in the late twentieth century. In "E Unibus Pluram" he makes repeated statements about the purpose of art, the ways in which it's supposed to affect the world, at one point telling us that "insights and guides to value used to be among literature's jobs" (*Fun*, 76). He doesn't believe literature does its job any more—hope and faith in literature is usurped by the power of postmodern irony—and as we've seen, he laments that fact. Yet towards the beginning of the essay he says that what's at issue is not "whether there are truly nasty problems involved in Americans' relation to television but what might possibly be done about them" (29) and he proceeds in the next fifty pages to talk about the problems and what can*not* be done about them, only offering a possible solution in the final paragraph. The fact that he can't discuss a solution sounds similar to DeLillo's Bill Gray when he observes that "I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of the culture (*Mao II*, 41). The difference between Wallace and DeLillo's Gray, however, is that while they are both concerned with the novelist's ability to effect change, Gray believes the novelist is markedly impotent in this ability, whereas Wallace comes up with a potential solution.

Unfortunately that solution is problematic. Wallace posits that "the new rebels might be the artists willing to risk . . . accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. . . . Of willingness to be suckered by a world of lurkers and starers who fear gaze and ridicule" (*Fun*, 81). It sounds at first as if this should be no problem, right? Fiction writers simply have to regress to a pre-postmodern, pre-modern even, language of sincerity and credulity. Wallace would argue, though, that this type of fiction would necessarily abandon the "genuine [albeit unsuccessful] socio-artistic agenda" of the Image-Fiction

writers (51), because it would not address the feeling of futility and cynicism and has

been engendered by TV and postmodern culture, and it would thus be avoiding the very

problem that it wants to confront: that of a postmodern lack of faith in anything but the

transitory and ephemeral and the depressive effects of this cynicism. Confronting the

depression that results from this sneering cynicism about anything innocent or naïve turns

out to be one of the important projects of *Infinite Jest*. Fiction that deals with TV,

however, including *Infinite Jest*, must have some level of irony if it is to be at all

believable to an audience reared on television and early postmodern art and theory. But

if Image-Fiction cannot criticize TV without becoming sentimental and atavistic, if

televisual culture prevents itself from being criticized from within, then the solutions to

the problems of televisual/postmodern culture must be offered by analogy. The analogy

Wallace uses in *Infinite Jest* is recovery from drug addiction, and he is able to do so by

characterizing the problem with televisual culture as being the addictiveness of TV

(which DeLillo discusses too). I will later discuss how he does this, and whether it is a

successful analogy. But a bigger problem than this is the general skepticism about

authority and absolute truths—from Neitzche's death of God to Barthes' death of the

author to Miller's loss of the "virtues personified by Dad"—that pervades postmodern

culture, which itself has forced us to question the authority any fiction can have. In

*Infinite Jest*, Wallace will offer a solution to the addictiveness of TV and the postmodern

loss of authority, but it will not be the revolutionary rethinking of society that DeLillo

both pines for and laments the impossibility of attaining.

3. *Mao II*:  The Power of the Terrorist, the Novelist's Impotence

"American writers ought to stand and live in the margins, and be more dangerous."
-Don DeLillo, interviewed in Vogue

In the slew of interviews that followed the publication of Mao II, his tenth novel, Don DeLillo often discussed the role of the novelist in contemporary society. He believes that American writers ought to be more dangerous, as writers are in repressive societies ("That's why so many of them are in jail." (Vogue)), but this doesn't seem possible in our "society that's filled with glut and repetition and endless consumption" (quoted in Passaro). The American writers who are potentially dangerous, DeLillo feels, have either had their power undermined by the spectacle of disaster on TV, or they've been subsumed by an economic system that markets their "dangerous" images to the point where the danger becomes hackneyed, banal, even clichéd. An example of this type of writer, and one of the primary models for the character Bill Gray, is J. D. Salinger. After publishing *Nine Stories*; *Franny and Zooey*; *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction*; a collection of stories called *Inverted Forest* that was only published in Japanese and of course *Catcher in the Rye*, Salinger went into hiding and has avoided media attention for decades. His reputation, on the other hand, has increased with every passing year, making the mystery surrounding him so great that in 1988 two photographers from The New York Post stalked him for six days in New Hampshire before finding him and taking his picture. This picture, of a famously reclusive, ostensibly dangerous writer, was one of two that inspired DeLillo to write *Mao II*, which is in part about the reasons for and effects of a writer's self-imposed seclusion. The other picture, reprinted on page 1 of the novel, depicts "a wedding in Seoul in a soft-drink warehouse, about 13,000 people" (in Passaro). The two pictures "represent the

polar extremes of 'Mao II,' the arch individualist and the mass mind" (in Passaro), both of which, DeLillo believes, are salient features of the American cultural landscape.

The mass mind is the reason Bill Gray, and to some degree DeLillo himself, is so concerned about the waning powers of the novelist. Because the writer needs to resist being absorbed by his culture (I say "his" because in *Mao II* at least, all writers are men), he "belongs at the far margin" and is necessarily going to stand in opposition to his society. This is hard to do, though, when your books are marketed to the same society you're trying to stand in opposition to and possibly change, maybe even transfigure. The problem now is that the individualist novel becomes one more piece of information and through advertising one more image in the world of "glut and repetition and endless consumption" inhabited by the American mass mind. The figure DeLillo raises in *Mao II* to explore the results of mass-marketing and repetition is pop artist Andy Warhol.

We first encounter Warhol's work when Scott, Bill Gray's one time groupie now assistant, goes to New York City to pick up Brita, the first person Gray has allowed to photograph him in decades. Before meeting her he stops by a museum to look at the Warhols and finally arrives "in a room filled with images of Chairman Mao." He sees "[p]hotocopy Mao, silk-screen Mao, wallpaper Mao, synthetic-polymer Mao," which images appear on some covers of the novel itself. These repeated images help Scott realize "the deeper meaning of Mao." But for us to understand what that deeper meaning is for Scott we must first understand how Warhol's art is functioning in the text of Mao II.

The pop art of Andy Warhol, which takes as its subjects commodities and stars such as Coca-Cola bottles, Campbell's Soup cans, Marilyn Monroe, Jackie Kennedy

Onassis, Mao and even Warhol himself illustrates how brand-name commodities have become internalized, part of our linguistic structure; how even people can become brand names. The images he used had become common linguistic currency in Warhol's 1960s; if they weren't already, Warhol made them into the signs that Roland Barthes describes in his Mythologies, which "all come down to the status of a mere language" (Barthes, 114). But to Warhol they have become signifiers themselves—images only—separate from the concepts they first embodied. To illustrate, let's take a can of Campbell's Tomato Soup.

The Campbell's Soup can—red on the top with "Campbell's" in white script, white on the bottom with "Tomato" in red and "Soup" in black—was designed to be a familiar trademark, an image that people would easily recognize and would associate with the tomato soup inside that they wanted to eat for dinner. The joy of the mass-produced product was that the soup on the inside was as consistent as the label on the outside. Successful marketing made the Campbell's Tomato Soup label widely recognized, so much so that by 1962 Andy Warhol was able to reproduce the image of a Campbell's Soup can (making it *the* "Campbell's Soup Can") and call it art. In his work, producing images of Campbell's Soup cans, Warhol was commenting of the commodification of contemporary art by representing a commodity as art and making the representation a commodity itself. This last was another layer of irony, where he also marketed his own work and became a popular artist by mass-producing the very images he was satirizing for their pervasiveness. Marketing is, after all, the way to become well-known.

In its rise from the utilitarian can of tomato soup to "Campbell's Soup Can," the precession of this product can help us trace Jean Baudrillard's formulation of the "phases of the image" in image culture, which are nicely summarized in Philip E. Simmons's chapter on DeLillo in his book *Deep Surfaces: Mass Culture & History in Postmodern American Fiction* (47). In its first phase, the image "is the reflection of a basic reality." At this point the basic reality is that there is soup in the can, and the image on the can is true to that reality. In the second phase, the image "masks and perverts a basic reality;" the image of the can, reproduced and proliferated in advertising, begins to represent the soup in the can, rather than simply reflecting it. The image begins to gain a meaning of its own. The third stage, where the image "masks the *absence* of a basic reality," makes the soup in the can (which you can eat) irrelevant: the image of the can that says "Campbell's Tomato Soup" only stands for soup—the can *means* soup, whether you see it on a shelf in a supermarket or pictured in an ad in a magazine. Baudrillard's fourth and final phase of the image says that it "bears no relation to reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum." This is the phase in which Warhol's soup can art exists. Whereas the representation of the Campbell's Soup can in an ad still supposedly has real soup hidden somewhere in the depths of its referential baggage, Warhol's presentation of the "Campbell's Soup Can" is purely an image—a "pure simulacrum," in Baudrillard's words—with no referent other than its own existence as an image.

