

Binding Commonalities: The Chronotopes of  
*Infinite Jest*

by

Daniel Thomas Zachary Roach  
Class of 2017

A thesis submitted to the  
faculty of Wesleyan University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Bachelor of Arts  
with Departmental Honors in English and American Studies

## Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>		iii
<i>Epigraph</i>		iv
<i>Introduction</i>	<b>Chronotopic Narrative</b>	1
	The Task	1
	Chronotope	3
	<i>Infinite Jest</i> 's Chronotopes	5
<i>Chapter One</i>	<b>Isolation</b>	13
	Inhabiting the Chronotope	13
	Chronotopic Consciousness	13
	Broad Strokes	19
	Characterization in Isolation	25
	Fatal Entertainment	31
<i>Chapter Two</i>	<b>Community</b>	34
	Chronotope of Recovery	34
	The Recovery of Narrative	35
	Language Games	39
	But For the Grace of God	43
	Work	50
	Modes of Communication	52
<i>Chapter Three</i>	<b>Student Writer</b>	59
	Chronotope of the Program	59
	The Autopoetic Novelist	62
	Producing Meaning	70
	Conservatism and Fetishization	75
<i>Conclusion</i>	<b>Bound Infinity</b>	81
	Regularity, Not Banality	81
<i>Bibliography</i>		84

## Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge several people who have made this project possible.

First, I owe many thanks to my advisor, Matthew Garrett, who over the last nine months has helped me immensely with my research and written work. Whenever I found myself stuck, Garrett would reach into his mental library and retrieve the perfect text or concept to get me going again. His support has been invaluable.

Thank you to all of my professors at Wesleyan—particularly Joel Pfister, Indira Karamcheti, and Ashraf Rushdy—for their wisdom and guidance throughout my college career.

Thank you to my family, the best teachers and readers I know, who instilled in me a passion for literature.

Thank you to the library staff at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin, who generously helped me sort through Wallace's vast archive.

Finally, I thank the author, David Foster Wallace, for his infectious prose, his uncanny humor, and the myriad little moments of beauty that inspired me to spend a year with his novel.

PLEASE PROVIDE A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF YOUR BOOK:

I decline to try to do this.

—David Foster Wallace, Author Questionnaire, Little, Brown & Co. A “Form for Our Use in Promoting and Publicizing Your Book”

## Introduction

### Chronotopic Narrative

I don't want to create any (unnecessary) confusion or hardship for the reader.  
—David Foster Wallace to Michael Pietsch, 11 September, 1995

Out of the actual chronotopes of our world (which serve as the source of representation) emerge the reflected and *created* chronotopes of the world represented in the work (in the text).

—M.M. Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel”

### The Task

Since its publication in 1996, David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* has gained a reputation for being some combination of ambitious, unreadable, and pretentious. Countless readers (myself included, initially) have opened the 1,079-page book (including 96 pages of endnotes), only to be overwhelmed by the novel's verbosity, complex character-system, and apparent lack of cohesion. Wallace's editor, Michael Pietsch, expressed this exact concern in 1994, during the drafting phase of *Infinite Jest*. Between pages 100 and 300, Pietsch wrote to Wallace, “there's a wall”:

I'm worried that a lot of readers are going to give up through here, exhausted at having too much data crammed into their heads with very little story to keep them moving through it. (Pietsch to David Foster Wallace, 30 November 1994, Box 23, Folder 8, Wallace Papers)

From the final form of *Infinite Jest*, it is clear that Wallace did not heed Pietsch's advice entirely. Although he cut several hundred pages of his “fluid-dribbler,” as he called *Infinite Jest* in a frustrated letter to Don DeLillo, the published novel is still enormous (Wallace to Don DeLillo, May 1995, Box 101, Folder 10, DeLillo Papers). Furthermore, Pietsch's concern highlights the startling dispensation of data in the novel, which reduces the “story” to zero for vast sections. If a reader found the size of the novel an attractive challenge, the descriptive form of the text itself might quickly

drive him or her away. The physical book, though, would likely find a home on the (non)reader's bookshelf or coffee table, as an indicator of a certain level of highbrow literary ambition, if not achievement.

