

How to Give or Take Anything: Breaking the Solipsism of *Infinite Jest*

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Introduction: The Animating Limits

“My barn having burned down, I can now see the moon.”

— Mizuta Masahide, 17th Century Poet

Infinite Jest is the Great American novel for the turn of the millennium. As our modern media landscape has shifted to provide ever-greater access to information and entertainment, so too have individuals become more disconnected from traditional sites of meaning making. David Foster Wallace’s magnum opus embodies our quintessentially American individualism within the new context of postmodernist fragmentation and information overload. Within Wallace’s tragicomic vision of the future, those shifting foundations engender vicious cycles of solipsistic existence which threaten not only the death of the individual, but the collapse of our American society as a whole.

On one side of this story is Hal Incandenza, a seventeen year-old tennis prodigy questioning his place on the cusp of competitive success. At the other side of the coin is Don Gately, an angelic meathead who likewise demonstrated the potential to be a spectacular athlete from a young age. Their parallel ascending paths fork when young Gately replaced his horrible family life and self-esteem issues with a variety of painkillers and other Substances, sending him into a nosedive that culminates in prison and then a halfway house. As Hal confronts the gaping void at the top of his ascension, and as Don scrambles to rebuild a foundation underneath the absence of his Substance’s terrifying ceiling, they form a mirrored parabolic arc of Icarus’s flight from and into mortality.

Knee-deep in postmodern tradition, *IJ* does of course refuse these two sole spotlight; Wallace's lovingly crafted milieu of addicts and Show-bound étoiles each more than act as a supporting cast for these protagonists. As Wallace populates his new pan-American Empire, he pays compassionate attention to the polyphony of voices that constitute the flawed institutions surrounding his prodigious characters. Figurants in both Hal's path towards tournament fame and Gately's halfway house show stories of systemic suffering. Paradoxically, in an era of crumbling social infrastructure, isolated suffering is what unites Wallace's citizens.

Lurking behind the tennis academy and the halfway house, Wallace dangles the eponymous film as a modern Holy Grail just out of reach of both the reader and these suffering characters. The Entertainment purportedly offers the "most refined pleasure imaginable" to the viewer (*IJ* 473) and thus overrides any Substance, any Game, and any of the individual psychic traumas that afflict Wallace's Americans. Concerned as he was by the new medium of television that Wallace declared "has my generation by the throat" ("E Unibus Pluram" 49), the captivating draw of this film fuels Wallace's extended thought experiment to its rational—if absurd—conclusions. As the film's siren call also makes the viewers' "lives' meanings [collapse] to such a narrow focus that no other activity or connection could hold their attention" (549), an international terrorist organization races to find and circulate The Entertainment as samizdat, thereby enacting poetic justice to bring down the American empire culture of excess and greed. While Wallace's farcically-incompetent governmental bureaucracy attempts to steel its institutions against the impending viral outbreak, it is the heroic arcs of Hal and Gately learning to live with their traumas that provide dual approaches for ameliorating the societal problems that invisibly pervade the West at the turn of the millennium: preventative, as embodied by Hal's

tennis experience, and rehabilitative as embodied by Gately's halfway house. When combined, the two offer a single prescribed model for better citizenship that hopes to break the solipsistic cycle of isolation and toxic desires that leads to individual and societal destruction.

In the course of this paper, I will be using *IJ* as an inflection point in literature, signaling a shift away from the postmodern era in an attempt to reinject meaning, truth, and trust into our society. Going beyond the New Sincerity movement that Wallace called for in his 1993 essay, *IJ* signals an attempt by fiction writers at the turn of the millennium to expose the ways our sociopolitical systems are failing to adapt to the social simulacra presented by new media. They warn of postmodernism's ideology habituating its citizens into solipsistic loops, as this new cultural fabric wraps individuals ever more tightly into isolated existences. *IJ* on its own may fall short of providing clear answers as to how to escape the problems generated by this changing media landscape, but nonetheless establishes pivotal steps to rebuild the foundation of the social sphere.

To prove *IJ*'s role as an inflection point in postmodern literature contextualized in new media, the paper has five parts that form an organizational trajectory of the changing ideology leading to the present. The first section will analyze how *IJ* participates in both the epic tradition and postmodernism in order to represent its characters as products of modern solipsistic American culture. The second will analyze Wallace's satirical creation myth of a new American empire and political subplot behind the principle characters, as well as the ways individual behaviors initiate the apocalyptic crises of the novel. The third will argue that despite its protagonists receiving individual tragic endings within the text, *IJ* does explore treatment options for America in the form of strategies that the culture can enact to survive in toxic ideology.

The fourth section will examine a positive case of post-postmodern literature, Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*, which carries the torch from Wallace's diagnosis-and-treatment in order to break its protagonists from their suffering. The fifth section will employ sociological data in order to contextualize how real-world cases of streaming entertainment, social media, and device usage have transformed American culture into and away from Wallace's television-based project. Finally, the paper will synthesize the diagnoses and treatment options established in order to provide a summary of actionable steps the reader can take to begin mending the social crises confronting America today.

1. Vicious Cycles

"When you show the moon to a child, it only sees your finger."

–African Proverb

At eighteen years of age, thanks to incredible athletic and academic performance, one of *IJ*'s primary protagonists is poised for success as he enters into adulthood. Flanked by patriarchs of his previous academy who declare that he has "already justified his seed"¹ (4), the young man is scrutinized by deans of a prospective university, as they negotiate how an exchange of prodigious talent can take place. The core elements of this scene are familiar: taken out of context from the rest of the novel, Hal's rapid upward arc of delivering the goods to appropriate authority figures would seem a fitting conclusion to a Bildungsroman, the prototypical modern American Dream. However, that is not where *IJ* ends, but where it starts.

¹ Tournament lingo where committees "composed of old big-armed men" expect the boys to reach a certain place based on their past performance (174).

Due to a mysterious set of circumstances, even though Hal contends “I am in here” (3), he is forced to adopt a “neutral and affectless silence” (9) because his words and gestures are grossly misinterpreted as subhuman. When Hal’s ability to be understood by his contemporaries shuts down, the existing administrators of power have inadequate tools at their disposal to help him. Instead they label him mad, physically subduing then forcibly rejecting from their institution. Wallace thus sets the stakes of the novel; though Hal demonstrates to the reader his interior existence, and even though he has desirable external qualities for the culture that he is in, “these tactics of separation serve as a framework for the perception of madness [based] above all on the dividing up of social space according to the lines of valuation and exclusion” (Foucault *Mental Illness* 78). When Hal loses his ability to control how he is perceived—one of his prior greatest strengths—so too his chance at the American Dream slams shut.

Why does Hal suffer this fate at the chronological end of the text? To what extent does America’s support network catch his counterpart Gately on his downward fall? Like Wallace’s own approach within the text, though these first pages establish that something is very wrong with Hal, we must delay our analysis until we properly frame his apparent disorder within the social fabric that surrounds him. While Gately’s mirrored experience fills in the other half of the American prodigy’s character arc, we cannot simply read the two protagonists against one another on an X-axis of time and a Y-axis of success. Rather, we must first dilate that focused lens to establish the social context in which these arcs are taking place.

In 1991, Frederic Jameson succinctly stated one of the major crises of postmodernism: that our minds are not yet able to “map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects” (“The Logic

of Late Capitalism” 222-3). Wallace’s text attempts to reconcile that problem, by representing individuals’ suffering as causationally entangled with multinational crises. Understanding how Wallace’s protagonists s their redemption would be incomplete without also demonstrating the toxic ideologies that roil under the surface of this hyper-American society. Thus, even as we attempt to untangle the fates of Hal and Gately, we must use *IJ*’s structure and the institutions it examines not as a key towards goal of “a fractal matter of reducing chaos to pattern,” but nonetheless as necessary limits that become “mathematically uncontrolled but humanly contained ²” (82).

To surround his prodigious characters, Wallace constructs a flawed family unit and a vision of American culture that is burgeoning with chaotic growth. Immediately around Hal, the Incandenza family is a familiar melting-pot of archetypes lifted from across the Western canon. They come from *Hamlet*, from which *IJ* takes its name and replacement-of-patriarch plot; from *The Brothers Karamazov* that structures the relationships of the three Incandenza brothers (Jacobs 269); and from more modern works like Hal’s name echoing Kubrick’s machine in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. There are subtle alterations to each of these storylines in Wallace’s iterations, but largely Wallace wears his literary inspirations on his sleeve.

However, *IJ* positions itself not simply as a postmodern collection of fragments, but a text that consciously renovates the literary canon to become more apt to illustrate—and to critique—American culture as a whole. As Stephen Burn points out, Wallace’s magnum opus fulfills many of the formal considerations of Griffiths and Rabinowtiz’s *Novel Epics*:

² Contemporary writers have a predilection to use every tool at their disposal to play with the form, including italics, underlines, caps, and bolded fonts. Assume the original author’s emphasis in quotations.

Such works possess a “double plot” that simultaneously outlines a story while alluding to its literary heritage (7); it is interested in the ‘documentation of fallen empires’ (9); it has connections to cinema and ghosts (12, 16); it sees “time moving to apocalypse” (18); and presents the perfect form for “novelists who want to overcome... the anomie of their age.” (18)

Perhaps it is no surprise that these components manifest multiple times in *IJ*'s encyclopedic 1079-page sprawl, as do more minor elements of epic. The ritualized single combat of the participants of Hal's Enfield Tennis Academy (“ETA”) for the sake of cultural recognition easily aligns significant portions of Wallace's novel with the cultural desire for recognition present in the first Epics, for example. However, Burn's analysis of Wallace's integration into the epic tradition misses crucial elements that establish *IJ* as not just a participant in, but as a reformation of the epic canon. The result is that Wallace collapses the typical “dichotomy between the narrative impulse in the epic, in which readers ‘experience’ the events” to ally themselves with the dominant ideology, and the descriptive mode of “capitalist art, [with] the difference that in Wallace's art of the information age, the reader experiences what is being described” (Boswell 165).

Wallace returns to the foundations of Western storytelling, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, to form the bedrock of a new empire contextualized in postmodern chaos. The most significant of the epic *bricolage* that Wallace picks through is, counterintuitively, relegated to the endnotes of his novel. Critics and Wallace himself established that one function of the nearly 400 annotations is to formally disrupt the linearity of the experience of reading, forcing the reader to bounce back-and-forth from the main narrative, not unlike the action of a tennis match (Holland

136). Instead of Homer's catalogs of ships and soldiers waiting for battle, Wallace catalogs Hal's father's filmography (985-93). The encyclopedic catalog contained in the endnotes nonetheless fulfills the same function of the *Iliad's* original deployment: the sheer quantity of individual items in the list emphasizes the vision of the speaker/director's culture, while simultaneously serving to localize the information for later use in the narrative (Gaertner 299, 302). In this particular substitution, the *Iliad's* catalog laid out its characters and thus equipped the reader with information as to along what lines the upcoming battles would be fought. Wallace's catalog of entertainment is no different; the text is chiefly concerned with how different ideologies wage their wars through non-physical means.