The "Campbell's Soup Can" was politically a fairly innocuous example of Warhol's work. More than soup cans and Coca-Cola bottles, Warhol focused on people. Frederic Jameson, in his seminal essay, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," analyzes Warhol's work as exemplary of "the waning of affect" in

postmodern culture. Jameson considers treatment of the human figure to be the best way to approach the idea. Like "the Campbell's Soup Can, which explicitly foregrounds the commodity fetishism of a transition to late capital . . . Warhol's human subjects, stars— like Marilyn Monroe— . . . are themselves commodified and transformed into their own images" (Jameson in Docherty, 68-69). The stars lose their personhood, their individuality, just like the image of the soup can is no longer associated with actual soup. What they lose, ultimately, is their depth, becoming mere surfaces that can be played upon to represent what they once embodied. This must happen in order to sell what it is these images represent; if they were to embody their original depths, they could not be used as images in advertising because they would be too complicated and contradictory, just as the real novelist, the human who wrote the novels, is impossible to represent truthfully in an image.

<div align="center">The Novelist Commodified</div>

Chapter One of *Mao II* opens in a bookstore, where Scott is browsing while waiting to pick up the photographer Brita. As he strolls through, he hears "Muzak in the air" and sees "rows of handsome covers," "lines of type," "stacks . . . arranged in artful fanning patterns," "books standing on pedestals and bunched in little gothic snuggeries," "gleaming best-sellers," "books in pyramids and theme displays" and "covers . . . lacquered and gilded" (19). The bookstore, a commercial enterprise, a book repository whose primary objective is to sell its wares and which must therefore make its wares appealing, has set itself up to radiate "bookness." Rather than the culture or information to be found in its books, the bookstore wants to promote the books themselves. The books are relegated to the status of mere objects. Like Marilyn Monroe, they've been

made into commodities. Customers cannot pass through without being assaulted by books—objects made up of covers and paper and lines of type—in every form, and yet as if to deny its voiding of culture the bookstore is playing Muzak, itself a simulacrum, an affectless image of real music.

Were Bill Gray willing to enter the public space of a bookstore, this scene would not surprise him. As an author himself, Gray is wary of being consumed by the image of the writer, and for this reason he has not allowed himself to be photographed for three decades. In spite of the wariness he demonstrates, Gray never actually discusses the issue of being made into an image of himself; the book only raises the problem peripherally, through the image-making of Brita's photography and the second-order image-making of Andy Warhol's art.

Brita's life work—photographing writers—problematizes the connection between the writer and the image of the writer. Brita began her career as a photographer of shock. She took pictures of "city faces, eyes of city people, slashed men, prostitutes, emergency rooms." She "followed derelicts practically to their graves. And [she] used to go to night court just to look at faces" (24). We're not told what medium Brita shoots for, but in the end whether she took pictures as a journalist, to demonstrate to their contemporaries the horrific circumstances these people endured, or as an artist, to make a statement about human suffering, is irrelevant. She comes to the conclusion that "[n]o matter what [she] shot, how much horror, reality, misery, ruined bodies, bloody faces, it was all so fucking pretty in the end" (23-24). If she meant for her photography to be journalistic, it became the spectacle of news, which I will discuss in further detail below. And if it was art photography, then her photographs aestheticized suffering. Her subject matter as

statement about horror, misery, *reality*, was subsumed into the aesthetics of the photograph as art object, allowing us to imagine the "pretty" end of her photographs as being in an art gallery where chic New Yorkers gaze at them while sipping Merlot and commenting how well the angle of her shot brings out the prostitute's emaciation.

Brita switches to writers because it's less dishonest. Rather than making misery pretty, she creates images of "novelists, poets, playwrights" (25). The writers she focuses on are the creative artists, the ones who do more than simply record. Novelists, poets and playwrights are all concerned, to varying degrees, with aesthetics, with re-presenting the world not objectively but in their own voices, with their own ideas and interpretations. When Brita photographs them, then, she believes she's not creating new interpretations of the world but simply clarifying or explicating the worlds the writers themselves have created. She even considers what she's doing as "simply a record" and to this end "eliminate[s] technique and personal style to the degree that this is possible" (26). Switching to writers removes the responsibility for "prettifying" the world from Brita to the writers themselves. Her focus on writers rather than victims is a focus on the actors, not the acted-upon; the personalities instead of the people.

The question raised by Brita's presence in *Mao II* is, why photograph the writer at all? If you're interested in writers, Bill Gray wonders, "[t]hen why don't you stay home and read?" (56). Between Brita's photography and Scott's first meeting with Gray, the beginning of *Mao II* puts a great deal of emphasis on the connection of the writer's face to his work. It's very important for both these characters to see the writer's work somehow reflected in his face, to see that his face stands for his work, encapsulates it,

represents it.  Brita and Scott enact the complex hierarchy of visual versus linguistic representation and meaning-making in a consumer society.

Brita has mixed feelings about photographing writers.  She tries to distance herself from the meaning-making of her own work, asking, "what's the importance of a photograph if you know the writer's work?" but she can't (and doesn't) avoid the fact that "people still want the image, don't they?" (26).  She is herself attracted to this act of association; as she takes pictures of Gray, she finds him "slowly beginning to make sense to her, to look reasonably like his work" (39).  Brita is creating a picture for herself of who Bill Gray is.  Scott had already done so when he first met the writer: he saw "a man who had to be Bill getting out of a car."  When Brita doubts his ability to recognize the face of a writer he had never seen before, Scott asks, "How can a photographer ask a question like that?  Doesn't his work, his life show on his face?  Are there other people in that one small rural area who might possibly look as though they'd written those books?" (60)  By making their mental picture of Bill reflect the "basic reality" of his work, Brita and Scott have both enacted the first of Baudrillard's four phases of the image.  They've condensed Gray's work—his novels, their "[s]entences with built-in memories" (51) and the complex ideas they express—into a picture.  At one point Scott says ironically that "[t]he book disappears into the image of the writer" (71), but in spite of his irony Scott does believe he has mentally represented—Brita that she has even expressed—in a mental or physical picture what Gray himself expressed and represented linguistically.  This may seem to be an innocuous move on the parts of Brita and Scott, but there are three phases of the image left, what Gray is afraid of is that they will follow.

Despite Brita's doubts, she and Scott both assume a hierarchy of the visual versus the linguistic. There is a variety of reasons for this. To comprehend an image requires only sight, whereas to comprehend the language of a novel we have to decode the symbols on the page, making words, then sentences, then finally meanings. Because print involves more layers of decoding, visual representation seems to confer a more immediate, holistic, and therefore truer understanding than a linguistic one. A picture, after all, *is* worth a thousand words. Because the comprehension an image provides is less mediated, it's also easier, which explains why "people still want the image." But in consumer society the image is even more charged.

Bill Gray is worried almost to the point of paranoia about being made into a simulacrum of himself. He hasn't let his picture appear anywhere for thirty years. He thinks "[t]he image world is corrupt" (36). He disagrees with the Britas and the Scotts of the world who act out a belief that the image is the final confirmation of truth. While Brita sets up to take his picture, she notices "mud crust and bent weed stuck to his shoes" and realizes that "[h]e didn't seem to be putting across his own picture, his idea of what he wanted to look like or who he wanted to be for the next hour or two" (38). He's not conforming to her expectations that the writer will assume a posture of who he's made himself out to be. He's not creating a persona for his pictures. Brita's surprise at his unusual candidness before the camera demonstrates how images can lie just as much as words; how even Brita, at heart, believes they're supposed to lie. But the question is, is the image world naturally corrupt, or is it corruptible? *Mao II*'s cover presents images that have been corrupted: pieces from the Warhol series on Chairman Mao described at the beginning of the book. Warhol has painted over reprints of a classic picture of Mao,

covering his face, adding mustaches, changing its color, making him look unhappy or dazed or much like Hitler. Warhol's project emphasizes the dissociation of the image from the "truth" of the original. Instead of reflecting a basic reality, as Brita and Scott assume it does, the image on the cover is in its final phase, where it "bears no relation to any reality whatever." Where the original photograph of Mao, taken to reflect reality, actually created reality through its representation of Mao as benevolent leader of the people, Warhol's pictures are no longer about the Chinese dictator at all but about a picture of him, about the creation of an image.