Others actively refuse to read *Infinite Jest*. Amy Hungerford, an English and American Studies Professor at Yale University, argues that *Infinite Jest* gained preeminence through the marketing tactics of Little, Brown, which framed the novel as a major breakthrough in "literary seriousness" in the late twentieth century (Hungerford 158). The marketers dared reviewers and readers to "man up, read a thousand pages, and prove that they had something intelligent to say about it," as Hungerford puts it (158-159). This sort of dare, she argues, led to the initial craze around *Infinite Jest*—and moreover, it has helped to sustain book sales in the twenty years since the first edition was published. Whether or not the reader takes up the dare, the novel (even placed on a bookshelf) ironically advertises a certain level of self-perceived, masculine literary seriousness—a seriousness that might be mocked as cliché.<sup>1</sup>

Although I agree with Hungerford's criticism of the hype surrounding *Infinite Jest*, I find the novel significant. My argument for its value, however, differs from those of readers and critics who see it as a monumental, singular achievement of the late-twentieth century. In addition, I differ from readers who find the novel too confusing, complex, or disjointed. While I acknowledge the brilliance of *Infinite Jest*'s discourse and the thorny intricacies of the novel's descriptive form, I argue that *Infinite Jest* is most interesting in its regularity. By regularity, I mean a formal

---

<sup>1</sup> This is ironic because, as I will discuss in my first chapter, one of the key problems in the novel's dystopian world is excessive advertising.

orderliness and structure—not banality—that contains the novel, even in its most chaotic passages. To clarify this regularity, I must explain a foundational concept in my reading of *Infinite Jest*: the chronotope.

### **Chronotope**

In his essay, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,” the Russian philosopher M.M. Bakhtin discusses the representation of time and space in literature. He uses the term “chronotope”—which literally means “timespace”—to describe the “intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (84). In literary artistic expression, time and space are inseparable; they depend on one another. Time “thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible” in space; similarly, space “becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history” (98). Importantly, chronotopes function intrinsically and extrinsically—that is, inside and outside of the novel. Inside of the novel, a chronotope constrains the possibilities of a character’s narrative movement. At the same time, a chronotope reflects time and space in the real world through the author and the reader; therefore, the chronotope imitates and references historical chronotopes—of the timespace in which the text was written *and* of the myriad timespaces in which any reader encounters the text. Furthermore, a chronotope has generic significance; as Bakhtin writes, “it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions” (95). Literary genre is inherently wrapped up in timespace; the specific chronotopes within and outside of the novel reflect the timespace of a certain genre.

To better flesh out the concept of chronotope and its effects on narrative, I will turn to Bakhtin's example of the chronotope of the road. He associates this chronotope with encounter; the road, Bakhtin notes, is "a particularly good place for random encounters" (243). Characters that might otherwise occupy different timespaces can interact on the road. Effectively, the chronotope of the road dissolves social distances, opening up the narrative possibilities for a character and broadening the scope of a literary text. Metaphorically, the "road" can also represent "life's course"—that is, the course of a character's life and the narrative events that determine it (Bakhtin 244). Here, we see that the chronotope is critical to the narrative events of a novel. The fusion of time and space creates the characters in the world of the novel and demarcates their narrative potential; in the case of the road, this potential is characterized by chance encounters.

Furthermore, outside of the novel, the chronotope is historically significant—reflecting the history of the novel as genre, the historical moment in which a specific novel came into existence, and the moments in which it is read. As Bakhtin explains, the chronotope of the road has developed throughout the history of the novel. In ancient novels, characters wander through the road on everyday pursuits; in medieval chivalric novels, the road is the locus of romantic quests. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the road becomes steeped in historical significance: the "flow of historical time" influences *Don Quixote*, as the titular hero sets out to encounter "all of Spain...from galley-slaves to dukes" (Bakhtin 244). Moving forward, the chronotope of the road continues to develop with changes in time and space. The historical novel of the nineteenth century employs this chronotope to creatively

represent historical events and encounters (Bakhtin 245). The chronotope, in other words, creates the world of the novel in relation to the actual world; it changes as a reflection of the historical moment. In sum, the chronotope functions as both a formalist literary category and an historical category. Given this dual purpose, the chronotope serves a valuable role in my analysis of both the form of *Infinite Jest* and its historical significance.

