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“The Hazards of Being Free”: Thinking About Not Thinking in *Infinite Jest*

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This paper is about self-consciousness and how it figures in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. Because *Infinite Jest* is such a large novel (1079 pages, including the indispensable footnotes), it serves, like other large novels before it, as a kind of encyclopedia of contemporary culture.¹ The novel, in large part, treats self-consciousness—a distinctly human phenomenon, one which certainly accounts for our dominance as a species—as a problem (on both an individual and collective level) that needs to be overcome. This is because, as it turns out, self-consciousness, when it becomes epidemic, is as much a boon as it is a blow to the species.

This paper will unfold in five sections. The first section introduces the problem of self-consciousness as one of the chronological starting points of *Infinite Jest*, showing its centrality to the work as a whole. The second section expands this problem in relation to Wallace's apparently conservative version of postmodernism. Sections three, four, and five explore the problem through detailed close readings of the text, showing some of its richness as well as drawing attention to some of its ramifications.

1. Freedom and The Problem of Self-consciousness

Infinite Jest's opening episode, in which Hal waggles during his admission interview at the University of Arizona, is actually the novel's last episode chronologically. As Stephen Burn shows, the novel's storyline actually begins in 1933, when James Incandenza's father injures himself playing tennis while his own father (that would be Hal, Mario, and Orin's great-

¹ For Stephen Burn, *Infinite Jest* appears near the end in a line of “encyclopedic” novels written in the twentieth century. This line includes James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegan's Wake* (1939), William Gaddis's *The Recognitions* (1955) and *JR* (1975), Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), and Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997) (19).

grandfather) looks on (82). The two episodes are closely related, however, like opposite ends of a family history: the episode in 1933 sets up an important theme, what I term, the problem of self-consciousness, which sheds light on Hal's situation almost a century later.² The goal of this paper is to trace the problem of self-consciousness through the course of the novel, to see how this works.

Along the way, I will show how Wallace uses the problem of self-consciousness to critique what the novel presents as a particularly American and modern view of freedom, a view that fails to recognize what Steeply terms, "the hazards of being free."

Self-consciousness is, in a literal sense, a state of mind; put simply, I take it to be the act of recognizing oneself as a self. More abstractly though, self-consciousness figures in *Infinite Jest* as the site of one's perpetual *confrontation* with oneself; it is where self-doubt festers, a kind of psychological wasteland, from which the novel's many characters, almost all of them drug and alcohol addicts, are trying to escape. For the Incandenza men, it is a problem passed from one generation to the next, almost like a disease.

One's inability to escape this wasteland is paradoxical: after all, if you are trapped inside your head—if you cannot, but wish you could ignore, as Wallace puts it, "the constant monologue inside your head" (*This Is Water*, 50)—you are not really trapped at all; you are only inwardly conflicted, and this conflict persists and is even exacerbated the more you think about it. Self-consciousness is, in this way, a self-perpetuating condition; in a way, it is a matter of will. Which means solving the problem of self-consciousness has something to do with changing the

² As Burn shows, the last episode of the novel, chronologically, is Hal's admission interview at the University of Arizona, Year of Glad (2010). See "Appendix: The Chronology of *Infinite Jest*" (81) in *A Reader's Guide to Infinite Jest*.

way you think—which, to be sure, is not an easy pill to swallow: no one wants to be told *how* to think.

But Wallace wants to challenge us on this point. Sometimes freedom—or rather, freedom as we commonly conceive of it—works against us. Sometimes a person can have too much of it.

This may, on the face of it, offend our modern liberal sensibilities, but it is an idea featured throughout *Infinite Jest*. Having too much freedom is in fact how Marathe characterizes the American people, all of whom would apparently rather die watching the *samizdat* unendingly than live without it. He compares the American people to a child whose father “cries out ‘Freedom!’ and allows his child to choose only what is sweet, eating only candy, not pea soup and bread and eggs, so his child becomes weak and sick.” In other words, if Americans are addicted to the pleasures of entertainment, it is because they—like the child gorging herself on candy—lack a kind of fatherly guidance. “How to choose any but a child’s greedy choices,” he asks Steeply, “if there is no loving-filled father to guide, inform, teach the person how to choose? How is there freedom to choose if one does not learn how to choose?” (320).