Incandenza's filmography contains a multitude of different genres and experimentations with form. In it, Wallace delights with short synopses of comedies, documentaries, and satirical Found Dramas that hint at motifs that Wallace himself will run with later in *IJ* and future works like *The Pale King*. Alongside these are films that appear quite useless³, and at times provide factual information that conflicts with the main text itself⁴. David Letzler correctly argues that this overflow of information camouflages the novel's politics, which "are only visible to those who have found some way to modulate their attention to navigate between the cruff and the valuable text" (141). Wallace's deployment of the catalog in this way subverts a trademark of epic literature, in which "the reader manages to work through emotionally and to understand his or her own place within the group or the collective... achieved through the reader's identification with the unfolding process of the epic narratives" (Toohey 36); rather than emotionally

³ Like a set films with no description but that they were Untitled, Unfinished, and Unreleased (990-2).

⁴ The *ONANtiad* is either "four-hour piece of tendentiously anticonfluent political parody long since dismissed as minor" (381) for the ETA, or only 76 minutes when collected in archival data (989).

understanding our place in the world, the endnotes' information overload formally embodies the detachment that an individual has from national identity.

The reader who sifts through the information overload, however, is rewarded with important plot functions. Most important for first-time readers are the tantalizing initial explicit references to early versions of the samizdat *Infinite Jest*. But no less importantly, Incandenza's filmography also includes the *ONANtiad*, the creation myth of Wallace's masturbatory-named Organization of North American Nations ("ONAN") in the mode of The *Iliad*, and the simultaneously released *No Troy*. While the former sets Wallace and Incandenza to parody epic tradition, the latter records America's version of the fall of Troy, which gets literally wiped off the map as a result of the creation of ONAN (*IJ* 990). Given that the hero of the Trojans in the original *Iliad* deserves respect for "not only the devotion of the warrior who does his duty and fights for his people... but also his greatness as a husband and a father—a striking contrast with the atmosphere of the armed camp on the shore" (Fagles and Knox 34), we can see Wallace's new fall of Troy as symbolic of an unfortunate triumph of warlike culture over familial bonds.

The *ONANtiad* proves paramount for understanding the toxic ideology that Hal and his contemporaries are immersed in. The story is told through the mediated lens created by Hal's brother Mario, whose interpretation of his father's original film materializes through a literal political puppet-show that establishes "the rise of O.N.A.N. and U.S. Experialism [through] little diffracted bits of real news and fake news" (*IJ* 385). Wallace's narration transforms to accommodate during this section: taking the place of typical exposition, the *ONANtiad* section instead trots out a parade of progressively more absurd all-caps headlines from news sources that run the gamut of respectability—from *Scientific North American* to one writer's farcically-long

and “Pretty Obviously Homemade” contributions (399-407). Alongside the attention-grabbing headlines as exposition, Wallace’s lifts the curtain to his new Oval Office with a form that melds play script and transcript with sections in which the “accuracy of Mario’s puppeteered account... gets to stand uncontested by fact” because the characters that populate the administration had forbid recording equipment (400). As a result, even Mario’s interpretation of events submerges important details under a marriage of bureaucracy and humor, of palace intrigue and shocking images of totalitarian rule. The deliberate juxtaposition of these two forms side by side immerses the reader in the infotainment of democratic politics as we follow ONAN’s creation myth.

Only through this mediated infotainment lens do we see how ONAN is forcibly united under the head of this new empire, President Johnny Gentle, Famous Crooner⁵, a B-list celebrity turned authoritarian that would be laughable if it weren’t so prescient. The new despot with over two Presidential terms “suddenly swept to quadrennial victory in an angry reactionary voter-spasm... as the Dems and G.O.P.s stood on either side watching dumbly, like doubles partners who each think the other’s surely got it” (382), he and his new Clean U.S. Party rising to power because he wasn’t going to “ask us to make some tough choices because he was standing here promising he was going to make them for us” (383). President Gentle heads the new American empire, carried to victory on a platform of Experialism, the ideology of forcing other countries to take the toxic waste products from the United States instead of taking responsibility for cleaning up our own excesses.

The crises that set events in motion in *IJ* hinge upon Gentle’s Experialist ideology. President Gentle’s administration claims to solve the problem of cleaning up the United States⁶,

⁵ The sole character to have a Homeric epithet similar to swift-footed Achilles or horse-taming Hector.

⁶ “Something is rotten in the state” indeed.

but their bureaucratic sleight-of-hand fails to solve the fundamental issue of “sending away from yourself what you hope will not return” (1031). When Gentle threatens Canada with a bizarre inverse of mutually assured destruction—to nuke our own territory and blow the radioactive waste northward—Canada acquiesces to the U.S.’s demands. But as N. Katherine Hayles contends, a main goal of *IJ* is “to demonstrate the fallacy of the dump by exploring [the ways] the abjected always returns in recursive cycles of inter connection that inexorably tie together the sanctified and the polluted” (“The Fact of Recursivity” 687). At the international level, this manifests when Canadian resistance begins to find other outlets for their intransigence. Wallace takes care to embed the geopolitical conflict throughout the text, even at the SNOOTy level of semantics: referring to the radiated overgrown territory the Great Convexity or Great Concavity, and labeling *No Troy* as *The Violet City* or *The Violet Ex-City*, indicates one’s cultural allegiance as respectively pro-Canadian or pro-U.S. More consequentially, resistance to the expanding empire leads to the violent terrorist organizations like the Les Assassins en Fauteuils Roulants (“A.F.R.”) (*IJ* 1056), and the entire background subplot of Rémy Marathe interfacing with Hugh Steeply in search of the samizdat that can cut at America’s Achilles’ tendon (421).

Rather than making the tough choice between power and responsibility, the *ONANTiad*’s governing ideology begets destructive political theatre and leads to selling the country’s understanding of cultural stability. Gentle’s administration temporarily placates his constituents’ demands to have more and give up less, as his new empire auctions off the very ability to label time itself to corporate interests. Wallace’s NAFTA/USMCA reimagining synthesizes not just the three distinct nations under one banner, but adds corporate advertisements into the living mix as well. As we read chapter headings with the Year of the Whopper and Year of Glad, not only is

the reader chronologically disoriented, but advertisements themselves manifest as literary devices that (dis)organize the neo-American culture. Subsidized Time and the overwhelming crowd of individual characters certainly present a first-time reader a seemingly indecipherable form that embodies Wallace's "kind of Total Noise that's also the sound of our U.S. culture right now" ("Deciderization" 1).

It is no coincidence that the first year of the so-called Subsidized Time is when Wallace places the new fall of Troy, as a bloated Western empire stumbles towards collapse under its own excesses. As Wallace noted in an interview with Laura Miller of *Salon*, a main goal of the book was to make a time-capsule of "what it's like to live in America around the millennium," which presses upon him "250 advertisements a day and any number of unbelievably entertaining options, most of which are subsidized by corporations that want to sell me things." The empire Wallace thus portrays in the creation myth of *The ONANtiad* is democracy dangerously enmeshed with corporate culture as understood by Neil Postman in his text *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. In that groundbreaking work, Postman argues that in such a public sphere "we have no way of protecting ourselves from information disseminated by corporate America; and ... therefore, the battles for liberty must be fought on different terrains from where they once were" (140). In satirically amplifying the effect corporate influence has on his text, Wallace thus begins fighting that battle by helping readers snap to the degree to which we're already inundated in Jameson's postmodern logic of late capitalism.

In a variation of the proverb 'history is written by the victors,' classics scholar David Quint argues in *Epic and Empire* that participating in the narrative form of epic, as Wallace does with his satirical creation myth and deployment of traditional epic literary devices, typically runs

concurrent with support of the empire it is encased in. He declares that writers responding to epic tradition are “compelled to do so on [epic]'s terms [and]... participate in the very epic continuity they strive to break,” thereby co-opting the writer into either supporting its basic political philosophies, or rejecting them from western canon (10). As in *The Iliad*, “epic draws an equation between power and narrative. It tells of a power able to end the indeterminacy of war and to emerge victorious, showing that the struggle had all along been leading up to its victory and thus imposing upon it a narrative teleology” (Quint 45), and absent that narrative structure like in the *Odyssey*, the writer loses power and instead is forced to “random or circular wandering” (10).

These arguments that the dominant system co-opts attempted critiques ring familiar to Wallace readers, especially with his concern about the gestalt of television becoming all-consuming and thus rendering satire impotent as a weapon against it (“E Unibus Pluram” 54). However, *IJ* rejects Quint’s dichotomy. Rather than organizing a teleological history of the American empire in hindsight, Wallace attempts to write a creation myth of American culture of the then-present and then-future. Though farcical, the creation myth of the empire of Subsidized Time clearly demarcates a pre-and-post fiction era. By stepping outside the historical context that he was living in, Wallace was able to organize an alternative teleology – one that warns, and avoids capitulating into supporting the existing ideology. Wallace’s deployments of epic tradition in this creation myth allows him to subsume them in his critique of American empire, and not the other way around.

In the most comprehensive and recent take on the novel, Mary K. Holland correctly asserts that Wallace’s overriding theme of solipsistic excess plagues both its empire at a macro

level and its individual characters at micro level (“IJ” 128). That synecdoche would accurately reflect the fractal structure of the novel, which Wallace divulged was originally designed to embody a Sierpinski Gasket, a “very primitive kind of pyramidal fractal” that is chaotic on the surface, but beauty at the bones (Silverblatt). Furthermore, as Holland argues, the tragic fates of Hal and Gately which bookend the novel—each engaged in his own mind, desperate but unable to communicate—indicate that the narrative “recapitulates and exaggerates the postmodernism its recursive engines aim to abandon” (“IJ” 130). Thus *IJ*'s lonely and seemingly aimless character arcs, as manifestations of Wallace's anticonfluent realism, do acquiesce into Quint's argument. Characters appear to be mere figurants in an embodiment of American life, so concentrated on their own Substances, Games, and self-centered *Odysseys* that they pass like ships in the dark on their voyage to find home, briefly intersecting but rarely overlapping.

But the book's structure offers more tightly orchestrated symphony than *Total Noise*. Clear divisions along thematic and formal grounds demarcate the novel into 28 different chapters and six relatively equal units (Carlisle 17). *IJ*'s fractal structure allows Wallace to reclaim power as a writer, and achieve unity of purpose not through linearity but through a diffuse blend of characters and timelines. Rather than “random or circular wandering” (Quint 10), Wallace's deliberate patterns-within-patterns structure forms quite the rejoinder to Quint's argument that narrative organization necessarily supports the triumph of a dominant ideology whose “struggle had all along been leading up to its victory” (45). Wallace himself argues against interpreting his text as falling into postmodernism anticonfluentism, clarifying that “certain kind of parallel lines are supposed to start converging in such a way that an ‘end’ can be projected by the reader somewhere beyond the right frame” (“Live With David Foster Wallace”).

The “end” Wallace refers to most likely refers to when Hal and Gately’s parallel lines finally converge in Incandenza’s graveyard. The two pantomime *Hamlet*’s gravediggers from the book’s eponymous scene, digging up Incandenza’s head to avert “Continental-Emergency” (934). Though this event never directly manifests in the text, interpreting *IJ* is “constructing a game as much out of what’s missing as what’s there” (*IJ* 681). Even in its absence, this scene still functions within the fractal structure; Hal’s external analepsis occurs during their convergence within the text’s first pages (17), while Gately receives the mirrored external prolepsis in the form of a fever-dreamed premonition just as the book itself is ending (934).