### ***Infinite Jest's* Chronotopes**

I organize my thesis into three chapters, each centered on a different chronotope that I find in *Infinite Jest*: isolation, recovery, and the (writing) program. These chronotopes serve as the organizational centers of the novel. To borrow Bakhtin's formulation: the "knots of narrative are tied and untied" in chronotopes (250). In Chapter One, I argue that narrative unravels in the chronotope of isolation. Specifically, this chronotope is manifest in the living room, though it also appears in other isolated spaces—for example, the tunnels below Enfield Tennis Academy, where Hal Incandenza smokes marijuana in solitude. As I will discuss in detail in Chapter One, Hal's collapse exemplifies the effects of the chronotope of isolation. Furthermore, the chronotope of isolation pervades the dystopian "outside" in the world of the novel; advertising, technological advancement, and drugs produce a fractured, collapsed society. In these isolated timespaces, characters develop addictions—to substances, entertainment, and even loneliness itself. The novel presents isolation thematically through characterization; moreover, I find this chronotope in the narrative form of these sections. In the chronotope of isolation,

narrative is reduced to zero; instead of plot, the novel dispenses maximalist description.<sup>2</sup> This is most evident in the several encyclopedic sections of the novel. In these sections, a narrator describes a certain phenomenon of the world of *Infinite Jest* with excessive and circuitous information. Plot vanishes, overridden by detail. This chronotopic narrative reduction occurs at the character level, as well. In the living room, addicted characters ingest substances, watch video cartridges (the novel's version of DVDs), and do nothing. Here, too, description overtakes narrative—precisely because nothing can happen narratively in this chronotope. The epitome of isolation in *Infinite Jest* is the fatal Entertainment cartridge—a film so compelling that a viewer cannot stop watching it. Stuck in a recursive loop—watching the film over and over again—the viewer embodies *annularity*, a key term in *Infinite Jest* that describes concentric circles.<sup>3</sup> Eventually, the Entertainment produces the literal end of narrative: death.

The chronotope of isolation leads to the reduction of narrative function in *Infinite Jest*. Additionally, this chronotope reflects the historical moment in which the novel was written *and* the historical moment in which I encounter the text, 2017. Although Wallace began writing sections of the novel in 1986, it started to come “alive” for him around 1991-92 (Max 318n15). First, the dystopian world of the novel amplifies the proliferation of advertising and entertainment in the early 1990s. Furthermore, it echoes a developing post-Cold War neoliberal ideology, which emphasized free trade and an increase in the “flexibility and profitability of capital,”

---

<sup>2</sup> I use Georg Lukács' differentiation of description and narration to inform my analysis of the effects of description. See Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?” in *Writer & Critic* (110-148).

<sup>3</sup> Annularity abounds in the structure and form of *Infinite Jest*. I will describe this idea in greater detail in Chapter One.

as James McCarthy writes (Severs 102). In particular, the concept of the Organization of North American Nations (O.N.A.N.) parodies a real life predecessor, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). NAFTA, a “signature extension of the logic of neoliberalism from the Reagan-Bush years into the Clinton era,” was negotiated in the 1980s and ratified in 1992 (Severs 102). In the novel, the United States absorbs Canada and Mexico into an interdependent system in order to deal with the country’s waste problem. Waste is the only product that the United States can offer in this agreement, thematically emphasizing the byproducts of an excessively consumerist economy (Severs 101). The acronym itself (O.N.A.N.) implies masturbation (onanism), suggesting the isolation of its inhabitants—lonely solipsists addicted to various forms of consumption. Further, President Johnny Gentle, responsible for the creation of O.N.A.N., is a version of Ronald Reagan: a Hollywood star turned politician. A reader encountering the text in the chronotope of 2017 will also observe the uncanny and disturbing similarities between Gentle and Donald Trump. Gentle wins the presidency by appealing to “Rush L.– and Hillary R.C.–disillusioned fringes” while “Dems and G.O.P.s stood on either side watching dumbly, like doubles partners who each think the other’s surely got it” (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 382; hereafter abbreviated *IJ*). This sort of shocking resonance abounds in *Infinite Jest*. In Chapter One, I flesh out in greater detail the chronotopic relationship between the world of the novel and the world outside of the text. The chronotope of isolation in the novel creatively represents real-world chronotopes of isolation—chronotopes that have continued to develop new significance in the twenty years since *Infinite Jest*’s publication.