Gray's reluctance to be photographed is that he realizes the same thing will happen to him. An image will be made, by Brita and the interpreters of the photographs. Even as the picture is shot, it will already be in the second phase, where it masks and perverts a basic reality. This is borne out by Brita's and Scott's belief that the writer's appearance can encapsulate the linguistic complexity of his novel. As the image is proliferated, extended through time as an object and through space by means of its marketing, it will bear less and less relation to the reality of Gray's work; the reality will slowly disappear and the image will begin to mask that absence. It's at this point that the novelist has become a commodity and to some degree already lost his power. But the novelist loses his power completely when his image becomes a simulacrum, a sign, emptied of all the complexity and truth his novels originally embodied.

Ironically, by withholding his image, Gray's author-icon becomes even more popular, mysterious, and separated from the novels. Gray realizes some of the implications of this withholding; as he says to Brita, a writer who doesn't show his face is "a local symptom of God's famous reluctance to appear" (36). People will of course

wonder about the reclusiveness of this public figure—as a writer is by his very nature—and they will be impressed with his desire to avoid appearances. The ability not to appear, to wield power from afar, even if the distance is temporal rather than spatial, is more awe-inspiring than an appearance would be. And so a great Salinger-style mystery is built up around this *éminence grise* to the point where, if his visit to his publishing company had not been a secret, there would have been "a queue outside that door stretching like a conga line into the distance," as Gray's publisher tells him (99). In other words, in spite of the fact that Gray has not publicly engaged with the world in decades, people still worship his image. It is still vitally important to people that they connect his work with his face in the manner of Brita and Scott. They need to see the truth behind, rather than in, Bill Gray's novels. In spite of his effort to avoid being commodified, we find that by avoiding any sort of influence over it, Gray has allowed his image—attached only to his name—to lose its connection to reality. It is an image, like Warhol's images, that's been drained of its truth and complexity. Bill Gray has become Muzak in prose.

<div align="center">Spectacular Terror, Complex Novel</div>

The novelist's diminishing power can also be found in the spectacle television necessitates. The rise of television has helped make images the primary mode of public communication. Because it is a visual medium, and therefore more immediate, television satisfies our desire for visceral stimulation much more readily than the earlier medium of print. And because every channel and show on TV must compete for our attention by offering us the most stimulating viewing experience, news must be about catastrophe whenever possible.

DeLillo has professed in many of his novels the belief that Americans generally crave news of disaster.  He best illustrates this in *White Noise*, when Jack Gladney, the narrator, and his family watch the news:

> That night, a Friday, we gathered in front of the set, as was the custom and the rule, with take-out Chinese.  There were floods, earthquakes, mud slides, erupting volcanoes. . . . Steffie, brought close to tears by a sitcom husband arguing with his wife, appeared totally absorbed in these documentary clips of calamity and death. . . . We were otherwise silent, watching houses slide into the ocean, whole villages crackle and ignite in a mass of advancing lava.  Every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping. (64)

This is a family completely entranced by the world of the image.  Fictions are more true to them than facts: Steffie almost cries watching a sitcom, yet becomes passively engrossed when footage of real calamity comes on.  We imagine her jaw suddenly becoming slack, her eyes as unfocused as the rest of her family's when the documentary clips appear.  At first it seems that the Gladneys have no understanding of what it means that this footage is real; they ought to be feeling some sympathy for the victims.  But as Baudrillard will help us understand, what the Gladneys crave is the interplay of the separation from reality and the reality itself behind these images.

Baudrillard argues in an early work, *The Consumer Society*, that TV is a medium not of the signified but of the signifier.  We move from "events signified by the image to the consumption of the image as such," and as a result the image loses all of its original content.  Because it lacks content, the most important aspect of the image becomes its

spectacle, which "exhaust[s] itself in the very time-span of its absorption, and never refer[s] on beyond" itself (Baudrillard, 124). This is one aspect of the Gladney family's image-addiction, which derives the craving for spectacle from the nature of the medium itself. But they also crave televisual calamity because watching it highlights their distance from the calamity itself. Earlier in his book Baudrillard described the news item with two valences of meaning. As an image it's a dramatization of reality, a sign of passion and of the event, but emptied of both event and passion. As a signifier the news item enforces the viewer's knowledge that "*I was not there*;" which is to say, the image of calamity becomes a source of security. "So we live," he concludes with characteristic vituperation, "sheltered by signs, in denial of the real" (33-34).

The Gladneys' Friday ritual, with its significance as denial of the real hand-in-hand with worship of the image, is the type that has convinced Bill Gray that "[n]ews of disaster is the only narrative people need" (*Mao II*, 42). "Years ago," he believed "it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of the culture. Now bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory" (41). The immediacy of spectacle is all people pay attention to now, Gray would argue, and the people with the most control over spectacular calamity are the terrorists. The novel is too complex compared to the image and the spectacle. It takes too long. Scott tells Brita that Gray thinks the novel can no longer "feed our search for meaning": "the emergence of news as an apocalyptic force" has usurped the power of this "Latin mass of language, character, occasional new truth" (72). This puts into serious question the influence a novelist may have on a televisual society—not because of TV's irony, as Wallace would argue, but because of TV's spectacle. Gray's awareness of the novel's declining influence leads him to conclude that

novelists need to be more removed from their society and more dangerous.  In other words, they ought to resemble terrorists.

His publisher, Charles Everson, reminds him that he believes writers should be "at the far margin, doing dangerous things."  They should have to carry guns because "[t]he state should want to kill all writers" (97).  It sounds romantic, actually, for the writer to be socially so peripheral, symbolically so central.  Maybe Gray's ideal writer would hijack airplanes to read to the passengers or throw exploding books onto tour buses, but if we consider writers realistically, especially the kinds *Mao II* focuses on—novelists, poets, playwrights—we realize very few were ever wanted by the state.  Milton, Twain, Updike and even Salinger, have all written texts that subverted dominant ideologies.  One could probably say all great writers have, but very few have ever been wanted by the state for their writings.  It is only the most repressive societies that try to kill subversive writers—Iran with Salman Rushdie, for instance.  Gray would probably argue that American society *is* repressive, but the repression runs so deep—that is, it's so repressed—that it's difficult for the American writer to get to a far enough margin.  Part of the problem, though, is that if the writer goes too far afield, he will not be able to communicate to the audience he's trying to speak to critically, just as if he does not allow himself to be marketed, risking commodification, he won't even reach an audience.

The goal is influence.  It is the prize that both writers and terrorists are striving for, and the second half of *Mao II* becomes a competition between them.  At the end of Part One we learn that a young Swiss poet has been taken hostage in Beirut; Gray's publisher asks him to come to London to do a reading in an attempt to free the poet.  An explosion where the reading was supposed to take place brings George Hassad, a

terrorism expert and "spokesman for the group in Beirut" (*Mao II*, 128), into contact with

Gray, and the two proceed in conversational DeLillo fashion to have lots of dialogues

theorizing writing and terrorism.  Gray tells Hassad that

> novelists and terrorists are playing a zero-sum game. . . . What terrorists
>
> gain, novelists lose.  The degree to which they influence mass
>
> consciousness is the extent of our decline as shapers of sensibility and
>
> thought.  The danger they represent equals our own failure to be
>
> dangerous. (156-57)

We've already seen why terrorists are gaining where novelists are losing, but what

exactly are they competing for?  Gray says here it's mass consciousness.  They both want

to affect a large number of people by shaping sensibility and thought.  They have the

same target society, too.  As the emphasis on terrorists as creators of spectacle has shown,

Gray believes they're trying to affect Americans—the TV-watchers—as much as he is.

When he talks about the danger they represent, he means just that—not the violence they

actually enact but the threat they pose for society.  Terrorists stand outside society, the

way Gray wants novelists to.  But novelists only add messages to society, and this is

ineffective in one where, as Hassad puts it, "[t]here's too much everything, more things

and messages and meanings than we can use in ten thousand lifetimes."  Meaning is lost

in the shuffle.  "The madman on the street is absorbed and processed and incorporated,"

reminding us of the world of Warhol, where market forces consume and regurgitate the

realities of tomato soup and Chairman Mao.  Hassad concludes that "[o]nly terrorists

stand outside" (157).

The terrorists are winning. Gray believes this and the novel demonstrates it. A bomb cancels the reading, Hassad brings Gray to Athens, where the terrorist leader, Abu Rashid, wants to meet with Gray. Gray gets on a boat to Beirut, though, and dies of an untreated injuries sustained in a car accident. If they had killed Gray themselves, it would be easy to say the terrorists win in this book. But his fading away from existence (no one from home knows where he is or that he's died) reflects not the terrorists winning but Gray giving up.