On this point Steeply argues that Americans do not need or want a state-sponsored program, or something like this, “to paternalistically do their thinking and choosing for them” (321). “These things you find so weak and contemptible in us,” he argues, “these are just the hazards of being free” (320). But perhaps the “hazards of being free” are greater than Steeply realizes. Left alone to their devices, human beings tend to make bad decisions; this is a basic premise of the novel. “Not all compulsion comes from without,” Marathe warns; a person may be politically, or even physically free, but psychologically (maybe even spiritually) a slave to

their baser instincts and desires; in such a case, a person may very well need someone or something to “paternalistically do their thinking and choosing for them.”

In my close reading below I will show how the logic of Hal’s suffering—a suffering passed on to him from his father and father’s father—reflects this predicament; Marathe is in fact describing a cultural condition that figures in the lives of the Incandenza men. It is important that Marathe refers to *fatherly* guidance here, because paternalism is closely linked with the problem of self-consciousness in the course of the novel. If Marathe’s diagnosis of American society is correct, Americans, it seems, are more in need of (fatherly) guidance than they want to admit or realize.

2. Wallace’s Postmodern Conservatism

James K.A. Smith argues that Wallace’s work, often offhandedly categorized as postmodern, is in fact a kind of hybrid, stylistically postmodern but expressing a decidedly anti-nihilistic moral sensibility, which accounts for what he terms Wallace’s “postmodern conservatism.”

Although Wallace’s early work, particularly his first novel, *The Broom of The System* (1987), clearly trafficked in the postmodern hijinks the postmodern literary fathers, such as Barthelme and Pynchon, are known for—“literature that exposed and undercut the very mechanisms of story-telling”—by the time he published *Infinite Jest* (1996) it was no longer enough, for Wallace, that a novelist point out the arbitrariness and constructedness of the stories and ideologies people believe to make sense of modern life; rather, the novelist should also offer a meaningful, if not *hopeful*, way forward out of the rubble of disillusionment.

Smith points to a now famous interview Wallace had with Larry McCaffery three years before *Infinite Jest*'s publication, in which he argued,

[W]e'd probably most of us agree that these are dark times, and stupid ones, but do we need fiction that does nothing but dramatize how dark and stupid everything is? In dark times, the definition of good art would seem to be art that locates and applies CPR to those elements of what's human and magical that still live and glow despite the times' darkness. Really good fiction could have as dark a worldview as it wished, but it'd find a way both to depict this world and to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in it. (*Conversations*, 26)

Here, Wallace indicates what Smith deems the “moral purpose of his fiction,” and the basis for the “postmodern conservatism” Smith sees in his work; that good fiction should actually *care* about the reader's well-being, helping her explore what it means to be human in an age that is in many ways dehumanizing.

For Smith, that Wallace thinks a distinctly human way of life is even worth exploring—indeed, that there might even *be* a distinctly human way of life—is evidence that he has a kind of *faith*, in literature and in life, in a way that makes him, though not necessarily religious,³ still a firm anti-nihilist; he is willing to search for meaning where there is supposed to be none. This sensibility governs his work so that, as much as his fiction “documents a world of almost

³ To be sure, Wallace himself explains he is not moralizing here or reflecting on a set of religious beliefs. “This isn't that it's fiction's duty to edify or teach, or to make us good little Christians or Republicans,” he explains, “I'm not trying to line up behind Tolstoy or Gardner. I just think that fiction that isn't exploring what it means to be human today isn't art” (26).

suffocating immanence, a flattened human universe where the escapes are boredom and distraction,” this world is never completely left alone:

[T]here is a persistent hint that Wallace is spooked, that his world is haunted. His characters are anything but satisfied with what late modern capitalism has to offer, and so we see regular glimpses of what [Charles] Taylor calls the “nova effect”—new modes of being that try to forge a way through, even out of, the cross-pressured situation where immanence seems ready to implode upon itself.

So if the modern age is, as Taylor suggests, an age of “disenchantment” (*A Secular Age*, 25), Wallace seems determined to re-enchant his fictional worlds in a way that signals a kind of wishful thinking on his part—a nostalgia for a time when human kind still believed in, if not God, then, at the very least, transcendent experiences. This, I think, accounts, in part, for Wallace’s participation in what Adam Kelly terms “the New Sincerity in American Fiction.”