The confluential ‘missing chapter’ thus acts as the culmination of the novel’s ideological trajectories. It is therefore all the more worrying that these two protagonists stand alongside emissaries of the political subplot literally knee-deep in the grave, and shout in panic that it is *Too Late* to avert upcoming Continental Emergency (934). *Too Late*, though, for what? Wallace enshrouds the culminating scene at the auteur’s tomb in mystery, refusing a clear answer. However, even as the individual characters are immersed in their own cages, Wallace is issuing a blaring eschatological siren for imminent societal-level collapse—we would be remiss to ignore that warning. Therefore, we must return to before the text begins to unpack forces that move Wallace’s main characters to converge at the tomb of his auteur.

2. The Sirens

“*One dead man is death—and two million are only a statistic.*”

— Erich Maria Remarque, *The Black Obelisk*

Along the course of the text, the reader devours huge swaths of hearsay, rumors, and interpretations to piece together *what* The Entertainment is, and *where is it?* Heuristically, the process of piecing these clues together ensures that even the mainstream reader participates in the text, “causing her to empathize with a variety of characters and with the author who handed us the puzzle to figure out” (Holland “IJ” 130). In action, dispersing these clues across the narrative and deliberately leaving subjectivity as to their veracity provides Wallace cover from simply being labeled didactic in his warning of the Continental Emergency that Hal and Gately attempt to avert.

Thankfully, though, the clues are well-connected enough to eschew Pynchonian postmodernism’s nihilistic combat between the reader and author. Instead, putting these patchwork clues together “dramatizes and alleviates the loneliness of interior experience” (Boswell 165) as the reader attempts to understand Wallace’s samizdat. Across the text the reader pieces together a film that portrays an infant’s perspective looking up at maternal Death, and find out that it is buried in the tomb along with Incandenza’s corpse (IJ 999). But Wallace offers the audience more than a few Freudian breadcrumbs of answers: when our protagonists are to arrive at the tomb outside the text, it is a familiar location, and not just because of its recycling a set piece from *Hamlet*. Careful readers are given its exact location in the Great Concavity during our delve into the *ONANtiad* (1030). The absent confluent graveyard ‘chapter’ most importantly is the sole point of contact between the narrative’s primary protagonists, but the few

direct references to the chapter also hold an easily overlooked detail that is critical to understanding the beginning and ending, and thus lending more cohesion to the densely-patterned novel. For Hal and Gately's are not the only parallel lines that are starting to converge at this juncture, and Incandenza's corpse is not the only story interred in his tomb. Buried inside the craft of the novel reveals that the coffin that Hal and Gately are so frantically digging up is also a record of another suicide—the Clipperton saga.

When Wallace reveals the “catastrophic feature” of the *ONANtiad*'s threat of societal self-annihilation is in fact “a puppet-à-clef allusion to the dark legend of one Eric Clipperton” (407), a network of connections falls into place. First, the saga explicitly connects the death of one young man, Clipperton, to Gentle's ideological faults which lead the U.S. to nuclear brinksmanship. Since Hayles's analysis of the fallacy of Experialist ideology illuminates that this nuclear brinksmanship in turn caused a terrorist organization to begin its quest for the samizdat, the death of the individual and society are thus eschatologically linked. Given that the recording of the Clipperton saga itself is interred in the same tomb as the samizdat, his and Incandenza's deaths thus anchor the text in our world's pre-Subsidized Time. Their deaths serve to balance the apocalyptic confluent ending just “beyond the right frame” with an important beginning just to the left, one that we may still learn from. Lest readers become too focused upon just the geopolitical narrative of impending doom of Continental-Emergency under an incompetent regime, or wrapped into the allure of the mystery of the samizdat, Wallace reminds us that there are real human sufferings that cause and are caused by social problems. The saga becomes the sequence in which Wallace illustrates that tragic statistics are comprised of individual tragedies.

The legend of Eric Clipperton is of a sixteen-year-old tennis player whose desire to reach the top of the tennis qualifiers is not particularly distinguishable from Hal's nor the other boys at ETA. Yet with no tether to a town, tennis academy, nor any observable community, Clipperton receives the label Independent⁷ in tournament seeds. The boy does not find the recognition he is looking for on the tournament circuit. He quietly arrives on the court isolated in his independence, connecting only with the perpetually friendly Mario as his "only even remote friend" and Incandenza Himself whom "at any rate at least Clipperton like he *exists*" (410). We, too, are uncharacteristically prevented from empathizing directly with the young man. We receive his story not through *IJ*'s typically empathetic limited third person point of view, but through an exceptionally diffracted lens: the legend (the term itself wrapped in mythologizing) is alluded to through a film (Mario's) that itself is a tonal reinterpretation of an epic (Himself's) satirical documentary of historical events.

It is all the more tragic, therefore, that Independent candidate Clipperton became so obsessed with the goal of reaching the apex of the Boys' Continental tennis rankings that he began bringing a Glock 17 handgun to tournaments. Like Gentle's administration that threatened they were "WILLING TO ELIMINATE [THEIR] OWN MAP OUT OF SHEER PIQUE" if the Canadians did not accept the toxic Great Convexity (407), Clipperton turns the pistol not on his opponent but upon himself (409). Despite this overt threat of violence, the system filled with competitive boys and tournament officials accommodate around him, giving him "meaningless victory" after meaningless victory (408). When Clipperton finally reaches #1 ranking

⁷ A holdover from The *ONANtiad*'s political lingo; Wallace extends the metaphor of tennis-as-politics to illustrate that although political theater largely engages its audiences in an illusion of a one-on-one competition, there are typically large machines and institutions that back the final candidates. Clipperton and Gentle are logical aberrations, outsider candidates taking advantage of the codified systems.

continentally, only then he “eradicates his map,” killing himself in front of the two Incandenzas (433).

Clipperton got what he thought he wanted. He thrust himself up the tournament circuit at any cost, and when he was greeted with apparent success, he takes his own life. We cannot hope to understand his story entirely due to the aforementioned diffracted lens through which we read his story, but this displacement is not solely Wallace undermining our ability to empathize with the perhaps-depressed person. It works as a structural device that reverberates meaning outwards from the center of the text, bouncing off similar stories within the fractal structure until it does contextualize each of them. Wallace explicitly establishes the young Clipperton’s story as a symbol for ONAN and the failures of Western Empire’s Experialist ideology. He further raises the saga’s importance by placing the record of his story literally alongside the body that acts as the destination for the arcs of Hal, Gately, and the AFR who are all seeking the Master Copy. We must therefore ask ourselves: Why did Clipperton take his own life?

Suicide extends its shadow across much of Wallace’s oeuvre. The young man’s death reflected a stark problem in Wallace’s life: since the 1970s while Wallace was writing, the number of young people taking their own life was on a “continuously increasing” path (McKeown et al. 1745). Especially when read—and how could we not—in conjunction with Wallace’s own lifelong struggles with major depression that culminated in his decision to take his own life in 2008, it’s clear that *IJ* does not intend to offer any easy answers. “Some cases of depression are beyond human aid” (697), he writes. Indeed, as his prose developed after *IJ*, Wallace’s self-deprecating humor transformed for a time into self-flagellation. The cruelly ironic rebuke that came with his 1998 short story on “The Depressed Person,” for example, paints the

titular character plainly as so self-absorbed that her self-awareness and desperate attempts at ingratiation threaten to cut her off from both her dwindling Support System and the reader's pity. Much of his short story collection *Oblivion* studies how individual suffering can be pointless in the context of society ("The Soul is Not A Smithy"), and comes down decidedly pessimistic on philosophical questions of whether authentic connections can ever be achieved with our limited capabilities for language (Boswell 168).

But in sharp contrast to the pessimism demonstrated within Wallace's subsequent works, *IJ* treats its suicidal characters with great care, chronicling the various *rationalities* of suicide for a psychotically depressed person. Within *IJ* multiple characters suffer from deep psychic pains that are "wholly incompatible with human life as we know it" (695). Thus at times Substance-abuse counsellors, family members, and Support Systems are rendered impotent in the face of these instances of suffering "total psychic horror" (650), akin to bystanders of a burning building shouting at those trapped within to 'Hang on!' as the suicidal person makes the terrible choice between the fall and the flames (696). Wallace was not alone; some of his contemporaries like the moral philosopher Christopher Lasch grappled with suicide as a rational response to the deeply flawed societies that individuals felt trapped within. As Lasch stated in *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times*, "Suicide becomes the ultimate form of self-defense in a world perceived... as a comfortable concentration camp" (99).

When read within that lens, the problem of becoming engaged within toxic cultural ideology permeates much of lived experience for characters in *IJ*. Wallace's motif of attempting to escape Lasch's cage manifests across his text not just permeating the stories of Hal and Gately, but also arising within the sections of suicidal Kate Gompert, Madame Psychosis, and in

the Director's works. He notes that at a certain point "we snap to the fact that the great transcendent horror is loneliness, excluded engagement in the self. Once we've hit this age, we will give or take anything... [to] not be Alone" (694). The chosen terminology of 'cage' echoes Foucault's famous interpretation of Bentham's Panopticon, in which "Everyone locked up in his cage" (*Discipline* 196) internalizes and thus perpetuates cultural power: "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles" of object and subject (203). Paradoxically, this lonely suffering as individuals is a commonality that Wallace uses to unite his characters of the new ONAN Empire. It thus becomes the micro-scale correspondent to the macro-scale Experialist ideology that drives American culture (Hayles "The Fact of Recursivity" 677), as individuals attempt to escape their cages by expelling from themselves the unfulfilling desires that fuel their solipsistic behavioral loops. Early in the text this initial hypothesis becomes explicitly clear: "The suffering *unites* us" (*IJ* 113) Hal argues to the younger ETA Little Buddies that are to learn from under his wing.

If only this takeaway of recognition of the universality of the human condition through suffering were so simple. Yet with one Little Buddy's remark to Hal's short speech, "*E Unibus Pluram*" (111), Wallace widens that hypothesis into conversation with himself. Inverting of our country's motto—"Out of Many, One" becoming "Out of One, Many"—signifies not only a critique of ONAN's postmodern culture inverting our foundational values of We the People, but also directly links one of Wallace's most famous essays by the same name into the conversation. In the essay published in 1993, Wallace poignantly articulates the other major concern that *IJ*

works through: that individuals trapped in solipsistic cycles are bred by (and often blind to) the culture that they are trapped within. Thus *IJ* wrestles with how to reveal the toxic cultural “water” that is invisible to us while participating in it, arguing that that “televsual conditioning influences the whole psychology of one’s relation to himself, his mirror, his loved ones, and a world of real people and real gazes” (“E Unibus Pluram” 53). Recognizing that television is now a driving force of epistemology, a medium of information and not simply a technology (Postman 78-9), he presents a conundrum that I believe indicates the major *raison d'être* of *IJ*:

So here’s the stumper for the U.S. writer who both breathes our cultural atmosphere and sees himself heir to whatever was neat and valuable in avant-garde literature: how to rebel against TV’s aesthetic of rebellion, how to snap readers awake to the fact that our televsual culture has become a cynical, narcissistic, essentially empty phenomenon, when television regularly *celebrates* just these features in itself and its viewers.