The conclusive moment occurs in an epilogue called "In Beirut." Brita has come to photograph the terrorist leader, Abu Rashid. In Beirut she sees signs for Coke II, a new soft drink, and thinks they "herald the presence of the Maoist group" (230). That Maoist terrorists can appropriate the capitalist advertising placards of a soft drink, whether deliberately or not, shows that they already exert a great deal of influence. Brita arrives at Rashid's, where they speak through an interpreter, and while she shoots, he talks about Mao, revolution, historical change:

> Mao believed in the process of thought reform. It is possible to make history by changing the basic nature of a people. When did he realize this? Was it at the height of his power? Or when he was a guerrilla leader, at the beginning, with a small army of vagrants and outcasts, concealed in the mountains? (236)

Rashid is saying that it took terror, enacted by a small army of vagrants, for Mao to have the lasting effect he has had on Chinese society. Bill Gray's feeling of competition with the terrorists comes from a desire to change, as Mao did, "the basic nature of a people." But the only examples in *Mao II* of people who have been able to do this are leaders of

violence like Mao or Ayatollah Khomeini, because they're the ones who can control the crowds.  Throughout the novel we see pictures and scenes with images of Khomeini or Mao surrounded by vast numbers of followers.  This, Gray seems to conclude, is the only way to make history in the late twentieth century: by infusing one's own image with such force that it can draw crowds, by making oneself into an icon of change that will ultimately affect a whole society.  The book, in fact, arrives at the same conclusion in letting Brita come to Beirut to photograph Rashid.  No longer is she taking pictures of writers, who for her were the shapers of society.  Now Brita has moved on to the real shaping, the place of true influence: the terrorist's den.  And her photographs, which will be disseminated to the Western world, will give Rashid precisely the publicity he needs.  They will help to form of him in the West the image he has already imprinted on the shirts and minds of all the children of his community.  Rashid explains the shirts to Brita and then asks, "do you think I'm a madman living in this hellish slum and then I talk to these people about world revolution?" (232-33), raising a specter of the comment Hassad made to Gray earlier about the madman in the street being absorbed and processed by TV and advertising.  Hassad's point was that the terrorists are the only ones who can stand outside society and affect it.  Rashid proves that right here by showing that unlike the images of writers, which only add to society's "blur and glut" (157), his image, like Mao's and Khomeini's, will draw crowds.  And as the narrator has told us in the prologue, "[t]he future belongs to crowds" (16).

Bill Gray believes that the writer has been subsumed by the image and that in a culture of images, the only true thought reform can come from terrorists.  It would be

nice to say that *Mao II* as a whole disproves Gray's feelings, but the sentiment by the end of the novel is that he's right. DeLillo too believes that only spectacular images can change a televisual culture. In coming to this conclusion, DeLillo has made a move that Myra Jehlen argues has been a condition of the American novel since *Moby-Dick* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Unlike the European novel, which "more easily envisages alternative societies or at least their theoretical possibilities," the American novel gives up, moves on and out of the problematic society. Gray's death, then, is no different from Huck Finn's decision to "light out for the Territory," or Ahab's fight to the death with Moby Dick. It is simply an escape, a refusal to try to deal with the problems with society that the novel has illustrated throughout. John Kucich, who diagnoses this refusal "as a symptom of [DeLillo's] own postmodernist inability to reason out an alternative politics" (Kucich, 341), finds that "DeLillo's novels contain a full cast of such characters [as Gray], who grope for alternative social identities that they ultimately use only in ironic or self-destructive ways" (Kucich, 341), an accusation that Wallace would level at his forefather only obliquely.

What the novel can still do, as *Mao II*—although not Bill Gray—has shown us, is to criticize the culture. If the writer is to stand and live at the margins, as DeLillo and Gray both want him to do, then all he can do is criticize society in the manner of Socrates—by demonstrating problems rather than offering solutions. DeLillo must believe, ultimately, that this is the purpose of the novelist, although neither Jehlen, nor Kucich, nor I, nor even Wallace, believe this to be so. Wallace, as my final chapter will show, believes that in addition to criticism the novel must offer, if not a pragmatic solution, then at least a redeeming vision.

4.  <u>On Losing, and Finding, Limits in an *Infinite Jest*</u>

> What it should be,
> More than his father's death, that thus hath put him
> So much from th'understanding of himself,
> I cannot dream of.
> *Hamlet*, II.ii.7-10

As a cultural critic, Don DeLillo finds his problems with television culture in American society reflected in the condition of the contemporary novel and novelist. The novel is commodified, *Mao II* tells us; it's made into idea-currency which people may trade amongst themselves to signify their affiliation with its content. The image of the novelist, too, is passed around among various media and in the process meanings are both attached to and drained out of it. In addition, the spectacle created especially by television places a premium on simple, easy-to-convey statements, such as those of terrorists, rather than the complex meanings enacted by the novel's text. As a result, narratives cannot simultaneously uphold contradictory positions and the novelist thereby loses her ability to make nuanced cultural commentary; she loses her power to critique, influence and maybe even shape society. DeLillo dramatizes this in *Mao II*. And David Foster Wallace, in "E Unibus Pluram," argues that fiction in the postmodern period, especially that which acknowledges the influence of TV, must be self-reflexive and ironic to the point of emptiness if it is to be at all convincing to postmodern intellectuals and anyone raised on television. Both of these novelists agree that television has diluted the influence of the novel in late twentieth-century American society. But while DeLillo, who was born too early for his formative years to be shaped by TV, laments its presence in our culture and even vilifies it, Wallace, who grew up under the its influence, has tried

to write a novel that will accept the commodification and irony that it heralds into his and his readers' lives and attempt to deal with these effects rather than lamenting them.

As "E Unibus Pluram" showed, Wallace has ambivalent feelings about postmodernism. Having grown up in the '60s and '70s himself, having been influenced by TV his whole life and having gone to Amherst College in the early eighties, just past the apex of academic deconstructionism, he has plenty of reason to find postmodernism's cynicism, disbelief in essential truths and hypocrisy-exploding irony compelling; yet compelled as he is, it's gone on long enough, he feels. He comments, in a 1993 interview, that "the postmodern founders' patricidal work was great, but patricide produces orphans, and no amount of revelry can make up for the fact that writers my age have been literary orphans throughout our formative years." The cause of this orphanage is twofold. First, in exploding the hypocrisy of popular mass cultural tropes, authors like Pynchon, Burroughs and DeLillo showed that novels that attempt to do social work must constantly question dominant cultural modes, while not necessarily offering alternative solutions. At the same time writers like John Barth and Donald Barthelme disallowed assumptions about traditional narrative itself through metafiction: stories that are finally only about their own status as stories. Perpetual doubting in form and function necessarily leads to a level of cynicism: between critiques of culture and of fiction itself, the authorial progeny of these fiction writers have been left with a vacuum of tradition in which they are left free to write about anything and in any form but must doubt the validity of every positive statement they try to make. As a result of this freedom, Wallace decides "[w]e're kind of wishing some parents would come back. And of course we're uneasy about the fact that we wish they'd come back . . . . Is there something

about authority and limits we actually *need*?" (*Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 150).

This relationship between cynical freedom and transcendent limits becomes the crux of

*Infinite Jest*, a novel of entertainment, addiction, and, as its Shakespearean title implies,

the effects of father-figures absent, or abusive, or dead.

<div align="center">Cynicism and its Discontents</div>

In setting *Infinite Jest* in a near-future United States, Wallace can satirize various

trends he sees in his own culture. *Infinite Jest* centers around a film of the same name

that has proven to be so entertaining that people who watch it put their futuristic VCRs in

a loop so the film will keep playing constantly. They will sacrifice everything to

continue watching; food, sleep, even bathroom breaks. The film turns out to be so

entertaining it's fatal, an extreme version of what Wallace sees as contemporary

addiction to television. Advertising has also become even more pervasive, with

everything from the Statue of Liberty becoming a 'spokestatue' for the product of the

year (wearing a giant adult diaper in the year of the novel's main action) to time itself

becoming subsidized (most of the novel takes place in the "Year of the Depend Adult

Undergarment"). In satire, though, we cannot take things seriously. We cannot believe,

in other words, and this produces the same effects as DeLillo's cynicism.