3. The Problem of Self-Consciousness: A Close Reading

James Incandenza’s father (who remains nameless) is a lover of tennis who, in 1960, is determined to instill in young James, age ten, a similar love for the game, convinced that James will be a truly great player. As James goes to open their garage door so they can retrieve their equipment, his father corrects him:

Jim not that way Jim. That’s no way to treat a garage door, bending stiffly down at the waist and yanking at the handle so the door jerks up and out jerky and hard and you crack your shins and my ruined knees, son. Let’s see you bend at the

healthy knees. Let's see you hook a soft hand lightly over the handle feeling its subtle grain and pull just as exactly gently as will make it come to you. (157)

James is careless opening the garage door: James' father explains that James has learned this kind of carelessness by following his mother's example—"Your mother is a shover and a thruster, son. She treats bodies outside herself without respect or due care"—and he explains that she herself learned it, along with her whole generation, by following Marlon Brando's example:

She was in love from afar with this fellow Brando, son. Who? Who. Him, Marlon Brando was the archetypal new-type actor who ruined it looks like two whole generations' relations with their own bodies and the everyday objects and bodies around them. No? Well it was because of Brando you were opening that garage door like that, Jimbo. (157)

Here it seems that James' carelessness with the garage door is symptomatic of a more fundamental problem: his father implies that the generations influenced by Brando (James' mother's generation and James' own generation) do not relate to their bodies (and the everyday objects and bodies around them) the way they should; this is why James opens the garage door the way he does. To understand what his father means by this, it is helpful to recognize Brando's cultural significance.

According to James' father, Brando—by "leaning back on his chair's rear legs, coming crooked through doorways, slouching against everything in sight, trying to *dominate* objects, showing no artful respect or care, yanking things toward him like a moody child and using them up and tossing them crudely aside so they miss the wastebasket and just lie there, ill-used. With the overclumsy impetuous movements and postures of a moody infant"—depicted a new

character type on screen, i.e. “the new archetypal tough-guy rebel and slob type,” as he terms it, whose demeanor and manner James’ mother and her generation appropriated for their own use, but to their detriment:

She may have loved Marlon Brando, Jim, but she didn’t understand him, is what’s ruined her for everyday arts like broilers and garage doors and even low-level public-park knock-around tennis. Ever see your mother with a broiler door? It’s carnage, Jim. It’s to cringe to see it, and the poor dumb thing thinks it’s tribute to this slouching slob-type she loved as he roared by. Jim, she never intuited the gentle and cunning economy behind this man’s quote harsh sloppy unstudied approach to objects. (158)

That is, James’ mother and her generation never understood that Brando himself was not actually “sloppy,” his approach to objects was not “unstudied”; his sloppiness—indeed, his whole “tough-guy rebel and slob type” demeanor—was, after all, part of his performance as an actor.

Here I think James’ father makes indirect reference to Brando’s particular acting method. Brando is known for popularizing “Stanislavski’s system,” an acting methodology taught by the Russian theatre director Konstantin Stanislavski, from which the American “Method acting” was later adapted. According to Burnet Hobgood, Stanislavski’s system teaches that acting is “the art of experiencing in performance” (149); the actor’s central task is to think like, to emotionally identify with, the character’s imagined personality:

When an actor experiences a role, Stanislavski believed, the fully realized personality of the character so dominates the occasion that the actor’s own personality virtually disappears. A fusion (*sblizhennia*) merges actor with

character and, for the moment makes it irrelevant to the spectator that the actor has an identity other than that of the character. The surest means to this end comes when the actor learns how to align his psyche with the imagined psyche of the dramatic character, for then an authentically organic process of creation can happen. (150)

Stanislavski therefore opposed acting that relied on replicating stereotypes, in which “the player observed experienced actors and copied their manner and gestures” (148), in favor of acting that sought “sincere expression” (151).

To the extent that he acted according to this method, Brando, I think one can say, acted in earnest, *becoming* his characters, so that any of his characters’ affectations—i.e. sloppiness, carelessness, etc.—would manifest almost unconsciously. In this sense, his affectations are not affectations at all; he is not *trying* to appear sloppy or careless, because he is not *trying* to mimic some pre-existing character type. His choices are born of Stanislavski’s “authentically organic process of creation.” And this is what James’ mother, so keen on paying “tribute to this slouching slob-type,” does not understand:

She never... never sees that Marlon Brando felt himself as a body so keenly he’d *no need* for manner. She never sees that in his quote careless way he actually really touched whatever he touched as if it were part of him. Of his own body.

The world he only seemed to manhandle was for him sentient, feeling. (158)

Brando had no need for manner—that is, he had no need to consciously put on airs—because when he acted, he wholly identified with his character; his physical gestures, his overall demeanor, corresponded naturally with his character’s state of mind.