(“E Unibus Pluram” 68-9)

Much of the philosophical back-and-forth that occurs in the background between Marathe and Steeply underlies these basic premises – that the American culture that paved the way towards the ONAN Empire had become more attached to the “temple” of narcissistic consumption than devotion to a nation or cause (*IJ* 107). Wallace foresaw that medium of information developing, in Hal’s recent history, to condition viewers “to associate the Freedom to Choose and the Right to Be Entertained with all that was U.S. and true” (412)⁸, despite the fact that this “essentially empty phenomenon” would ultimately lead to the cultural weakness presented by the novel’s samizdat.

⁸ It is important to note that sequentially this explanation of the “ideological root” of American culture immediately follows Clipperton’s introduction, linking them thematically.

IJ brings to the foreground those who might be mere figurants in other texts, so our dive into the Halfway House reveals the Freedom to Choose these Substances in action. Wallace's Americans quite literally pick their poisons according to internalized character deficits, enslaving themselves to a catalog of multisyllabic chemical compounds and habits. However, the encyclopedic nature of the text reveals that Substance abuse can manifest in as many different ways as you can think—we and Gately come to learn that “gambling can be an abusable escape, too, and work, shopping, and shoplifting, and sex, and abstention, and masturbation, and food, and exercise, and meditation/prayer, and sitting so close to Ennet House's old ... cartridge-viewer that the screen fills your whole vision” (202). Emphasizing the democratic nature of addiction forces the reader to acknowledge that they need only find “the right switch for a man's wiring” (1065), and empathize by overlaying themselves upon the characters that they might identify with. In this way, Wallace extends compassion through his fiction; his characters are recognition of the ineffable suffering those encaged in the vicious cycles of their solipsistic loops deal with on a daily basis.

It is sad that he lamented at the end of his drafting process that “I have never felt so much a failure, or so mute when it comes to articulating what I see as the way out of the loop” (qtd. in Holland “*IJ*” 137). However, I would argue that his failure to efficiently communicate a solution does not fundamentally undercut his contribution towards breaking that entrapment, for he does provide guidance towards the way out. When another tennis étoile, like Clipperton, “wants to get to the Show bad it feels like it's eating him alive” echoes Wallace's doubt that “I'm stuck in the cage... There's no way out,” the guru Lyle steps in to empathize and helps him briefly “feel unalone” (*IJ* 388). Lyle, an institutional figure of New Sincerity and empathy that helps “take up

most of the psychic slack” from the younger ETA squad (437), responds “You might consider how escape from a cage must surely require, foremost, awareness of the fact of the cage” (389). Reminiscent of Wallace’s famous philosophical keynote at Kenyon College “This is Water”⁹ that urges the audience “to exercise some control of *how* and *what* you think” (53), Lyle’s wisdom encourages the young man to consider about what entraps him. Given that Foucault articulated that The Panopticon’s ability to perpetuate ideology “can be assured only if... it can be exercised continuously in the very foundations of society, in the subtlest possible way” (*Discipline* 208), the fact that Wallace makes his readers aware of those ideological forces at work starts to wear away at the great machine.

3. I Am In Here

“All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.”

— Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*

We have come to the greater problem *IJ* lays at our feet: from that first step of awareness of the cage, how do we then escape? It is the same paradox that Wallace established with his problem of television subsuming its critiques three years prior; as one character identifies in the lead-up to her attempted overdose, “What looks like the cage’s exit is actually the bars of the cage... It is the cage that has entered *her*” (222). The dual storylines of Hal and Gately which each end alone and unresolved, when read through this lens, become more clear. For although they individually process a great deal within their respective institutions—as embodied by Hal’s ETA experience channeling his desire to deliver the goods, and Gately’s halfway house helping him stave off

⁹ The joke that frames that speech appears some 50 pages later in *IJ* (445).

Substance Abuse—they are still so wrapped within the ideologies of those very institutions that they cannot yet share nor act on their new knowledge. Wallace thus highlights flaws in the systems that breed our culture that will lead to Continental-Emergency, unless we combine what Hal and Gately have learned to create a new model of shared epistemology for a healthy citizenry.

Foucault's analysis of power states that patterns emerge for "a particular form of behavior" to "be imposed" "whenever one is dealing with a multiplicity of individuals" (*Discipline* 205), establishing codified hierarchies across a culture that span across institutional modes of competition and social spheres. To ensure the stability of these systems, the systems invariably evolve to co-opt discontent and channel resistance through outlet valves that either render the problem impotent or support the dominant hierarchy. Hal's experience of ETA sheds a spotlight on the ways in which American culture encourages discipline through systemized suffering from a young age, supplanting competitive edge over any other sites of meaning making.

Wallace paints the academy as an institution that successfully supports the ETA players in their desire to make it to the Show, as they "loved to be watched" (654), channeling their basic adolescent talents in trial-by-fire, their souls apparently forged for greatness in a massive smithy. The academy subject thus becomes a literalized version of a prisoner of Foucault's Panopticon, who Foucault asserts "He is seen, but he does not see" (*Discipline* 200). However, the ideology of the academy attempts to become a countervailing force to the permeation of that wider ideology: Prorector Aubrey DeLint illustrates that "they teach us to teach that this place is about

seeing instead of being seen” with the goal that if the young get “inculcated right they’ll never be slaves to [success], they’ll never blow their brains out after winning an event” (*IJ* 660-1).

Hal’s rapid upward arc on the tennis circuit from 43rd nationally to 4th (260) stands in for successfully achieving the hopes and dreams that the young ETA generation clamors for. An older boy on the way out of ETA’s *palestra*¹⁰, he is at the top of his game, senior in age and tournament seed. From this vantage point in the locker room, he offers the younger boys his perspective on the systemic suffering. Taking a page out of Foucault’s discourse analysis, he notes that though after practice they are all “still suffering, hurt, beat up, so tired” (109), the design of the academy deliberately creates the locker room as a shared space to complain about their superiors as an outlet valve for discontent (111) (Foucault *Discipline* 197). The locker room between games thus becomes ETA’s locality of communal recovery, where young tennis warriors return from the zero-sum ritualized single combat. Just suffering in each other’s presence helps unify their individualized fragmentation that works its way into their very “bodies [that look] hastily assembled from different bodies’ parts” (*IJ* 100).

At ETA the boys experience this ideology of systematizing suffering in order to forge candidates that can survive at the pinnacle of the United States’ nearly religious worship of voyeuristic sports culture. Examining the way American culture places sports on a pedestal manifests often in Wallace’s non-fiction, where he contends “high-level sports are a prime venue for the expression of human beauty. The relation is roughly that of courage to war” (“Federer as Religious Experience”) that the early Epics venerated. However, this neo-American ideology that cultivates competitive individualism has a dark side: it applies immense pressure to the

¹⁰ A Greek term for gym used by the Athletic Director at ETA (82); it recalls the epic foundations of Western Culture and thus strengthens the tennis-player-as-warrior motif.

individual, whether it is to attain success or to fail in its pursuit. “Hence the suicides. The burn-out. The drugs, the self-indulging, the spoilage” (*IJ* 677), an emissary for ETA explains for a magazine profile. Wallace flips his non-fiction’s script and explores the philosophy of ETA that believes the young generation “must have something built into them along the path that will let them transcend [the experience of having that goal be their entire existence], or they are doomed” (680) because “We see suicides in history by people at these pinnacles; the children here are versed in what is called the saga of Eric Clipperton” (681).

The process created for the boys in ETA—Hal included—seems to largely be successful in working through a period of “spiritual puberty” (694) together, a race between reinforcement and the nihilistic burnout that institutions hope to avoid. Hal creates an instructional film of the daily discipline titled “The Feral Prodigy,” which is told through the second person and thus implicates the reader directly into this process. The film concludes that this institution imparts the Experialist ideology to “See yourself in your opponents. They will bring you to understand the Game. ... That its object is to send from yourself what you hope will not return” (176). With the various institutional heads captaining the helm of ETA and picking up the psychic slack, this seems to be a healthy enough method for most young *étoiles*—although immature, none of these innocent young yet demonstrate the kind of solipsistic problems that the magazine profile warns against. As the head administrator of the ETA stresses during the first scene, the outward-facing philosophy of ETA rejects Foucault’s contention that academies follow the same model of systems of power: it is “an *Academy*, not simply a camp or factory” (8).

ETA’s praxis only works to an extent, however, which is a reality that Hal confronts as he is about to exit the institution that he thrived within. The institution’s success comes with the

caveat that these outlets are insufficient in the face of latent psychic horrors that can manifest outside of the academy's spiritual puberty. In the beginning of the novel Hal is "struck by the fact that he really for the most part believes what he's said about loneliness and the structured need for a *we* here" (114), but nonetheless derives most of his pleasure smoking marijuana alone after drills and delivering the goods to superiors. When an impending drug-test forces Hal to give up his daily secretive marijuana ritual, however, he goes through initial stages of both a detox and existential crisis, and struggles to cope with filling that void. Thus as Hal explores the concept of shared suffering that lurks underneath the mask of American culture, the more worrisome it is that he realizes the Game with all its hoops to jump through is an inadequate foundation upon which he can have a fulfilling life. Laying statically on the floor and watching his father's old films he wonders if marijuana "had somehow become not just the high-point of the day but its actual meaning" (853), and is appalled that he might be unable to choose "between continuing to play competitive tennis and continuing to be able to get high" (898).

Midway through Hal's processing, Wallace interjects one of the only elements of clarity behind Incandenza's suicide. In his frank discussion of the difference between anhedonia and the deeper depression that older characters like his father experienced, he explains that Hal's anhedonia is a type of numb emptiness that signifies the absence of phenomenological feelings of *joie* and *value*. For the anhedonically depressed, Wallace describes that there becomes a gap between the sign and the signifier, where the anhedonic sees "the world becomes a map of the world" (693), echoing deconstructivists and the debate that the immature ETA literalize during their game of the Eschaton ("It's snowing on the goddamn *map*, not the *territory*, you *dick!*" (333)). Crucially, this anhedonia is "the standard take on Dr. Incandenza's suicide among

younger ETAs” which “says more about the students at E.T.A than it says about [the Director]” (693). Wallace draws the distinction between these two types of depression to assert that the tennis circuit’s carrot-and-stick ideology allows these students to qualify their proportional worth against one another¹¹ is a “lucky way to live. Even though it’s temporary” (693); Hal “isn’t old enough yet” to know the difference between the two (695).

The maturity gap between these two types of depression informs our understanding of the Clipperton saga and the downfall of ONAN. Incandenza’s observation to sympathize with the boy for his “traumas connected with early success” (432), suggests Clipperton was anhedonically depressed rather than clinically depressed. As an Independent in the ONAN Empire, he was unsupported by the academy’s disciplined praxis of meaning making before reached the apex of his career, and unsupported by family and friends. The saga thus becomes a warning that Hal and the other prodigies at ETA are, if they do not receive proper support to transition them from the carrot-and-stick competitive ideology of Experialism towards a more internalized form of meaning-making, in similar danger of being drawn to self-erasure than the clinically depressed that are elsewhere in the novel.