Yet Wallace can't avoid social critique. Like DeLillo, he sees transmission of

information in the late twentieth century as heavily mediated, and he reflects this in his

novel. N. Katherine Hayles discusses this in her 1999 essay on "The Illusion of

Autonomy and the fact of Recursivity: Virtual Ecologies, Entertainment, and *Infinite

Jest*" with respect to the recursive systems enacted within the novel (although she does

not illustrate the way in which this mediation contributes to doubt and disbelief). The

mediation occurs on various levels. Periodically we are reminded of the narrator's role in communicating the story, as when he points out in note 137 (1026) that "[n]one of these are Gately's terms," after a metaphor for alcoholic Don Gately's fear of the Alcoholics Anonymous veterans who seem to "rule by . . . shamanistic fiat" (354). Historical information is even more mediated: we receive political history through a puppet show written and filmed by Mario Incandenza, national history in footnotes about conversations between Mario's brothers Orin and Hal, and television history via Hal's high school papers. The emphasis on mediation makes us constantly question the validity of the information and the trustworthiness of the narrator. This technique combines metafiction and cultural satire to make us question the sources from which we receive our knowledge, but it also decreases our ability to believe in the text itself, a move that seems inimical to the goals Wallace set himself in "E Unibus Pluram."

While *Infinite Jest* enacts this technique, it simultaneously illustrates the (in)expressive power of an artwork that foregrounds its status as mediated expression. At a party film student Molly Notkin holds for herself we see "two empty ornate gilt frames Notkin thinks she's been retroironic by having the frames themselves framed, in rather less ornate frames, in wry allusion to the early-Experialist fashion of making art out of the accessories of artistic presentation" (*IJ*, 229). These frames decorate a room where film academics dance the latest "anticraze," the "Minimalist Mambo," in which "the dancers appear to be just this side of standing still" (229). The film students exhibit a perfect lack of enthusiasm because to actually enjoy something, to be moved by music— to care—would belie naïveté, and these (postmodern) intellectuals must show that they are anything but naïve. And so in a perversion of the already perverse Warhol, they

frame only frames, showing us that content itself is no more than sentimentality. If asked, these intellectuals might say that they've been freed from the constraints of content, but what their expression in art and dance amounts to is cynicism. Wallace is satirizing here what he sees as the logical next step in culture if we directly follow the lead of the early postmodernists. The film students' art is reminiscent of the Image-Fiction he describes in "E Unibus Pluram": "amazing and forgettable, wonderful and oddly hollow" (*Fun*, 81). Freed of the constraint of content and meaning, the result is a vacuum delineated by cynicism. *Infinite Jest* itself would be the same if its only point was to demonstrate its status as mediated expression. But it wants to explore the results of that self-consciousness—that super-awareness—as well.

Hal Incandenza is the character in whom Wallace concentrates the effects of intellectualized emptiness. The novel opens with Hal's admissions interview at an Arizona college from which he hopes to receive a tennis scholarship. We learn here that he is a troubled prodigy. One of the top-ranked tennis players at Enfield Tennis Academy, where he went to middle and high school, he also happens to have memorized the *O.E.D.* To convince the admissions officers that he is not a tennis jock who's exercised away his neocortex, he tries to tell them, "I believe the influence of Kierkegaard on Camus is underestimated. . . . I believe Hobbes is just Rousseau in a dark mirror. I believe, with Hegel, that transcendence is absorption" (*IJ*, 12). Yet as precocious as he is, Hal is mysteriously unable to communicate to the interviewers. Although he's been narrating to the reader quite eloquently, the interviewers hear only grunts and squeals. They panic and send him to the emergency room. The 1,000 pages

following[2] take place in the years leading up to this linguistic calamity. Although we're left without the answer we thought we were reading for—what happened to precipitate Hal's admissions debacle[3]—the novel does show Hal as being quite adept at communicating emotions prior to this event. Yet adept at communicating does not necessarily mean that he actually feels them. Hal's communication problems and his emotional emptiness, similar to the emptiness of Molly Notkin's frames, is a crux of the novel.

Like the Danish prince the title refers to, Hal has lost his father. Also like Hamlet, who is "but mad north-north-west," Hal demonstrates the ability to convey emotions he does not actually feel. This becomes most clear in a scene where Hal and his brother Orin discuss the aftermath of their father's grisly suicide.[4] Orin is being interviewed for a magazine profile of himself and his family and wants to know about their father James's death, having avoided the funeral and phone calls home for the two years following. After describing to Orin the circumstances of the death, which Hal was the first to come upon, he embarks on the story of his forced grief-therapy sessions, which bothered him most because they hurt his placement in the tennis ranks at his school. The therapy couldn't end, Hal realized, until he figured out how to "deliver the goods": how to convince the therapist that he was grieving, had grieved, and had now successfully "processed" the grief, enabling him to go on with his life, no longer

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[2] Including 100 pages of footnotes.

[3] This textual lacuna frustrated many of *Infinite Jest*'s early reviewers; Wallace had to fight hard with his publishers to keep the ending thus unresolved. For a typical reviewer's exasperation, see Jay McInerney's review in the New York Times Book review, in which he characterizes it as "alternately tedious and effulgent." Another reviewer refused even to read the massive text (Schwarzbaum).

[4] This is an important scene in the novel not only for its commentary on issues in contemporary culture but for the emotion that it evokes itself a little earlier, when Hal expresses his bitterness toward Orin for not being in touch. In other words, before it becomes grotesquely funny, this scene is sad. It is one of many scenes that disprove various reviewers' (including McInerney's) conclusions that Wallace is an authorial version of Hal: linguistically dazzling but emotionally empty.

traumatized.  But already we see a problem, because Hal's goal isn't actually to confront the loss and grieve; he simply has to convince the grief-therapist (and his mother and uncle, also authority figures, who are sending him to these sessions) that he has felt and dealt with the expected emotions.  All that matters is that he successfully manipulate the right emotional signifiers, however empty they may be.  And so at the advice of a friend, he rushes to the library's "professional grief- and trauma-therapy section" and there learns how to deliver.  At the next session, he launches a tirade about how the grief therapist has made him "feel toxically guilty for not feeling anything."  After an affected breakdown about how bad the sessions are making him feel he absolves himself, and the therapist is convinced that Hal has finally worked through his grief (*IJ*, 255-56).

Hal's suspicion of the process of grief-therapy has its merits.  He finds at the beginning that he can't make an emotional connection with the therapist.  All he can tell Orin about the therapist is that "[h]e always had the remains of a sneeze in his mustache. I got to know that mustache very well" (*IJ*, 252).  The relationship is sterilely clinical but the therapist tries to make their interaction seem genuine by asking Hal to call him by his first name (which Hal soon forgets).  This authority figure is not to be trusted, as we learn when, in shaking Hal's hand in the last session, he brings his own hands out from under the desk.  They turn out to be "tiny and pink and hairless and butt-soft, delicate as shells" (257): the hands of a child.  This proves to Hal the absurdity of the whole situation and he rushes to the men's room reeling with laughter.  We as readers also see that in spite of the therapist's appearance of expertise and wisdom—his "huge red meaty face and thick walrus mustache and dewlaps" (257)—his hands, in which one's ability to act and to use tools—one's true expertise, in other words—is actually located, have never acted.  They

present quite a contrast to Hal's own hands, callused from years of tennis. While this scene is a legitimate undermining of a twentieth-century American authority figure, it also shows how Hal undermines that authority, an ability that arises from suspicion, which leads to cynicism, which results in emptiness. The scene becomes a criticism of an artificial attempt to access emotions, whose artifice ultimately makes it even more difficult to reach them. Hal in this scene might very well be Don DeLillo himself, capable of criticizing, satirizing, undermining problematic systems but without any positive concrete alternative.

Because of his ability to manipulate the images of emotions, Hal has been able to get by without actually feeling them himself. We're told later that

> Hal himself hasn't had a bona fide intensity-of-interior-life-type emotion since he was tiny; he finds terms like *joie* and *value* to be like so many variables in rarified equations, and he can manipulate them well enough to satisfy everyone but himself that he's in there, inside his own hull, as a human being—but in fact he's far more robotic than [his tennis competitor] John Wayne. (*IJ*, 694)

The reasons for this are varied. The narrator, who through most of the book is a third person—not Hal—posits that it's because of the televisual culture described in both "E Unibus Pluram" and *Mao II*. This passage, in a mode closer to essay than fiction, considers "the lively arts of the millennial U.S.A." to contain "vestiges of the Romantic glorification of *Weltschmerz*, which means world-weariness or hip ennui" (694). Most of the passage makes a similar point as the end of "E Unibus Pluram," but the one thing it does add is a theory of Hal's own ("who's empty but not dumb"), which is that "what

passes for hip cynical transcendence of sentiment is really some kind of fear of being really human" (694-95). Hal becomes Wallace's TV-child here, his ability to relinquish power to his own emotions crippled by the healthy skepticism of the "patricidal founders" that was co-opted by TV itself and made into "hip cynical transcendence of sentiment."