In this way, James's father believes that Brando performing on camera is much like a high-level tennis player performing in front of a crowd:

She never saw that Brando was playing the equivalent of high-level quality tennis across sound stages all over both coasts, Jim, is what he was really doing. Jim, he moved like a careless fingerling, one big muscle, muscularly naïve, but always, notice, a fingerling at the center of a clear current. That kind of animal grace. The bastard wasted no motion, is what made it art, this brutish no-care. His was a tennis player's dictum: touch things with consideration and they will be yours; you will own them; they will move or stay still or move for you; they will lie back and part their legs and yield up their innermost seams to you. Teach you all their tricks. He knew what the Beats know and what the great tennis player knows, son: learn to do nothing, with your whole head and body, and everything will be done by what's around you. (158)

For James's father, high-level tennis operates on an almost mystical plane; top players wield a kind of power on the court so that objects (like the ball, presumably) “move or stay still or move for you.” A player who can do this is “muscularly naïve” in the sense that his movements are, just as Brando's movements were, instinctual; in this way he “learn[s] to do nothing, with [his] whole head and body,” in the sense that his head—a metonymy for “mind”—is not actively thinking about what his body is doing; his head simply *is* his body. Tennis thus orients the self inside the body so that one's mind and body become one.

Perhaps the best way to characterize James' mother's generation, from James' father's perspective, is to say their heads float outside their bodies. From outside their bodies they look at

themselves as they would in a mirror and are, in this way, preeminently self-conscious, in a way that great tennis players must not be. To the extent that self-consciousness is a function of an overactive mind, James is liable to think this way (with his head floating outside his body), because he is highly intelligent. James' father thus admonishes him:

[Son], its just neural spasms, those thoughts in your mind are just the sound of your head revving, and head is still just body, Jim. Commit this to memory. Head is body. Jim, brace yourself against my shoulders here for this hard news, at ten: you're a machine a body an object, Jim ... (159)

This, then, is James' father's creed: *head is body*. When head is body the mind is not self-conscious; it does not drift about or look inward.

To underscore his point, he explains to James that he himself failed to abide by this creed the day his own tennis career effectively ended at the age of thirteen. He was playing against the son of one of his father's clients, and this was the first day his own father (James' grandfather) ever came to watch him play a competitive match. "And was I nervous, young sir J.O.I?" he asks James rhetorically, referring to his father's presence there,

I was not. I was in my body. My body and I were one. My wood Wilson from my stack of wood Wilsons in their trapezoid presses was a sentient expression of my arm, and I felt it singing, and my hand, and they were alive, my well-armed hand was the secretary of my mind, lithe and responsive and *senza errori*, because I knew myself as a body and was fully inside my little child's body out there, Jim, I was in my big right arm and scarless legs, safely ensconced, running here and there, my head pounding like a heart ... (165)

James' father was by his (James' father's) own estimation perfectly fit and ready, physically and mentally, for the match, his head so much a part of his body—"safely ensconced" inside—that it "pound[ed] like a heart."

He was, thus, in the course of "handing the dandy his pampered ass," when it all went wrong—when his father's client, who knew too little of tennis etiquette to keep quiet from the sideline, remarked to his father, "Good godfrey Incandenza old trout but that lad of yours is *good*" (166), and James's father, hearing this remark and wondering how his father would respond, while simultaneously reaching for a ball hit just out of reach, slipped and fell to the ground.

As he is quick to note, it was not his body that betrayed him in that moment; it was he (read: his mind) who betrayed his body:

Jimmer, I may well have betrayed that fine young lithe tan unslumped body,
 Jimmer I may very well have gotten rigid, overconscious, careless of it, listening
 for what my father, who I respected, I *respected* that man, Jim is what's sick, I
 knew he was there, I was conscious of his flat face and filter's long shadow, I
 knew him, Jim. (167)

When he hears the client's remark and cannot help but anticipate his father's response, his head, up until this point securely *in* his body, drifts (metaphorically, I am suggesting) outside it.

Desiring his father's approval and respect, he listens for his father's response and becomes "overconscious": his attention shifts, if only slightly, from the game to *himself*.

His falling to the ground and the injury he suffers thereafter reinforces this point; he becomes acutely aware of himself, particularly as a body; he sees himself as a fixed point in the world:

It was a religious moment. I learned what it means to be a body, Jim, just meat wrapped in a sort of flimsy nylon stocking, son, as I fell kneeling and slid toward the stretched net, myself seen by me, frame by frame, torn open. (169)

In this moment he watches himself—his mind floating there outside his body—as if on a movie screen, “frame by frame, torn open.” In becoming aware of himself as a body, he experiences a kind of religious humiliation, from which, if his alcoholism later in life is any indication, he never recovers; the lesson here is that understanding the need to abide by the creed, *head is body*, may signal one’s very inability to do so, because one cannot remain, strictly speaking, willfully naïve; once he becomes “overconscious” of his body he cannot undo it. This, I think, is what causes him to drink; to become *unconscious* of one’s self may require a kind of self-forgetting⁴—perhaps a kind of self-annihilation—which is only made possible, in this case, with alcohol:

It’s a pivotal, it’s seminal, religious day when you get to both hear and feel your destiny at the same moment Jim. I got to notice what I’m sure you’ve noticed long ago, I know, I know you’ve seen me brought home on occasions, dragged in the door, under what’s called the influence, son, helped in by cabbies at night, I’ve seen your long shadow grotesquely backlit at the top of the house’s stairs I helped pay for, boy: how the drunk and the maimed both are dragged forward out of the

⁴ If James’ father’s alcoholism is his best attempt at self-forgetting, James’ own alcoholism is likely a similar attempt. It is especially telling that James Incandenza commits suicide by sticking his head inside a microwave oven.

arena like a boneless Christ, one man under each arm, feet dragging, eyes on the aether. (169)

The reference to Christ suggests a Biblical allegory: James' father's fate seems analogous to the fate of Adam and Eve in Christian mythology, who eat the forbidden fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil: with the knowledge of Good and Evil they become self-conscious and are subsequently made irreversibly aware of their nakedness and feel ashamed for the first time. Jungian psychologist Jordan Peterson writes, "This is why Adam and Eve became ashamed, immediately after their eyes were opened. They could see—and what they first saw was themselves" (50). So mankind's fall from Grace corresponds with the moment it becomes newly self-aware. James' father also experiences a fall from Grace when he becomes aware of himself as a body (i.e. a mind that is a body); if James' father sees himself like "a boneless Christ," it is because he, much like the crucified Christ atoning for the sins of mankind, now suffers the consequences of his own fall.

4. A Close Reading Continued: The Problem of Self-consciousness at ETA

James Incandenza apparently takes his father's lesson to heart, because he hires Gerhardt Schtitt to run the tennis program at ETA, a program generally understood among ETA personnel as "a progression toward self-forgetting" (635).

Schtitt's program is basically designed to condition players psychologically, so they will not fall victim to the same kind of self-conscious introspection that got the best of James's father; although couched in different terms, the ethos at ETA is still basically the same as the one outlined above: keep *head is body*: look past yourself and see only the game.

Schtitt believes that whether a player wins or loses a match is mostly determined by the player's state of mind, whether he (the player) can stay focused on the game at hand and not get distracted by things he finds interesting, alluring, bothersome, painful, or irritating. At morning drills in the November cold, Schtitt provides a long list of things the players might find distracting on any given day, which includes:

Cold. Hot. Wet and dry. Very bright sun and you see the purple dots. Very bright hot and you have no salt. Outside is wind, the insects which like the sweat. Inside is smell of heaters, echo, being jammed in together, tarp is overclose to the baseline, not enough of room bells inside clubs which ring the hour loudly to distract, clunk of machines vomiting sweet cola for coins. [...] Opponent's relatives heckle, opponent cheats. You hurt. You have the injury. Bad knee and back. Hurt groin area from not stretching as asked. Aches of elbow. Eyelash in eye. The throat is sore. A too pretty girl in audience, watching. (459)

For Schtitt, a distracted player is basically a weak-willed player, a player stuck inside his head. To overcome distractedness the player must overcome *himself*—he must put aside his petty concerns, doubts, and fears. In this way, he explains to Mario, “[t]he true opponent, the enfolding boundary, is the player himself. Always and only the self out there, on court, to be met, fought, brought to the table to hammer out terms” (84).

The player learns to overcome himself by finding refuge in what Schtitt terms a “second world,” a metaphorical world the player steps into every time he steps onto the tennis court, a world sheltered from distractions, where the player finds “purpose past sluggardly self and complaints about uncomfot” (459). Distractedness in this instance seems to be (at least for

Schtitt) a function of self-centeredness. Entering the second world is thus an act of self-denial (i.e. a kind of self-forgetting): the player's self does not get what it immediately wants.