This explains why we empathize with Hal even as he sprawls on the floor at the tail end of the novel: he is beginning to enact the wisdom “That sometimes human beings have to just sit in one place and, like, hurt” (203). As he works through the grieving process, Wallace invites readers into the interior of a hero of non-action as Hal grapples with the fact of his Substance addiction. Only after he asks his brother for help do we receive Hal’s narrative in some of the only portions of first-person throughout the entire novel (den Dulk 216). With this perspective

¹¹ Such that a 2nd seed “feels exactly twice as worthwhile as the continent’s #4” (693).

afforded to him—distractions like his chosen Substance removed—he is forced to confront the lack of meaning present in his life:

It now lately sometimes seemed like a kind of black miracle that people could actually care deeply about a subject or pursuit, and could go on caring this way for years on end. ... [T]he object seemed incidental to this will to give oneself away, utterly. To games or needles, to some other person. ... To what purpose? This was why they started us here so young: to give ourselves away before the age when the questions *why* and *to what* grow real beaks and claws. (IJ 900)

From this perspective on the floor, Hal's prose widens in scope to take in the ideological totality surrounding his life. All at once, "the familiarity of Academy routine took on a crushing cumulative aspect"¹² and Hal suddenly becomes overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of fundamentally similar actions that he will have to undertake in order to continue his trajectory on the successful tennis path (897). In this state to outward observers Hal appears depressed; but Mario alludes to the idea that this is the first time that Hal is becoming even more himself than usual.

We leave him here in his horizontal position, a foundation that is "more solidly composed," that is "impossible to knock down" (902). He is suffering through grief, surely, but the perspective offered by considering the wideness of time's cumulative moments provides the counterpoint to the Ennet House's method of recovery.

¹² Perhaps catalyzed by the onset of the fictional psychoactive drug DMZ, which notably is a mold that grows on mold, "synthesized from a derivative of fitviavi" (IJ 170). "*Fit via vi*" is a Latin phrase with its roots in the destruction of Troy during *The Aeneid* (II.494) that translates as "Force finds a road." (Infinite Detox). Hal recalls ingesting this literal culture-feeding-on-culture as a child, in the middle of the chronologically last scene in the book (IJ 10),

Don Gately's character arc in the Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House (sic) is devoted to his process of working through the absence of Substance abuse. By the end of the text, even as he suffers from a gunshot wound, he consistently refuses the temptation to recapitulate into his Substance addiction with stoic aplomb as he realizes that "no single instant of it was unendurable" (860). Other characters argue amongst themselves that "once you are sufficiently enslaved by a Substance to need to quit the Substance in order to save your life, the enslaving Substance has become so deeply important to you that you will all but lose your mind when it is taken away from you" (201) and "You can only quit [your Substance] if you move onward and up to something else" (1065). The 12-Step program Gately works through is deliberately cliché-ridden, but the creed ultimately provides Gately some modicum of success to walk between these two lines and reject his Substance abuse (932). The praxis of Ennet House lays out systemic rigid discipline that Gately discovers is like following the directions for baking a cake: "it didn't matter at this point what he thought or believed or even said. All that mattered was what he *did*" and he would receive his desired result (466). Wallace establishes that this simple process allows Gately to get Free from his Substance-inflicted mental cage that he had been in since ten years old (468). The 12-Step Process thus gives him the tools to Abide with the Demerol addiction that nearly derailed his life.

Like *IJ*'s deliberate positioning of fractal structure that weighs the individual Clipperton as example of the flaws of societal-level Experialist ideology, Wallace uses Gately's revelations to inform Hal's. Hal's vantage point at the top of the competitive landscape affords him broad perspective of the ideology around him, but is mentally crushed by its cumulative immensity. If he were to go through the same process as Gately to learn how to endure each moment, he would

have the tools to suffer through his detox and grieving period. Much of Hal's apparent anhedonic stagnation in fact embody what Gately learns through the Ennet House: that Abiding through the addictive tendencies lets the individual start to emotionally "almost re-experience things that he'd barely even been there to experience" (446). Conversely, Gately's insistence to take one moment at a time lacks the perspective necessary to ascertain the goals he wants to accomplish. Thus, when we combine Hal and Gately's arrival at the end of their character arcs in the text, they complement each other with the macro and micro scale understanding of time and meaning that is necessary to fix ONAN's perilous ideology and flawed institutions.

Admittedly, the two protagonists' arcs are not perfect fits for each other's "missing interior jigsaw piece" (350). The critical essay "Modeling Community and Narrative" explains that the "communities in Wallace's fictions are not all good, and nearly every one of them exists only in relation to the threat of vast, compounded catastrophe. ... [Wallace's books like] *Infinite Jest* aren't themselves communities; they are gestures to community, and to its limits" (Warren 80-1). In ETA Hal is constantly surrounded by family, but he "devotes an unusually small part of his brain and time ever thinking about people in his family *qua* family-members" (*IJ* 515); the ETA is a bubble for young people to channel their competitive desires, but does so at the expense of closer bonds like familial connections. Oftentimes with students are dropped off at the academy without much of a second glance (519), and despite the institutional characters like Lyle that "take up the psychic slack" (437) the notable absence of these family figures surely adds to the loneliness that they experience. Ultimately, as Holland argues, despite the drive towards personal responsibility motivating both protagonists, the text "never manages to produce an unqualified care-taking parent or functional family" (*Succeeding Postmodernism* 84).

At the same time, Gately's sheer reliance on the stoicism of the 12-Step program evidently prevents him from fostering a healthy relationship with Joelle, a potential romantic partner who Wallace writes as quickly going through the same process as Gately (934). While the discipline of the guardrails of the 12-Step program thus provide Gately sanctuary from his Substance, they also consistently reinforce the message that Gately and his fellow addicts lack the interior willpower to make it out in the real world. Their temples to the self become another form of cage. Invoking Lasch's techniques for *Psychic Survival in Troubled Times*, the Ennet House path to recovery strongly discourages relationships with "any kind of sentimental attachment" since these build a hole that newcomers mistakenly fill with singular romances (*IJ* 1054-5). While this solipsism is temporarily healthy and even necessary, Gately notes that "they like to omit to tell you that after the year's gone by you're going to have forgotten how to even talk to a girl except about Surrender and Denial and what it used to be like Out There in the cage" (477-8).

Given that Alexis de Tocqueville established that American ideology has, since 1835, had a predilection for separating ourselves "into a multitude of particular little societies" rather than participating in a cohesive body politic (577), the relative anticonfluentism between most constituents of Ennet House and ETA feels realistic. However, in *IJ* these mid-level institutions serve to form more elaborate cages for their protagonists. As Gately himself intuited, the creed of the 12-Step program failed to equip him to survive "Out There" in modern life, and Hal suffers from the same fate once he is positioned to exit from the ETA. The mid-level institutions in *IJ*, the academy and the halfway house, bestow only limited social capital to their constituents; as Robert Putnam of *Bowling Alone* remarks, social capital is comprised of "networks of social

connection” that in turn “provide the channels through which we recruit one another for good deeds” and “foster norms of reciprocity that encourage attention to others’ welfare” (117). Since the social infrastructure that generates this social capital (Klinenberg 5) is limited in *IJ*—Hal and Gately do not, in fact, meet within the novel—Gately’s seemingly tiny problem of not being able to talk to girls about anything other than his 12-Step’s specialized jargon becomes much more consequential. When taken in conjunction with the realization that Wallace’s 12-Step programs only provide the tools to *remove* a Substance from their lives, but do little to *reinvigorate* sites of meaning back into his characters’ lives. *IJ* shows its characters’ baseline hedonic tone returns with time spent away from addiction, helping to cure the anhedonia that pervades American culture; but Wallace also cautions that hardline addicts who “pared away potential escape after potential escape” are in fact strikingly similar to *The Entertained*, as they “end up sitting there completely motion- and escape-less” (998) until they die. Crucially, Wallace’s text is limited in that it doesn’t provide methods to do more than survive within its cages.

We as the readers of their stories have the opportunity to enact the patterns of preventative care and rehabilitation that Hal and Gately undertake within their respective institutions. While Hal is crushed by the immensity of the cumulative system that he’s become aware he’s immersed in, Gately provides support for us to Abide through those feelings. With these parallel lines set to converge in the graveyard, Wallace hopes to achieve balance in his text and thus provide balance at an individual and collective level. Though he ultimately doesn’t provide models for individual responsibility nor healthy institutions, he does illuminate the way forward. It is not yet *Too Late*.

4. Echoes and Absence

“Books always speak of other books, and every story tells a story that has already been told”

–Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*

Since Wallace made his mark in the literary canon, contemporary authors continue to wrestle with the paradoxical issue of simultaneously representing and rebelling against the symptoms of the postmodern capitalist condition. The 2016 novel *A Tale for the Time Being*'s principle characters still remain engaged within their nihilistic culture's perpetual state of anxiety. Ruth Ozeki has responded to these epistemological crises with a text that reifies faith in social connections as sites of meaning-making, much in the way that Wallace began in *IJ*. In the face of personal trauma and postmodernism's seemingly broken semiotic chain, like *IJ*'s Eric Clipperton, the young protagonist of the novel initially consider suicide as her only option out of nihilistic crises. Beyond becoming aware of those problems, the text works successfully to model methods to heal and subsequently extricate its characters from those cultural troubles. Nao find ways to inscribe her traumas, and as she consciously pushes against the limitations of language, she achieves meaningful catharsis.

A Tale for the Time Being's initial frame starts quite solipsistically, portraying a character that closely resembles Ruth Ozeki-as-author¹³ as she attempts to work through her writer's block on her memoir (31). Her story exemplifies the changing narrative throughline since *IJ* by attempting to express “everything that has happened in the past decade, personally as well as globally, in the post-9/11 period and since the turn of the millennium” (Ty 161). Formally, rather than adhering to a linear personal history or diving into a completely unbound postmodern mode,

¹³ Even though it disrupts the effect Ruth Ozeki undoubtedly wanted in critical interpretations of the text, for clarity's sake hereafter the in-text character will be referred to as Ruth, while the author will be Ozeki.

Ozeki realized her post-9/11 period needed to transpire across a split lens – quite similar to how Gately and Hal inform each other’s character arcs. The story that erupts onto the page shifts between Ruth’s chapters and those where the reader and Ruth explore the diary of a young Japanese-American girl in what feels like real time.

Mojca Krevel conducts a brilliant reading of the text that establishes how its structure, despite initially appearing to be neatly split across this author/character divide, in fact recursively disrupts that binary. Instead, the novel applies a “rhizomatous and fluid structure” to the narrative that necessitates “consideration from the perspective of a different historical framework” that can accommodate this portrayal of the shift in contemporary societies and cultures (112). Like *IJ*, the barebones structural elements like chapters and books cohere not based on linear historicity, but are fractally built upon themes and motifs that span generations. This new historical framework disrupts our typical conception of causal links and instead disperses causation across time and space using quantum theory. Although Ozeki ostensibly is the real-world creator, *A Tale for the Time Being*’s teenage Nao calls her specific reader into existence in order to start her journey to achieve self-acceptance. On the first page of the narrative Nao asks specifically if the person reading her diary has a cat sitting in her lap, smelling of “cedar trees and fresh sweet air” (3), and the last page of the novel Ruth replies that she does have exactly that (403). The text thus actualizes poststructuralist understandings of the author and reader divide (Krevel 116), injecting the reader into the text to explore trauma from the interior, while simultaneously affording empathetic perspective to facilitate the healing process for both author and reader.