This "transcendence" shows itself in intellectual realms, too, and most devastatingly in postmodern thought. In *The Condition of Postmodernity* David Harvey locates "the triumph of aesthetics over ethics" in "the fact the Reagan was re-elected when all the polls showed that the majority of the US electorate . . . disagreed fundamentally with him on almost all major issues" (Harvey, 329). Wallace himself believes that "the intellectualization and aestheticizing of principles and values in this country is one of the things that's gutted our generation" (in Miller). The result is to "gut" the relevance of any value at all. If every value is simply a term to be manipulated in order to please the public (Reagan) or the authority figure (Hal), then there is no reason to try to uphold any value for its own sake. Progressive thought in the late twentieth century, says Jean-François Lyotard in a statement that could be tailor-made for *Mao II*, "can find expression in reactive, even reactionary, attitudes or in utopias—but not in a positive orientation that would open up a new perspective" (Lyotard, 48-49). Wallace also feels the difficulty in finding this new perspective, as his own constant satire shows, but he is nevertheless driven to search.

<u>When Entertainment Goes Bad</u>

In the fictional future of *Infinite Jest*, where time has become subsidized and high school students are required to write papers on historical TV characters, the pursuit of

happiness has turned into the pursuit of entertainment.  Broadcast television has been

replaced by pay-per-view-like "spontaneous dissemination," wherein viewers choose and

pay for any program they want directly, receiving them on diskettes called "cartridges"

and viewing them on "teleputers," or "TPs."  This new technology has led to the downfall

of advertising companies (and necessitated subsidized time), but has allowed "American

mass-entertainment [to become] inherently pro-active, consumer-driven" (417) and thus

even more pervasive than in DeLillo's formulation.  Because it is so much more

interactive, this new type of televisual entertainment gives its viewers more choices about

what to watch, and it gives the impression of even offering them more freedom.

N. Katherine Hayles discusses this problem in her essay.  She summarizes a

market theory of Charles Ostman, science editor at *Mondo 2000* and technology

consultant, in which computer technology, especially on the Internet, allows companies

to track individual consumers' tastes as they shop online.  The tracking system can then

provide the consumer with exactly the stimuli she prefers, making the experience "more

like entertainment than shopping" and this "[e]ntertainment [is] so intense and personally

tailored to her individual responses and psychology that it is irresistible" (Hayles, 682).

Ostman characterizes this (perhaps ironically, Haynes points out) as a process of selling

enrapturement; that is, marketing product and experience as one and the same in order to

"suture the consumer tightly into a circuit of pleasure" in which the consumer becomes

dependent on the marketing system rather than the product itself to repeat the satisfaction

she's gained from buying the product.  The product loses its inherent value and becomes

important only insofar as it offers the consumer the opportunity to repeat her experience

of buying it.  Ostman speculates that this combination of product and experience will

become "so compelling, enriching and rewarding that you'll want to come back for more," but the potential down-side, he admits, is that "you'll become so enraptured that you won't want out; you'll become addicted" (Ostman in Hayles, 683). Wallace foresees this same situation in *Infinite Jest*, in whose world there are multifold pleasurable experiences that characters can buy or otherwise obtain in material form, to be consumed and enjoyed until they must be bought again. The most insidious of these is of course the eponymous film, which provides an ecstasy so perfect that its viewers do not care to act of their own accord ever again.

Experiences like these, whether they're reached through "Entertainment" or "Substances" (to use Wallace's locutions), are inherently passive. A television "viewing experience," for example, involves nothing more than sitting and watching. As banal as this statement is, the implications may not be so obvious. The experience of Hugh Steeply's father illustrates Wallace's view of the implications most clearly. As Steeply tells it, his father began watching "M*A*S*H" religiously, whenever it was on TV, to the point where Steeply's mother would have to cancel social engagements so he wouldn't miss any episodes. Over time he became so involved in the show that he would take notes on it, refer to places in the house as fictional locations on the show, and try to write letters to the characters. He died watching it and left scores of notebooks with his theories about apocalyptic messages in "M*A*S*H"'s subtext. This scene prefigures the many others we see in the present of the narrative where people die watching "Infinite Jest," suggesting that addictive entertainment existed long before the fatal film. Steeply's father was addicted to a television series that depicted a fictional army base with fictional characters in 1950s Korea. He was addicted to watching. Although he was also involved

with the show, his involvement was based on an assumption that the characters were actual and relevant, rather than figures created simply to entertain. His involvement did not require any act of his own; although he wrote letters and made extensive notes, he was at best *re*acting to stimuli from the show—the Entertainment—itself. The result of watching, of passive reception of Entertainment, then, is to let the fiction overtake the real world. It is to let the satisfaction of the narrative with a beginning and end—a telos—replace the struggle of creating one's own life narrative, to let an organized image of life supplant the chaotic real thing.

Yet if this is what makes a person happy, why berate it? Once again, Hugh Steeply demonstrates the problem, this time through his own beliefs. Steeply, a field operative for the U.S. "Office of Unspecified Services," which includes the F.B.I. as well as the C.I.A., converses with Québecois terrorist Rémy Marathe about American values. Most importantly, he says, the United States "reveres the sacredness of the individual choice. The individual's right to pursue his own vision of the best ratio of pleasure to pain: utterly sacrosanct" (*IJ*, 424). It seems that the first two rights declared in the *Declaration of Independence*—Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness—have been subsumed by the third. Of course life is important, Steeply might say, but it is worthwhile only insofar as the following two terms are available to it. And liberty must be mentioned only because it is necessary for the individual to be able to pursue his or her own personal source of happiness. Happiness is the ultimate goal for Steeply, but in the manner of the addicted characters he refuses to distinguish between happiness and pleasure: "We don't force. It's exactly about *not*-forcing, our history's genius. You are entitled to your values of maximum pleasure" (424). Because each individual's choice is

equally respected and "not-forced," each pleasure becomes functionally equivalent: it doesn't matter what the source of pleasure is as long as there's a satisfactory amount of it. In this formulation, happiness as pleasure is even more important than life, and anyone who finds watching endless TV—say "M*A*S*H" or "Infinite Jest"—most pleasurable ought to be admired for fulfilling the American dream.

Being passively pleasured, whether through entertainment or drugs, turns out to be terribly solipsistic. Witness Steeply's father, who ignores not only social obligations but eventually his own family to watch more "M*A*S*H." Notice the experiences of most addicts, including a father in Narcotics Anonymous who in spite of his abiding love for his family spends their last dollars for food on a final cocaine binge. Or see Hal's own inability to communicate with his father, a result of millennial televisual cynicism that makes him so afraid of appearing "sentimental and naïve and goo-prone and generally pathetic" (695) and results in his emotional vacuum and the speech catastrophe. Wallace reflects this rampant solipsism in the acronym for the new political system in the novel's present: "O.N.A.N.," for the "Organization of North American Nations." These letters refer to the biblical Onan, who sinned by physically pleasuring himself.

Solipsism makes it difficult to act. Like the viewers of "Infinite Jest" who are entertained to death in their easy chairs, readers of *Infinite Jest* the novel are at risk of not acting either. This is because *Infinite Jest* works to have an effect suspiciously similar to the one the film has on its viewers. The novel opens with a mystery: what happened to this boy Hal Incandenza to make his interviewers think he was making animal noises when he was actually trying to talk about Kierkagaard and Rousseau? After the first seventeen pages, the narrative drops back to the previous year, with forays into earlier

periods. But it never catches up to the event that precipitated this disaster. After 981 pages, the plot is unresolved. This lack of resolution frustrated reviewers like Jay McInerney, but at the same time, it leaves the reader speculating, making her want to return and read the book again, and again, and again, until she has finally found the answer to the book's mystery. The intellectual challenge—along with the narrative's densely packed humor—becomes the equivalent of the pleasurable drug or film that promises to finally satisfy with one last ingestion, viewing, reading. Whether the reader can stand the test, whether he will be pulled into the recursive cycle of the novel's unanswered questions, will depend on how well he understands the father problem and how it must be solve.