Schtitt believes the way you direct a player's focus, the way you teach him to enter into this second world, is by giving him something greater than him to focus on, i.e. something greater than him (and his immediate needs) to *care about*. "These kids," DeLint notes in his conversation with Steeply, "they're here to get lost in something bigger than them. [...] To forget themselves as objects of attention for a few years and see what they can do when the eyes are off them" (660). By caring about something other than himself—by getting "lost in something bigger," i.e. something *meaningful*—the player no longer notices (read: cares about) peripheral distractions.⁵

Reporters are therefore never allowed to interview ETA students, because ETA is "about seeing instead of being seen" (660). Because, when players make it to professional tennis, they are *seen* plenty—they are idolized, in a way—and are effectively turned into what DeLint terms "statues"—"to be looked at and poked at and discussed, and then some." This is dangerous, because very often such players come to believe they *are* the statue, and when the statue inevitably crumbles, that is, when the players' fame has run its course—"when they start to stop getting poked at or profiled, when their blossom starts to fade" (661)—they psychologically disintegrate; they do not know who they are apart from the statue.

⁵ To be sure, this "something bigger" is, to my knowledge, never clearly defined, but the point, I think, is that the player will only overcome herself if she believes (or even if she just senses) that by doing so she will achieve, obtain, or be-part-of something worthwhile in the end. "Any something," Schtitt tells Mario, "The What: this is more unimportant than that there is something" (83).

To overcome oneself in this way is very hard, particularly for American teenagers. Schtitt explains to Mario that an ethos of self-denial does not jive with a “U.S. of modern A.” that teaches boys to care only about themselves, to care only about pursuing “this flat and short-sighted idea of personal happiness: ‘The happy pleasure of the person alone, yes?’” (83). This is why Schtitt’s program is so rigorous; it is also, I think, why he resembles and sounds like a German military drill sergeant: if an ETA player wants to be successful at a sport that is at its roots “self-competitive” (84), he must learn to starve his distinctly *American* self of what it usually wants—attention, satisfaction, pleasure, ease, etc.—which requires a daily training regimen.⁶ Schtitt and his program are therefore notably juxtaposed with the American way:

The thing with Schtitt: like most Europeans of his generation, anchored from infancy to certain permanent values which—yes, OK, granted—may admittedly, have a whiff of proto-fascist potential about them, but which do, nevertheless (the values), anchor nicely the soul and course of a life—Old World patriarchal stuff like honor and discipline and fidelity to some larger unit—Gerhardt Schtitt does not so much dislike the modern O.N.A.N.ite U.S. of A. as find it hilarious and frightening at the same time. [...] Schtitt was educated in the pre-Unification *Gymnasium* under the rather Kanto-Hegelian idea that jr. athletics was basically just training for citizenship, that jr. athletics was about learning to sacrifice the hot narrow imperatives of the Self—the needs, the desires, the fears, the multiform

⁶ He is, in a way, teaching them to hope. That is, he is teaching (read: habituating) them to look past themselves when met with adversity, to transcend their present discomforts and disappointments in order to see only the game.

cravings of the individual appetitive will—to the larger imperatives of a team (OK, the State) and a set of delimiting rules (OK, the Law). (82)

It is significant that Schtitt's values “whiff of proto-fascist potential.” If a distracted player is a weak-willed player, a player who is basically a slave to “the multiform cravings of the individual appetitive will,” Schtitt's program is supposed to help strengthen the player's will, so he (the player) can overcome these cravings. But in overcoming these cravings the player overcomes himself. This is a *willful* act of self-denial, a limit imposed on an American self that (supposedly) wants to be limitless and free.

To the extent that Schtitt's conspicuously fascist-leaning tennis program is effective, it implicitly critiques the American way; it also recalls the paternalism invoked in the Marathe/ Steeply conversation from section 1. To be sure, I am not suggesting that Wallace endorses fascism here, but I do think he wants to challenge a modern American sensibility that rejects “Old World” values—what the especially cynical might term “proto-fascist” values—outright. That is, if the “Old World” has these supposedly illiberal values—“honor and discipline and fidelity to some larger unit”—which nevertheless happen to “anchor nicely the soul and course of a life,” and which apparently make the one who holds these values receptive to athletic coaching and character formation, it is not clear whether the New World of *Infinite Jest's* “O.N.A.N.ite. U.S. of A.,” having apparently dispensed with these values, has its own values that can do the same (i.e. “anchor nicely the soul and course of a life”). To the extent that Schtitt's program at ETA is coextensive with ETA itself, ETA represents a vestige of this Old World, where the players have relatively little freedom but plenty of meaningful work.