The particularities of how the reader and author affect each other is crucial in the text. We are initiated into the novel not unlike Hal's declaration that "I am in here," being invited directly into the diary of the young girl we are to read. But within the first pages, we know that we are voyeuristically invading into a fictionalized account of the book, which is written in "adolescent purple handwriting that sprawled across the page" (11) for Ruth. Ozeki writes that "Print is predictable and impersonal" while handwriting "is as intimate as skin", allowing for Ruth to empathize with the teenage girl's moods and anxieties (12). While the reader is nonetheless obviously expected to explore the narrative—it is a book of fiction, after all—this functionally closes the system of the text, and thus allows Nao's intended reader of Ruth to have a direct effect on the outcome of Nao's story.

Ruth finds the diary while sorting out garbage that washed up on the shore of her island in Canada, carried from Japan across the Pacific tidal gyre. The gyre that links Ruth and Nao's worlds is an important image when Ozeki unpacks its role in understanding Nao's story. For although the gyre transports Nao's diary intact across time and space, it also brings unsorted garbage, microplastics ground down over time, and radiation from the Fukushima nuclear disaster. It seems sheer chance—or fate—that Ruth was able to find the diary out of all of the chaos that the gyre brings; she becomes the hero that sorts out the meaningful content from the Total Noise. In contrast, Ozeki notes that there were ancient warnings to prevent the Fukushima Continental-Emergency written on stone markers – but the modern Japanese ignored "the voices of our ancestors... speaking to us across time" (114).

The diary and the disaster cause Ruth to ask point-blank: "What is the half-life of information? Does its rate of decay correlate with the medium that conveys it?", and later, "Does

the half-life of information correlate with the decay of our attention? Is the Internet a kind of temporal gyre, sucking up stories, like geodrift, into its orbit?" (114). These are chief concerns of Ozeki's hypertext in the context of an Internet Age, and important questions for the movement of post-postmodernism. After Postman asserted that "a major new medium changes the structure of discourse" (27), Ozeki's novel deliberately puts our new communication medium on trial as a cause and inadequate amelioration for social anxieties. Her portrayal is not entirely negative: this new medium for communication affords Nao an important lifeline to connect to her great-grandmother, and the "compulsive mania and hyperfocus" of vital Internet research that Ruth conducts grinds to a halt when her internet connection shuts down (Ozeki 91). But Marlo Starr astutely argues that the new medium of cyberspace otherwise "allows [Nao] neither greater autonomy nor escape" from the traumas that she works through in the novel (104). Nao initially attempts to transcribe her experience moving to Japan in a blog titled *The Future is Nao!*, but the outward-facing persona that Nao initially creates for her blog does not provide any solace to her. In her efforts to drum up an artificially optimistic spin on her experience of moving to a foreign country, she makes her traumas invisible. Despite the internet's possible opportunity to connect to friends back home, Nao laments that even aided by cyberspace, "really nobody gives a shit" (Ozeki 25).

Indeed, the process through which Nao writes a diary for herself and for Ruth seems the antithesis to the postmodern mode presented in our new media landscape. Nao's personal narrative that she writes for Ruth is notably not the optimistic face she filled her blog with, but is instead filled with digressions and self-doubt; her initial inability directly address her anxiety and her alienation is understandable given that her institutions and ideology haven't yet given her

coping skills nor structural supports to turn to. To combat that, Nao's narrative manifests into the text with deployments of prolepsis and influences from the Japanese I-novel genre, whose "confessional" style allies the reader with Nao on her modern synthesis of her bildungsroman and künstlerroman. The reader follows Nao's non-chronological thought process, initially demonstrating a postmodern mode as it flits from moments of background information on Nao's writing setting to school to family life without an apparent organizing principle at work.

Nao's narrative initially follows the postmodern cultural logic of Late Capitalism envisioned by Frederic Jameson. Jameson argues that late capitalism's overemphasis on consumer culture is linked with the postmodern breakdown of linear historicity, with resulting psychological burdens that are thrust unto the subject (*Antimonies of Realism* 300). In the face of an economic crash, a broken family life with her father's suicidal thoughts, and global terrorism on the world stage, Nao is understandably consumed by a state of anxiety from the outset, which only gets worse as she attempts to integrate into her new society. Ruth's perceived urgency is understandable as a frame, as the real author declared that her inspiration for the book was reading about the stories of bullying in the US and Japan; she declared "if the book is about anything, it is about bullying" (Ty 164) and how to deal with those issues, equipping the individual and society with tools to bring about systemic change.

Nao is ostracized by her peers at her Japanese high school as they aimed to metaphorically "cripple [their prey] and eat them alive" (Ozeki 48). Unlike *IJ*'s academy, Ozeki's portrayal of these children shines a spotlight on the depths of cruelty that even young will enact on one another, with Nao concluding that "School just isn't safe" (44). For example, the students play a "game" called *kagome rinchi*, which loosely translates to "lynch cage" (102-

3). The chosen target is surrounded by their peers, blindfolded and beaten until “you can’t kneel anymore and you fall over” (104), with no way out of the cage prior to total submission. Nao’s narrative circles around situations where she survives trauma at school, but finds that both her mother and father are inadequate supports for her, so that “there was nobody left in my life I could count on to keep me safe” (74). Through this process, the reader is able to follow Nao’s line of thought to the point where she eventually opens up to tell the audience about her sexual assault. These traumas dramatically escalate in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on 9/11. Her classmates attempt to rape Nao, tying her down and videotaping the process for later publishing on the internet (276-8). They thus take away her agency in every capacity available to them: physical and social denigration, both corporeally and in the cybersphere.

Her father later finds this video, spurring him to attempt suicide again (284). His suicide note amends Socrates’ final words before drinking hemlock to read: “I should only make myself ridiculous *in the eyes of others* if I clung to life and hugged it when *I* have no more to offer” (emph. added, 284). In his eyes, the theory to turn to self-erasure due to societal pressures “exemplified the Western Mind.” But his idea is misguided. For while Ozeki, like Wallace, uses the image of a man deciding to jump from a burning building¹⁴ to help illustrate that sometimes self-erasure is rational (268), Ozeki’s novel works a great deal to reach out to help this man understand that this particular justification is not only the incorrect choice, but would have far-reaching ramifications for the social network that he is embedded within.

What allows Ozeki’s characters to begin healing is when Nao escapes her school, and instead goes to live at a Zen Buddhist temple with her great-grandmother. There, she is given a

¹⁴ Ozeki’s novel, tragically, does not need to rely on descriptive imagery for its depiction. It invokes the Falling Man from 9/11.

protective familial bond that affords her the ability to be vulnerable with her emotional state for the first time (169). Furthermore, her great-grandmother teaches Nao zazen meditation as a “supapawa” that bestows the ability “to enter time completely” (182-3). Meditation doesn’t solve the suicidal tendencies that run in her family, Ozeki clarifies (162), but nonetheless functions similarly to Gately’s ability to Abide through suffering with no single moment as unendurable. But Ozeki does more than provide Nao the ability to *survive* with Lasch’s survival techniques and fix Jameson’s temporal crisis, which signify the anomie of postmodernism. Rather, when Nao’s perspective widens, unlike Hal’s crushing cumulative aspect, she finds experiences that resonate with her and allow her to escape her solitary existence.

At her great-grandmother’s temple, Nao interacts with the ghost of her great-uncle who died in World War II. The spirit notably has the same name as her suicidal father, and in her first interaction with the spirit she confuses the two (212). Weaving the spiritual world to reality allows Nao to become in tune with the wider cultural context, thus modeling a protagonist who listens to ancestral voices that “were speaking to us across time” (114). When Nao stumbles across her great-uncle’s last letters before his death (217, 248), Ozeki shifts the narrative yet again, integrating the old family member into the web of experience as first-person chapters in the text. He became an unwilling kamikaze pilot for the Japanese government, who took student soldiers and “bullied them and beat them every day” aiming to crush their spirits into compliance (244). While in this practice she embodies the beginning of Lasch’s narcissistic individual, who “shores up fragments against [her] ruin. [Her] life consists of isolated acts and events” and “[t]he decline of the narrative mode... reflects the fragmentation of the self” (*The Minimal Self* 96), Nao thus collects fragments of the other narrative layers and crucially *synthesizes* the resonant

pieces with her own. In reading her great uncle's similar experiences of trauma, Nao gains sympathetic perspective and confidence. When she returns to the toxic environment of school, she declares "the kids must have noticed the difference, or maybe they sensed [my great-uncle's] ghost hovering next to me," allowing her to succeed in school (264). Thanks to her great-grandmother's tutelage and drawing on her great uncle's similar experience in war, Nao declares that her classmates "could break my body but they wouldn't break my spirit" (277).

Yet Ozeki and Nao's narratives are not quite finished with their healing process. Although Nao has gained the skills to survive, she is not the only character in the text suffering from trauma. When she reads that her father is spending time on online suicide forums, she is triggered to make the decision "I would just kill myself, too, and be done with it" (304). Again constrained to Jameson and Lasch's immediate present and threatening self-erasure, Nao declares "The fact is, I'm all alone" and "this is what now feels like" (340-1). Immediately, Ruth herself is unable to find any more written text: all the subsequent pages of Nao's diary become blank (343). Only when Ruth is able to acknowledge that the fiction "calls our existence into question" (344) and reaches out across time and space to help Nao's suicidal father does the vicious cycle get broken. She convinces him that he needs to snap out of being so "selfish" and live for the sake of his daughter (351), and thus successfully is able to finish Nao's story.

In doing so, Ruth herself is able to come to terms with her own mother's death (370). These entangled passages remind the reader of the degree to which their own interpretation of a text has power. As Krevel argues, by mingling the causality of the Yasutani family across time with the author figure of Ruth Ozeki, the reader is implicated in the process of healing the traumas of both themselves and the characters in the text:

Their individual identities, together with the corresponding realities, thus merge within a single system of subjectivity into which — by and through the act of reading — the identities of the novel's readers are incorporated as well. The readers, namely, verify the compatibility of the received information on the literary subjects... and interpret them accordingly. (121)

The whole text becomes a site of meaning making for the characters by re-edifying religious, familial, and ancestral bonds in rejection of the solipsistic nihilism that postmodernism lays as its precepts.

The important final move that Ozeki's text makes, however, is removing its principle characters from the toxic cultural ideologies that they are within. Ozeki's text agrees with Wallace's necessity to remove oneself from the endless recursive loops in order to reinject meaning into an otherwise nihilistic existence, but notably gives its characters tools to achieve that end. When Ruth is able to intervene to "change the end of [Nao's] story," (Ozeki 376) Nao's end is revealed to be no end at all, but rather absence. Nao's father invents a technology to remove someone from the past, present, and future of the internet (383), allowing her the ability to transcend the endless loops that encaged Wallace's characters. Just after Nao "caught up with herself," the pages again go blank "like writer's block, only in reverse" (375). These final words recalling Ruth's impetus for writing the novel: though at the beginning, she asked herself "What was she doing wasting precious hours on someone else's story?", when she could have been finishing her memoir (31), the result is that both stories receive catharsis.