<div align="center">The Father-Figure, or Freeing Limits</div>

The cynicism-run-rampant in *Infinite Jest* is born in the act of finding problems with traditional forms of authority. This can play itself out everywhere from DeLillo's exposition of the power of the image to television's satires of its own naïve sitcoms to metafiction's explosions of assumptions about narrative itself. In *Infinite Jest* Wallace locates his conception of traditional authority in the figure of the father. The novel's title is apt then, with its reference to Hamlet's mentor Yorick, who, having borne Hamlet "on his back a thousand times" (V.i.186), both entertained the prince and acted as a father. But Hamlet is also known for his sudden lack of a father; the constraints the ghost puts on him are the spurs for the rest of the story. The father-figure can provide useful constraints. By definition constraints and boundaries would seem only to confine, but *Infinite Jest* shows certain limits that have the power to liberate. Lack of the right kind of limits is equated with lack of a father-figure, or an authority figure, here. Thus the

problem in the literature and life of the late twentieth century, *Infinite Jest* posits, is not authority but a pervasive lack thereof.

According to Robert Con Davis's introduction to *The Fictional Father*, in which he outlines the theoretical workings of the father-figure in narrative structure, the lack of a father "is an originary feature of every narrative" (8). Every narrative must have its origin in an absence, in other words; it is this absence that creates the obstacles to a character's happiness. *Hamlet* (like *The Odyssey* and *Oedipus*) provides a clear illustration of this and one that is for obvious reasons especially pertinent to a discussion of *Infinite Jest*. The play begins with a sighting of King Hamlet's ghost, already showing how the father, even when dead, exerts a powerful influence. The King's death—his absence—has allowed Claudius to take the throne, displacing the younger Hamlet and introducing a disorder into Denmark. It is the King's absence-presence that sets the plot in motion as the Ghost orders Hamlet to avenge his murder. Davis calls the father's originary action a "no," which is his prohibition that the son take his place. But this "no" doesn't come from the father, it comes from the pseudo-father: in *Hamlet*, Claudius; in *The Odyssey*, the suitors; in *Infinite Jest*, the pseudo-father is Entertainment. "Son status" thus becomes a state of restricted action. This constraint, brought on by Claudius's overtaking of the throne, engenders in Hamlet a desire, in this case for punishment for his father's murder. In following this desire Hamlet is also following his father's (ghost's) orders, or the Law of the Father.[5] According to Davis, this constraint—the Father-Law— may be understood as the "enfranchising [of] one line of continuity over other possibilities" (13), or the limit created by choosing one line of narrative over others.

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[5] In Freudian and Lacanian theory, the Law of the Father represents the impossibility of reestablishing the maternal/physical understanding of the world and the inevitability of symbolic (linguistic) understanding.

Whereas the line of continuity offered Hamlet if he follows Claudius's plan disempowers him, his father's order, which involves immediate limits on his choices of action, will ultimately empower him as he enforces the law and (in theory) assumes his rightful place on the throne.  By enacting the Father-Law, Hamlet will become a mature adult.  But he does have to act.

The most important father in *Infinite Jest* is reminiscent of Yorick.  James O. Incandenza, optics expert, first headmaster of E.T.A. and "après-garde" filmmaker, made the fatally entertaining film "Infinite Jest" as an attempt to break Hal out of his emotional emptiness and solipsism, which James noticed beginning before his suicide.  In the opening section of the book, as Hal is being taken to the hospital after his admissions debacle, he thinks "of John N. R. Wayne . . . standing watch in a mask as Donald Gately and I dig up my father's head" (16-17).  And toward the end Don Gately, who has never met Hal in the course of the narrative, "dreams he's with a very sad kid and they're in a graveyard digging some dead guy's head up and it's really important" because they have to get to "the important thing [that] was buried in the guy's head . . . to divert the Continental Emergency" (934).  The important thing is the film "Infinite Jest" (which Canadian terrorists, in an act that combines DeLillo's conception of the terrorist with the mesmerizing power of televisual entertainment, plan to use as a threat against the U.S.).  Gately has dreamed of this dig while in the hospital, after being visited by Hal's father's ghost, and thus with (the) Entertainment literally within his skull, James comes to represent Yorick as well as the Ghost of King Hamlet himself.  Entertainment and the imperative of the father are conflated here, when the ghost says that in making the film "Infinite Jest" his "most serious wish was: *to entertain*" (839).  He simply wanted to

converse with Hal, wanted to "concoct something the gifted boy couldn't simply master and move on from to a new plateau" (838-39). In this sense the film "Infinite Jest" and the novel *Infinite Jest*, along with the goals of their respective authors, are conflated. Is the novel meant just to entertain? Might the novel, with its efforts at preventing its readers from mastering it, from moving on to the next literary plateau, be as addictive as the film within? If this is true, then Wallace is trying to be the author of the same conversation James Incandenza wants to spark. As the author/father he's worried that his reader/son is as cynical as Hal, and so he must make the novel as compelling as possible. At the same time, he must offer the reader the Father-Law to choose if the reader wants to grow and to act rather than lapse into the solipsism of an attempt to solve an intellectual mystery.

As per Wallace's comment on the contemporary condition in fiction, in which the postmodern founders committed useful patricide but left orphans as a result, *Infinite Jest* shows many characters who have father problems in one way or another. James O. Incandenza, father of Hal, Orin and Mario, committed suicide using an ingeniously rigged microwave oven. Joelle Van Dyne's 'Daddy' was obsessively in love with her. Bruce Green's 'Pop' accidentally killed Bruce's mother with a snake-in-the-can-of-nuts gag. Matty Pemulis's father molested him, and James Incandenza Sr., Hal's grandfather, was an alcoholic ex-top-ranked tennis player and pre-Method actor whose expectations for his son were disastrously high as a result of his own father's low expectations for him. Don Gately, who shares the stage with Hal as the novel's protagonist, most vividly represents the damage a missing father can do, and he will afterward lead us to Wallace's solution. Gately never met his father, but he knows that he had "broken Gately's

mother's jaw and left Boston when Gately was in his mother's stomach" (446). This has left Gately free to begin finishing his mother's vodkas by the time he is ten or eleven. With an alcoholic mother and no father, there is no authority figure to stop young Don from drinking to his heart's content. Already he lacks limits, and he has yet to admit their absence. Not long afterwards, he starts to test harder drugs. However by this point he's playing high school football and for a short time does learn to limit himself: "During football season he ruled himself with an iron hand until the sun set, then threw himself on the mercy of sidewalks and the somnolent hum" (905). Football, for a moment, provides the father-law Gately needs to keep himself from unbounded twenty-four hour drug consumption. But by failing multiple English classes Gately gets kicked out of athletics, and when his mother has a cirrhotic hemorrhage and is taken to a "Long Term Institution," he leaves school altogether and has nothing left to keep him from ingesting what the novel calls "Substances" to his craving's content. Without limits, Gately can follow every want that overtakes him or, later, his body. Choosing not to avoid—or rather, not choosing to avoid—each transient desire that comes along leads Gately to addiction, in which his desires begin to control him, imposing limits on him that he did not, could not choose. It is this inability to choose that makes some Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) members, with whom the novel spends a great deal of time, refer to addiction as "The Cage": a confined space that the inhabitant has not chosen for herself and cannot escape without help. Because Don Gately did not have an authority figure to help him create his own boundaries, he let addiction put him in The Cage.[6]

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[6] We learn in the novel's Footnote 24, James Incandenza's filmography, that Incandenza made three films entitled "Cage." All three cages are arenas where participants have no perspective on their own situations. The first, a "[s]oliliquized parody" of a shampoo ad, uses "four convex mirrors, two planar mirrors, and one actress." With all these mirrors, and the title of the piece, we see advertising as itself both limiting

In obedience to his Substance-Law, Gately becomes a burglar to earn money for more of his various drugs. But through some unfortunate decisions, Gately gets arrested, and he eventually ends up in Alcoholics Anonymous. His relationship with this program illustrates the progression from the supposed freedom of cynicism and Substance-Law to the transcendence of that, which is achieved through the constraints of the Father-Law.