Fascism is notably referenced elsewhere in the novel. The narrator notes that AA's root axiom, that there are "no whys or wherefores allowed. In other words check your head at the door," is "almost classically authoritarian, maybe even proto-Fascist" (374). In other words, AA is a program of self-surrender⁷—as the narrator notes, it only works if the addict is truly willing to do whatever the program dictates:

If you don't *want* to do as you're told—I mean as it's suggested you do—it means that your own personal will is still in control, and Eugenio Martinez over at Ennet House never tires of pointing out that your personal will is the web your Disease sits and spins in, still. The will your call your own ceased to be yours as of who knows how many Substance-drenched years ago. It's now shot through with the spidered fibrosis of your Disease. His own experience's term for the Disease is: *The Spider*. You have to Starve The Spider: you have to surrender your will. [...] You have to want to surrender your will to people who know how to Starve the Spider. (357)

But if AA is "proto-Fascist," it is not necessarily ill conceived; after all, in the course of the novel AA mostly works, if not for all of the addicts then certainly for Don Gately (at least up until the novel's ending with him in the hospital bed, after which point the reader decides whether he finally breaks and takes the hospital's morphine). The program's effectiveness thus

⁷ When Marathe interviews at Ennet House masquerading as an addict the narrator notes that Marathe and Fortier learned, while preparing for the ruse, "that U.S.A. recovery from the addictions was somewhat paramilitary in nature"; so, when Pat Montesian makes an offhand reference to prayer Marathe readily volunteers, "I will attempt to pray at a moment's order" (749). AA is thus linked to military training regimens, and military training regimens are linked to Schtitt, and Schtitt is linked to fascism.

problematizes a claim modern liberalism generally takes for granted, that maximizing personal freedom maximizes personal happiness.

Fascism is also referenced during Marathe and Steeply's conversation in Tucson that I referenced in the opening section. Marathe wonders if Americans really understand how delayed gratification works, because practicing it requires a level of self-control he thinks Americans are never taught. To which Steeply responds:

But see that here it can't be a Fascist matter of screaming at the kid or giving him electric shocks each time he overindulges in candy. You can't induce a moral sensibility the same way you'd train a rat. The kid has to learn by his own experience how to learn to balance the short-and long-term pursuit of what he wants. (429)

So Steeply believes self-control is something one learns by trial and error; one only needs to be given the *freedom* to work it out. "This is the crux of the educational system you find so appalling," he tells Marathe, "Not to teach what to desire. To teach how to be free. To teach how to make knowledgeable choices about pleasure and delay and the kid's overall down-the-road maximal interests" (429).

But if Steeply is correct about this, the *samizdat* he and his colleagues are searching for should not be dangerous; as Marathe notes, the *samizdat* is only dangerous if the American people actually lack self-control:

How could it be that A.F.R. malice could hurt all of the U.S.A. culture by making available something as momentary and free as the choice to view only this one Entertainment? You know there can be no forcing to watch a thing. If we

disseminate the *samizdat*, the choice will be free, no? Free from force, no? Yes?

Freely chosen? (430)

But, of course, the *samizdat* is dangerous; everyone that looks at it cannot turn away. If

Marathe's position smacks of proto-fascism he is not necessarily wrong. Conversely, if Steeply is supposed to be championing American freedom he is not necessarily right.

5. What is Wrong With Hal? Another Close Reading

As I noted above, the novel's opening episode, in which Hal suffers an apparent, but inexplicable,⁸ breakdown during his interview at the University of Arizona, is chronologically the novel's final episode.

In the lead up to Hal's breakdown, a critical event is the meeting in Tavis' office, to which he, Pemulis, Axford, and Kittenplan are summoned after the Eschaton debacle. A urologist is there to administer a surprise drug test, which Pemulis gets pushed back a month, but Hal will only pass the test if he stops smoking marijuana. This is significant, because at this point Hal "hasn't gone over twenty-four hours without getting high in secret for well over a year" (1052). His quitting marijuana has a direct effect on him when, only the next day, he nearly loses a match to Ortho Stice; afterwards at dinner Hal admits that he feels like—and on the court earlier with Stice, felt like—a different person, "a whole new and chemical-free Hal who should by all rights have lost to a 16-year-old out there in public on what ended up a gorgeous NNE autumn

⁸ Hal's admission interview reads like a scene from a Kafka story; something supernatural seems to be either affecting Hal directly or distorting how he appears to others, and at this point in the novel the reader has no idea why. As Dulk suggests, by opening the novel with this scene, "[t]he question 'What happened to/is wrong with Hal?'" becomes "one of Infinite Jest's main narrative threads, to which "the novel offers no explicit answer" (217).

day” (635). If chemical-free Hal should have lost to Stice, it is because chemical-free Hal is distracted, introspective, and morose; Stice later describes Hal as having played with “the wide-eyed but unfocused look of a tennis player right on the verge of falling apart out there, and yet strangely affectless, as if deep inside some well of his own private troubles” (637).