In viewing their writing as antithetical to self-obliteration, Ozeki's protagonists share their stories with a hypothetical audience outside their personal text. This self-conscious

disassociation in the act of writing allows Nao to take ownership of her troubles; furthermore, Ozeki invites the reader to piece together the full picture of events alongside the characters in the text. In order to prevent the stories from continuing to reverberate just out of right frame or endlessly just out of left frame, the characters need to take ownership of their own stories and close the loop. The reader is thus wrapped into the hermeneutic circle, self-consciously aware of their relative ability to affect the text's meaning through interpretation. Working through layers of interpretation, the investigative co-authors of *Ruth* and the reader use this codebreaking quality of the text to heuristically break out of postmodernism's lack of affect. Thus, when the Yasutani family comes to a resolution of their traumas, the reader is not granted the typical narrative denouement that we have come to expect in more linear fiction. Rather, having acquired the skills to interpret their own trauma, the novel's characters erase themselves from their texts and exit the hermeneutic circle.

And yet the story continues, even in Nao's absence—this time, with an implicit offering to the reader: Use the skills we learned. It is your turn to break free.

5. Breaking News: Going Viral

“The people who used to ask, ‘Is it news?’ now seem to be asking, ‘Will it stimulate?’ And the change is felt, high and low, throughout the culture.”

—George Saunders, *The Braindead Megaphone*

We are now stepping a few years beyond the era of Subsidized Time that Wallace warned us might herald the danger of The Entertainment running rampant through an ONAN Empire.

Wallace's magnum opus paints an ominously familiar vision of our current days. And although

we are still thankfully in 2018 and not yet discussing the Year of the DIY Virtual Reality Escape Room, many of Wallace's concerns have come to pass. The crises of postmodernism have escaped the ivory tower and into the real world, presenting worrying vulnerabilities for our democracy. Trends in addictive behavior have been on the rise, as have their consequences for everyday individuals. Furthermore, like *IJ's* Continental-Emergency that stemmed from a terrorist group leveraging the United States' obsession with the Freedom to Choose against us, we have seen real foreign adversaries exploit the same avenues with the same intent. It is thus worth overlaying the insights contained in Wallace's and Ozeki's novels onto our transformed media landscape, to provide guidance for how to navigate these shifting cultural foundations.

The world in Wallace's absence barrels headlong into the Information Age, overflowing with streaming services, Big Data, and algorithms that invisibly form guardrails for our behavior as we explore the World Wide Web. While Wallace was deeply concerned with the addictive behavior that television cultivated—citing that it had risen to households consuming over 6 hours of watching (“E Unibus Pluram” 21)—these trends have worsened. The amount of television that

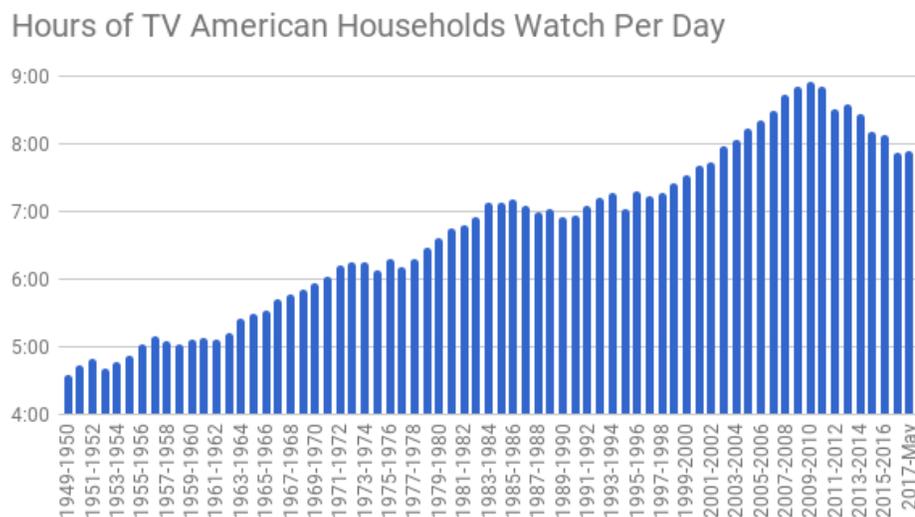


Figure 1 Nielsen records show we are watching about 30% more TV since “E Unibus Pluram” was written.

we are watching has ballooned to about 7 hours and 50 minutes a day (Figure 1), and of course with the advent of smartphones we’re even more attached to our entertainment. Thanks to the proliferation of devices and psychological tricks like auto-play, the average American now lives with that familiar white glow illuminating our faces and headphones pumping against our eardrums for over 11 hours a day (The Nielsen Company).

To be clear, I do not mean to adopt a wholly technophobic stance towards new media. The Web and smart devices operate under the same rules as other technological leaps in communication. They cover a wider populace than ever before, decrease costs before an individual can interact with a discourse, aid in research, and link content and constituents with more ease (Jenkins 210). While Wallace’s world contextualized by television certainly facilitated a democratic discourse of information, a voice still needed either a great deal of economic or cultural capital to get their message out on a platform of scale; the transition from television-based discourse to social media lifted these cost constraints (Mounk 139).

That said, as we accelerate this new media machine into uncharted territory, we need to be cognizant of any unseen obstacles jutting out of the water in front of us. Our ideological system is increasingly designed to address the question that *IJ* asks: what if “a viewer could more or less *100% choose what’s on at any given time?* What if s/he could *define* the very entertainment-happiness it was her/his right to pursue?” (416). Innovations in search methodologies reduce the friction that we encounter as we surf the web, making the process of accessing our desired information easy. But as Wallace foresaw in “E Unibus Pluram,” ease in fact “will remedy exactly nothing [unless] guides to *why* and *how* to choose among experiences, fantasies, beliefs, and predilections, are permitted serious consideration in U.S. culture” (75-6). A citizen’s greater access to information in a global network unbalances what Postman calls an information-action ratio, the relationship between news that elicits an audience’s opinions versus those that they can respond to in real life (68-9). Near the end of his life, Wallace postulated that the “professional filtering/winnowing is a type of service that we citizens and consumers now depend on more and more” to balance that ratio and successfully navigate the Total Noise of information overload (2-3).

What Wallace didn’t see coming, is how a user chooses their personal entertainment-happiness has now also submerged into the background Noise. New invisible gatekeepers have formed yet another layer to the cage trapping our culture in cycles of solipsism and addiction.

The same year that Wallace was acting as a Decider for the Best American Essays, Netflix was hard at work to become a Decider as well. In 2007, Netflix started the transition from its DVD-by-mail service to transform into a streaming platform¹⁵, offering a \$1 million

¹⁵ As an inflection point in the changing media landscape, Netflix’s fits the midpoint between when this paper is written (2018) and when *IJ* was published (1996).

grand prize to any team that could improve its recommendation algorithms by 10% (Netflix: “Beyond the 5 Stars”). Personalizing entertainment is as old as the industry itself, but *automating* that process by gathering that user data in real time is a paradigm shift for modern capitalism. Think of the market change when Ford automated the manufacture of the Model T; now that automation applies not only to the entertainment business but also to the advertising sector, which serves as the conduit between manufacturers and consumers. As consequence, since 2012 over three quarters of the watching that households “choose” on its platform is informed by Netflix’s recommendation engine. These improved recommendations increased membership satisfaction, but more notably also led to a precipitous growth of the company—with a 22,000% increase from its original value on Wall Street (Owens), the new kid on the playground has overtaken other media giants like Disney. In the era of Peak TV that it helped ushered in, its CEO Reed Hastings declared that Netflix’s biggest competitor is not Primetime or the new *Star Wars*, but sleep (Snider). And although Netflix’s sudden growth is staggering, it is only one player on the field of new media Tech Giants, all of whom are employing similar learning algorithms in their competition for a tighter hold on our attention.

In *IJ*, the debate between Marathe and Steeply shows how the American ideology’s pursuit of the Freedom to Choose above all else is similar to how we become destructively addicted to the sugar that our bodies evolved to seek out (430). When the pathway to these sugary media choices becomes automatic, there is a breakdown of the broader nutritional content that fuels a well-functioning democracy, both at the individual and societal level. Modern technocritics show these new forms of media have become a type of Substance abuse. Sherry Turkle, in her book *Alone Together*, conjectures that our social isolation when using technology

spurs a vicious cycle that reduces our skills to break out of it: “Always on and (now) always with us, we tend the Net, and the Net teaches us to need it,” with the consequence that “[n]etworked, we are together, but so lessened are our expectations of each other that we can feel utterly alone... and we become less willing to get out there and take a chance” (154). The data worryingly backs Turkle up. American citizens are experiencing a precipitous decrease in the number of people that they can rely on, in social media or otherwise. A sociological study from Duke University shows that “almost half of the population (43.6 percent) now [reports] that they discuss important matters with either no one or only one other person” (McPherson et al. 358). Furthermore, while the chemical triggers are not yet fully understood, when individuals spend more time on social media they experience a marked increase in depression (Lin et al. 7).

These trends have real-world effects. The American Psychological Association now indicates social isolation is a larger health risk than the obesity epidemic (Holt-Lunstad). Life expectancy for Americans is on the decline for the first time since World War I, due in large part to the sharp increase in what experts are calling “deaths of despair,” by suicide or Substance abuse (Fig 2). The opioid epidemic, which at this point has become more deadly than the height

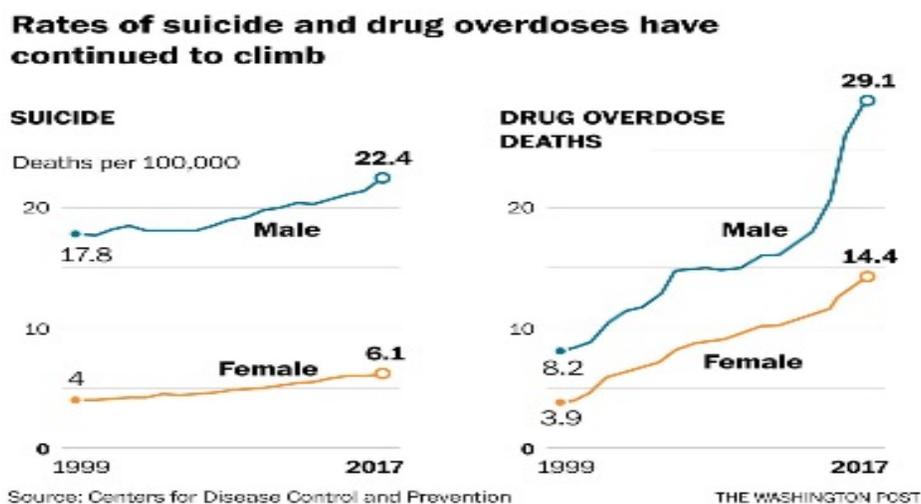


Figure 2 Crises prominent in *Infinite Jest* have surged in the U.S. since the book's publishing (Bernstein)

of the AIDS crisis, is fueled in part by these feelings of loneliness (Conner et al. 1401). This paper is not naively arguing these deaths of despair are easily remedied by fixing our solipsistic media landscape. But like Wallace wrote in *IJ*, the experience of loneliness and Substance abuse are closely related, and we can use our understanding of the causes of one to help the individual cope with the other.