Within a long section on Alcoholics Anonymous, the narrator lists "many exotic new facts" that one will acquire in spending time at a "Substance-recovery halfway facility": "[t]hat most Substance-addicted people are also addicted to thinking, meaning they have a compulsive and unhealthy relationship with their own thinking. That the cute Boston AA term for addictive-type thinking is: *Analysis-Paralysis*" (200). This follows the fact "[t]hat it is statistically easier for low-IQ people to kick an addiction than it is for high-IQ people" (200). The reason for this is that the people with the higher IQs—the people who think the most—will find all sorts of reasons to doubt the process. They're cynical. Like most Americans raised on TV—like Hal—they've heard all the mantras and the parodies; like postmodern intellectuals—Molly Notkin, for example—they're extremely wary of displaying any hint of naïveté. Wallace himself exhibits this tendency in the length of the novel, the narrator's self-consciousness, the pervasive satire and like Gately, finds it very difficult to accept clichéd advise like that of AA. And the discourse of AA *is* replete with clichés, including "Easy Does It" and "One Day At a Time" (369), "But For the Grace of God" (366), "Keep Coming" (358), and, as if in response to

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("encaging") and solipsistic. *Cage II* is about a blind man and a deaf-mute man imprisoned together and their attempts at communication. While not as solipsistic as the first, it does illustrate the challenges to communication that 'The Cage' of addiction presents. *Cage III* involves a carnival sideshow in which two sets of performers are each convinced that they're the spectators, making us consider the denial involved in addiction and offering a disturbing perspective on the role of entertainment specifically, in addiction's Cage.

members' cynicism about all the other phrases, "Fake It Till You Make It" (369).  Gately starts out cynical, hating "this goofy slapdash anarchic system of low-rent gatherings and corny slogans and saccharin grins and hideous coffee is so lame you just *know* there's no way it could ever possibly work except for the utterest morons" (350).  But he keeps following the advice, the trite mantras, staying sober "One Day At a Time," and eventually finds he no longer depends on his Substance.  He realizes that in spite of the fact that it's "unromantic, unhip, clichéd" (350), AA "actually does seem to work.  Does keep you Substance-free" (349).  Close on the tail of this realization is the question of *how* it works, to which, if asked, AA veterans will only respond with "Just Fine."

The characters may not be able to learn how it works, and the novel never explicitly says how, but as readers we can see that Alcoholics Anonymous, with its older (wiser) veterans who run the program and deliver the mantras, is enacting the Law of the Father.  As clichéd as the phrases are, they must be followed or the Law of the Substance will take over, just as Claudius will prevail if Hamlet doesn't act.  By the time Gately is in the hospital, unable to speak but trying to avoid the pain-killer Demerol, which would make him relapse into his addiction, he's able to accept his cravings and almost ignore them.  AA tells him to "[l]et them come as they will, but do not *Entertain* them" (*IJ*, 890), and he can.  Gately has learned to accept the boundaries created by AA's mantras.  The Father-Law is now in his system and he can now enact the narrative line of continuity that will bring him toward his goal: control over his own life, which is to say, maturity.  Ultimately, the Father-Law offers maturity.  It is only when characters stop thinking and accept limits to their narratives that they can be find that maturity.  "Just Do It," the veterans say (350), and this is one advertising slogan to be followed.  The AA

veteran becomes the only "loving-filled father to guide, inform, teach the person how to choose" (320) in the novel. And after the imperatives of AA begin to take effect, *Infinite Jest*'s narrator tells us that "you've started to have an almost classic sort of Blind Faith in the older guys . . . 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" (350).

*Infinite Jest* is about Canadian terrorists and the history and government of a new political configuration in North America. The novel raises questions about the ability to communicate across linguistic discourses, which Noah Raizman explores in his thesis. It deals with ecological crisis, as Hayles discusses, it creates an experimental and mathematically sophisticated form, as Chris Hager shows, and it satirizes a culture obsessed with television. Yet embedded within all this political intrigue, philosophical investigation, formal experimentation and social satire is the story of Donald Gately. Gately starts out in the narrative as a burglar, inept and perverse, then becomes a cynical recovering alcoholic, then a staff member and confidante at a halfway house who gets shot trying to protect one of his charges from a well-deserved fight. He spends the rest of the novel in the hospital, close to death. In the meantime, he's also fallen for Joelle van Dyne. In other words, in the midst of this convoluted yet intellectually stimulating novel, Wallace tells the story of a boy who grows up, meets a girl, makes a sacrifice. It's about as traditional a story as you can get, and it is through this story line that Wallace makes what to him is his boldest move.

In his *A Map of Misreading*, Harold Bloom characterizes the relationship between the poet and his predecessors as a son-father one. The poet does not develop her poetics in a literary vacuum; it is only in response to an earlier poet and poetics, one which the

poet loved (and which therefore had great influenced over her), that she may create her poetics: "poems . . . are neither about 'subjects' nor about 'themselves.' They are necessarily about *other poems*; a poem is a response to a poem, as a poet is a response to a poet, or a person to his parent" (Bloom, 18). If we extend this argument to novelists too, *Infinite Jest* becomes a response to the work of Don DeLillo and other early postmodernists. In telling the story of Don Gately's growth and education, *Infinite Jest* takes on the classic *bildungsroman* form, and in doing so it offers a solution. The solution does not have the scope that Don DeLillo would like to see. It neither offers a new utopian vision for society nor does it threaten the existing social order. Gately's story is unironic. It is sincere. It offers us a solution on a personal level to the problems it diagnoses on the societal level: to escape the addictive pursuits of entertainment, drugs and analysis, one must find a Father-Law, and follow it: just do it, one day at a time.

*Infinite Jest* thus attempts to respond to the constraints of DeLillo as father by creating a new law, a law—or poetics, or ideology, or faith—that says to limit, to act, to listen and communicate within the decadent chaos of postmodern cynicism. And so Wallace offers some redemption for the novel in a televisual society. Satire and cultural critique have their place in the novel, as do entertainment and philosophy. But the Wallace of *Infinite Jest* affirms the traditional role of the novel that he rhetorically questions in "E Unibus Pluram": "Umm, insights and guides to value used to be among literature's jobs, didn't they?" (*Fun*, 77). *Infinite Jest* reaffirms the place of literature as a father-figure, which can and should offer a guide to value, a structure that can help the reader question society yet not be debilitated by solipsism, cynicism. Literature, for Wallace, becomes the

"loving-filled father to guide, inform, teach the person how to choose" (*IJ*, 320) that a person needs in order to grow into an active adult.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

On the local level, the driving question behind this thesis has been whether David Foster Wallace lived up to the goals he set for himself in "E Unibus Pluram:" that the next phase of fiction that criticizes televisual culture be confident enough to endorse simple, even naïve values. In this sense he has, having written a novel whose hero is a recovering drug addict who grows into a caring, mature figure capable of leadership and sacrifice. Don Gately has learned to confront his problems, and through this confrontation *Infinite Jest* offers the reader a solution to the problems it diagnoses in society. Wallace's novel is in part a response to the tradition begun by writers like Pynchon, Coover, Burroughs and, as I've discussed, DeLillo. This tradition, while it successfully highlights problems with twentieth-century society, fails to offer positive visions within its (albeit successful) criticism, as I argued in my second chapter. In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace is able to combine criticism with a positive vision.

The bigger question at stake here is what the place of the novel is in twentieth-century America. In a society where TV such a powerful institution that it can make fun of couch potatoes in commercials for itself, where it is so pervasive that the Oklahoma City Bomber Timothy McVeigh thinks to have his execution televised, making an execution's supposed catharsis transmittable, how can the novel, with its complex visions and naïve values, communicate? Should it try to replicate the society's vapidity and worship of the image in order to highlight them to its readers who are themselves

devotees of the image? Is this the most frank and honest way to represent society? DeLillo thinks so. But in illustrating only the problems and in letting the protagonist simply escape through travel and/or death (in the tradition of the American canon), the novel will inevitably be ideological. This is because in ending with a disengagement it tells a story of hopelessness. Although in many situations a story of despair is most honest and deserves to be told, the novel that does social criticism and ends by leaving society is escapist.

Should the novel then create a positive vision for society itself, either by focusing on the aspects to be admired or by imagining a new society? The first would tell a story of milk and honey. Besides its dishonest avoidance of problems, it would simply be a boring read. And by imagining a new society, the novel puts itself in the realm of speculative and science fiction; both legitimate genres but also potentially escapist in the totality of their visions. Science fiction can give us important new visions, but it is less likely to be able to help with the more local, timely issues of living in a particular society.

Then maybe the novel ought to explore the effects of a society on the individual but only offer its solution on the individual level. This type of novel can become a guide to value rather than simply fictionalized critical reportage or a vision of technology's future, although *Infinite Jest* embodies all three. But it still does not imagine an engagement with the large-scale problems of society.

Maybe the novel is not the form in which to engage a whole society. It is a personal medium, a medium of stories of growth and change and individuality, and so maybe the novel can only address society from the vantage point of the individual life. In this case television might offer itself as the medium for societal change and it is, having

shaped our relationships to everything from politics to recreation.  Whether it can enact positive social change, however, is highly to be doubted.  It DeLillo is right, and "the future belongs to crowds," then television might be the last medium to influence American life.  But as long as individual readers allow themselves to trust and learn from individual authors, the novel will uphold a place for itself in American society.

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