Hal’s near-loss to Stice underscores his dependence on marijuana: he loses focus, and thus underperforms, when he plays without it in his system—which is perhaps counterintuitive (marijuana is not usually touted as a performance enhancing drug), but it is still the case. DeLint explains to Steeply that Hal’s main weakness as a player is that he easily becomes discouraged. Unlike Wayne who is “pure force,” who can easily move on (psychologically speaking) after losing a point, Hal cannot:

Hal remembers points, senses trends in a match. [...] Hal’s susceptible to fluctuations. Discouragement. Set-long lapses in concentration. Some days you can almost see Hal like flit in and out of a match, like some part of him leaves and hovers and then comes back. (682)

Hal is basically an overly self-conscious tennis player: if Hal naturally “remembers points”—that is, if he dwells too much on his mistakes—getting high helps him forget them. Hal thus uses marijuana for the same reason his father and grandfather used alcohol: to forget.

Stice’s own experience during, and then after, the game strongly and tellingly contrasts with Hal’s. At dinner Stice stares at a tomato stuck to the inside wall of his salad bowl:

His cheeks are ballooned with food as he stares at the perched tomato, trying to respect this object with all his might, summoning the sort of coercive reverence he’d felt this P.M. as several balls’ sudden anomalous swerves against wind and

their own vectors half convinced Stice they'd become sensitive to his inner will, at crucial times. (637)

The mystical connection Stice thinks he established with the ball during the match—that the ball had been “sensitive to his inner will”—directly recalls James Incandenza’s father’s words to James in section two: “touch things with consideration and they will be yours; you will own them; they will move or stay still or move for you.” This suggests that, at least on a textual level, the mystical connection he had with the ball was real; Stice played so well, because Stice was/is an analog of James’s father before his fall—that is, Stice was playing *unself-consciously*, abiding (though unwittingly, it seems) by the *head is body* creed.

The text suggests a colloquial term for this phenomenon, when many of Stice’s classmates, seeing him stare at the bowl, “interpret his intense distraction as Stice’s still being in the magic can’t-miss Zone from this P.M.’s match” (635). The “Zone” is referenced elsewhere in the novel, when Hal is shooting his toenail clippings into a wastebasket that sits across the room. He tells Orin on the phone that he is “shooting seventy-plus percent,” which to Hal feels almost supernatural: “It’s just like that magical feeling on those rare days out there playing. Playing out of your head, deLint calls it. Loach calls it The Zone. Being in The Zone. Those days when you feel perfectly calibrated” (242). Because being in The Zone happens to a person unintentionally, Hal worries that thinking about it too much will undo it—but of course once he starts thinking about it he cannot stop (248). Having lost confidence in his ability to keep the shooting streak alive, he sits frozen, too scared of missing on his next shot to even try—“This is why Pemulis and Troeltsch always seem to let a lead slip away,” he tells Orin, “The standard term is

Tightening up. The clippers are poised, blades on either side of the nail. I just can't achieve the *unconsciousness* to actually clip (249) (my emphasis).”

Conclusion

As I noted in the opening section, tracing the problem of self-consciousness through the course of the novel is helpful because it sheds light on Hal's bizarre reaction during his admission interview, which is, chronologically, the novel's final episode.

Hal quits smoking marijuana on November 10, Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment (Y.D.A.U.). His admission interview is a year later, sometime in November, Year of Glad. The only times Hal shows up in the novel between these two points are on November 11 Y.D.A.U., the day he plays Stice in the exhibition match, the following day, November 12, the day he and Pemulis discuss his addiction concerns, and then the following week on November 20, when Hal wakes before 5:00 am and finds Stice with his tongue frozen to the window. This means almost a year of Hal's life is unaccounted for in the lead up to his admission interview. It is therefore telling that soon after Hal begins withdrawing from marijuana he experiences physical symptoms that still persist at the time of his interview. Burn notes,

[A]s the effects of Hal's withdrawal worsen, his face begins to resemble an unreliable mask, assuming “various expressions ranging from distended hilarity to scrunched grimace . . . that seemed unconnected to anything that was going on” (p. 966), and he loses control of the tone of his voice, though he is, at this point, still able to communicate. (36)

This is not to say that marijuana withdrawal is the only thing affecting Hal during his interview, but it is an important piece to the puzzle; it connects his suffering with the suffering of his father and his father's father; because like his father and his father's father, it seems that he—if his “wagging” (14) (i.e., his bodily convulsions) is any indication—cannot forget (read: escape) himself.

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