At the societal level as well, the changing media landscape is revealing dangerous cracks at the very seams of our republic's democracy. The social media age fundamentally changes our political discourse, particularly in changing how citizens engage with the rest of their body politic. The Pew Research Center shows that in the U.S., social media has now displaced newspapers for where citizens often get their news (Shearer). And although television still reigns supreme, trends show that social media is gradually catching up to the medium that Wallace was concerned about: in 2017, total media ad revenues grew by just 3%, while digital advertising revenue grew by 21% (IAB Report). That growth is primarily credited to Facebook and Google (Ingram), whose market strategy is predicated upon their exceedingly efficient persuasion architecture that allows them to deliver desired information while getting audiences to spend more and more time upon the site. The title of Facebook Feeds can be read literally, as a newstream carefully constructed to build and then satisfy our hunger for specific knowledge. The news algorithm is designed to amplify emotionally-engaging stories, utilizing techniques like A/B testing and intrusive data collection to microtarget stories that best suit the audience (Oremus). One report examining these social media sites' interactions with democracy argues this choice is not "related to the democratic role of public service journalism [to inform the

public]. Instead, they make selections based on what will keep the user on the platform longer, thus enabling the display of more ads and the collection of more user data” (Ghosh and Scott 38).

There are two toxic by-products as consequence of the feature of machine learning dictating our media choices. The first is something that Wallace had his finger on during his profile of a radio host back in 2004:

It is, of course, much less difficult to arouse genuine anger, indignation, and outrage in people than it is real joy, satisfaction, fellow feeling, etc. The latter are fragile and complex, and what excites them varies a great deal from person to person, whereas anger et al. are more primal, universal, and easy to stimulate. (“Host”).

What we’re seeing supports Wallace’s assumptions. Algorithms on social media more frequently expose users to shocking news stories (Jones et al.), particularly those that trigger “moral outrage,” while decreasing the empathetic feedback that the user experiences when responding to that news item (Crockett 770). This phenomenon is a self-enforcing loop, where the emotional reaction to a news story itself goes viral, infecting the individual’s own emotional state even when they remove themselves from social media (Kramer et al. 8788). In short, we’re breeding a culture of outrage that follows us even when we disconnect.

The second toxic by-product is that these social media algorithms cause citizens to encounter less news from opposing ideologies (Bakshy et al 1130), creating the pervasive term “echo chambers” that rings frighteningly close to Wallace’s motif of the cage. This is a feature, not a bug; few people have emotionally affective responses to C-SPAN. However, as the book *Post-Broadcast Democracy* illuminates, though it is a natural consequence of greater efficiency in media choice to fragment audiences (Prior 6), “this fragmentation of news audiences does

seem to make democracy more vulnerable” because “it might limit the diversity of arguments that viewers encounter and expose them to biased information” (272). The issue compounds in that the “by-product learning” of politically relevant information that the user doesn’t want to see when surfing has drastically decreased in the Internet Age (4), which “threatens to separate politically interested citizens... from those who favor entertainment” (18).

In the absence of this by-product mode of civic engagement, the country has both become less engaged in politics and more polarized¹⁶, since “[g]reater media choice has made partisans more likely to vote and moderates more likely to abstain” (Prior 244, 263). Wallace, in his political non-fiction, worried as much: “If you are bored and disgusted by politics and don’t bother to vote, you are in effect voting for the entrenched Establishment... who are keenly aware that it is in their best interests to keep you disgusted and bored and cynical... In reality, there *is no such thing as not voting*” (“Up, Simba”). In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam noted that the trend of voting rates declining year after year doesn’t bode well for our democracy; he proves that the act of voting is entangled with acts that boost social capital, such as giving to charity, volunteering, and cooperating with fellow citizens on community affairs (35). Furthermore, polarization engenders a vicious cycle of representatives needing to cater more to their respective bases through the echo chambers that they can be reached within, as there are fewer votes to be gained in the center. In sum, these trends in our internal political process limit the efficacy of political discourse, since disagreeing parties can reliably motivate their base with a set of “alternative facts,” rather than having to meet median voters in the middle with a compromise.

¹⁶ Political polarization in this era is higher than any time in America’s history since the Civil War (Lewis).

For all the flaws of the television era, centralized news studios in the broadcast era of communication served as important institutions of gatekeeping. They limited the spread of Entertaining content that the audiences thought they wanted, whether this be dopamine dumps of cat videos, fake stories, or propaganda (Mounk 141). In the absence of those gatekeepers, the world's citizenry has become much more susceptible to a type of information warfare that is intended to overwhelm the individual's capacity to sort through it all (Paul and Matthews 1). Paul and Matthews explain that this "firehose of information" disinformation technique uses Wallace's Total Noise of postmodern culture as a weak point through which it can destabilize the target country. Though the CIA had identified this propaganda model as a deliberate strategy that the KGB has used since at least the 1980s (Boghardt 1), our modern media environment has given these "active measures" of misinformation and disinformation very fertile grounds to fester and proliferate (Postman 107). The reach of these companies controlling our media landscape means "consumers will necessarily be forced accept that political falsehoods shall be targeted at them" (Ghosh and Scott 41). In recent elections, Russian cyberwarfare units worked on social media platforms to stoke divisions across identity lines, with the intent to destabilize our republic and cause citizens to question the election's legitimacy (Frenkel & Benner) (Nadler et al. 38-9). While it has not been possible yet to quantify the degree to which these fake news misinformation campaigns affected outcomes, without taking efforts to restructure our media environment there is little indication that democracies will naturally inculcate ourselves to these viral infections. The World Economic Forum now lists disinformation as one of the greatest global threats, contributing to profound social instability (*Global Risks Report* 48-9).

How, then, do we begin to fix these Cross-Continental Emergencies accelerated by the crises of changing media? “Umm, insights and guides to value used to be among literature’s jobs, didn’t they?” (“E Unibus Pluram” 76). To be sure, the literary world is already shifting to grapple with these crises. One trend recognized by post-postmodern critics is how texts at the turn of the millennium demonstrate how to “salvage much-missed portions of humanism, such as affect, meaning, and investment in the real world and in relationships between people” (Holland *Succeeding Postmodernism* 8). Novels like Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* (2000), Ruth Ozeki’s *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013), and George Saunders’ *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017) are chiefly concerned with how to break the vicious cycle of suffering caused by isolation, and successfully model ways for the reader to achieve catharsis through their own work. Especially when following the trends that heuristically include the reader in the puzzle-solving aspects of compiling narrative, and by breaking down the binary between author and reader, literature is a fantastic tool. As Wallace said in an interview, compared to other types of media, literature is certainly “a more powerful anodyne for loneliness. I enjoy TV, but I always feel lonelier after I’ve watched four hours of it. ... In fiction you both feel like the writer is talking to you and [that] you are intimate with people in a book” (“A Conversation”). The deep work of literature also enables us the perspective to acknowledge the cage of potentially toxic ideology.

However, though literature certainly has power, these insidious problems threatening Continental Emergency necessitate a reassessment on multiple fronts. We must think deeply, like in *IJ*, about how to fix these problems as individuals and within the societies we are immersed in.

The first step is an awareness of the cage. While “E Unibus Pluram” highlighted the difficulty inherent to critiquing television culture, we do have the data behind the economic

model that drives the new media companies as they build the new rules around us. This means that, unlike Wallace whose television culture had “my generation by the throat,” (“E Unibus Pluram” 49), we can loosen the grip that these new media companies are tightening. As Postman argues, “No medium is excessively dangerous if its users understand what its dangers are” (161). Using timetrackers, disabling autoplay and unnecessary push notifications that clamor for our attention can aid in curbing addiction, by adding friction to the devices that offer endless Entertainment. Intentional usage is a massive difference between healthy media consumption on these sites, versus the experience of getting trapped, like in a casino without clocks on the walls.

Removing oneself from the cage by disengaging with these types of media, like Ozeki’s protagonist Nao accomplishes, is certainly an appealing solution in the short term. However, doing so only allows bad actors more power within the existing system. It therefore behooves us in academia to deliberately teach media criticism skills, as well as the different structures through which one can engage in a productive debate. The OECD and other individual countries have each instituted tests for digital critical thinking skills as part of their core curriculums to combat fake news, which we should accelerate incorporating into our own syllabi (*Global Risks Report* 48-9). We in English departments can also construct assignments oriented around Rogerian argumentative structure and working with stasis theory, in order to train the ability to navigate to compromise rather than the winner-take-all approaches of classical debates that can foment division.

But a more educated citizenry is not enough to solve these critical vulnerabilities. To complement, we also need a broad restructuring of the incentive structure for our media to better support our democracy’s Fourth Estate. We must find an alternative to the Breaking News cycles

that support the narratives of bombastic demagogues and bad actors for views, while shuttering the doors of smaller publication houses. In doing so, we can better inform our citizenry to inoculate ourselves against fake news going viral. If we do not increase the salience of some of these evergreen stories, such as for the impending crisis of climate change, we will always manage to kick these cans down the road until it is *Too Late*. Thus, like an update to the old Fairness Doctrine¹⁷, digital Tech Giants of a sufficient user-base should be subject to a progressive “attention tax” that inserts a relevant local infomercial every so often as a person scrolls or watches autoplaying videos—thus deliberately reinjecting the “by-product learning” that Prior identified as essential to informing a pre-Internet citizenry.

Lastly, these new styles of social engagement have caused a significant decrease in the amount of social capital that our culture may work with. Membership in self-help support groups—like the AA that Wallace models as helping Gately—was rising when IJ was written, claiming about 2% of all American adults as active in such groups. But even so, this coalition of self-help groups was “outnumbered two to one by the dropouts from league bowling over the last two decades” (Putnam 150). Mark Zuckerberg noted at Facebook’s first Community Summit in 2017 that “for decades, membership in all kinds of groups has declined as much as one-quarter. That’s a lot of of [sic] people who now need to find a sense of purpose and support somewhere else.” He’s not wrong. We indeed have lost contact with our family and kin, but as McPherson et al. reflect, “the largest losses, however, have come from the ties that bind us to community and neighborhood” (371). This is the social capital generated by social infrastructure like the

¹⁷ A 1949-1987 licensing law that stipulated that TV stations and radio frequencies leased by the government must have presented both sides of a debate, and that media must devote some programming to controversial issues of public importance.

institutions of churches, Little Leagues, community gardens, trade unions, and local politics that are crumbling at the turn of the millennium (Klinenberg 32).

While the rest of Zuckerberg's speech laid out his plan for Facebook to *replace* these mid-level communities, I would argue that digitization has proven, at least for now, to be an inadequate simulacrum of the social engagement that we desperately need. These institutions were the first to fall as the nationalization of outrage has sucked the oxygen away from them. Deliberately rebuilding these kinds of small communities will help foster diversity of opinion, and enable more frequent low-stakes political exchanges that balance the liberal democracy's equilibrium more safely than the political pendulum swinging wildly from a polarized base's desires to the other side.

But we also must cultivate a change in our mindset such that our citizenry understands that to be Entertained by a story is not the same as to be informed. To the individual who wants out of his cage of a negative ideology, I pose to you a set of alternative facts: to learn from your fellow man, you must listen to him, and thus come to know him. Yes. Know.

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