In Chapter Two, I identify the chronotope of recovery: the novel's response to the chronotope of isolation. In this chronotope, I argue, characters recover and tie together knots of narrative. Two institutions serve as the backbone for the chronotope of recovery: Boston Alcoholics Anonymous and Ennet House. A halfway house for addicts, Ennet House serves as an extension of Boston AA in the novel. The recovery of sobriety in these institutions necessitates the recovery of narrative. Importantly, narrative recovery is a communal practice in *Infinite Jest*. In Boston AA, characters co-create narrative by practicing a shared language.<sup>4</sup> In contrast to the hectic, descriptive language characteristic of the chronotope of isolation, this shared language is demarcated, regulated, and streamlined. I use Ludwig Wittgenstein's formulation of language games to inform my analysis in Chapter Two. In essence, Wittgenstein argues that an individual only understands language through its application; in other words, language requires a kind of doing. In the chronotope of recovery, characters engage in a doing of language through the enactment of clichés—not just in utterance, but also in physical practice. In Boston AA, characters engage in speaking Commitments in which they narrate the story of their addiction. Most of these speeches inscribe a similar trajectory of addiction; formally, the stories are fed through a rigorous mechanism that translates each story into the communal language of AA clichés. Furthermore, this structured approach to language allegorically reflects the rules of Ennet House. In this “binding commonality,” residents must attend an AA meeting every night before a strict curfew, complete a

---

<sup>4</sup> I differentiate these institutions from another institution, Enfield Tennis Academy, which promotes individualism and isolation as means of achieving capital.

weekly chore, and find a menial job in metro Boston—in essence, they must participate in forms of community as part of recovery (*IJ* 349).

Much of Chapter Two focuses on Don Gately, an unlikely hero of *Infinite Jest*. Gately, a recovering narcotics addict and live-in Staffer at Ennet House, embodies narrative recovery. Over the course of the novel, Gately recovers his narrative through participation in Boston AA and through his work at Ennet House. Importantly, his recovery is wrapped up in the recoveries of other members of Ennet House. Furthermore, Gately's recovery infuses the novel with optimism. The final pages of *Infinite Jest* narrativize his “Bottom”—the worst moment of any addict's “Substance-career,” yet a moment which must be re-membered (put back together) in the process of narrative recovery (*IJ* 347).<sup>5</sup> Although the gruesome story of Gately's Bottom marks his lowest point, its narrativization nevertheless exemplifies a “way out” for addicts (*IJ* 981). I argue that this “way out” is actually a Coming In, to use an AA term. Within the chronotopic parameters of recovery institutions, characters find protection from the ubiquitous chronotope of isolation that permeates the outside world of the novel.

In the chronotope of recovery, characters salvage narrative through a rigorous, institutional process. In Chapter Three, I reflect on the significance of the novel's belief in institutional programs as means of redemption. I argue that the programs in the novel are allegories for the institution of the writing program. In other words, the chronotope of recovery reveals a chronotope of the writing program. By the writing program, I refer to the institutionalization of writing through the emergence of a creative writing discipline in post-World War II American higher education.

---

<sup>5</sup> “Bottom” is always capitalized in *Infinite Jest*, as are all AA buzzwords.

Importantly, this chronotope oscillates inside and outside of the novel; that is, it exists allegorically within the novel, while also existing outside of the novel in relation to its author. Foundational to my argument about the institution of writing is Mark McGurl's argument, laid out in his book *The Program Era* and his essay "The Institution of Nothing: David Foster Wallace in the Program." In *The Program Era*, McGurl contends that the emergence of the creative writing program in American higher education "stands as the most important event in postwar American literary history" (ix). I build on McGurl's concept in Chapter Three, arguing that *Infinite Jest* allegorically reflects a chronotope of the writing program through the chronotope of recovery. In both institutionally enclosed chronotopes, the individual is given rules to follow and specific language to use for the purpose of constructing narrative. Furthermore, I argue that the writing program feeds back into the world of *Infinite Jest*, allegorically revealing an all-encompassing chronotope of the program (the institution) that wraps the novel in the "binding commonality" of programmed narrative (*IJ* 349).

In my analysis, I reveal three particular characteristics of the chronotope of the writing program. First, this chronotope is highly self-reflexive, or what McGurl would call "autopoetic." As a novel in this chronotope, *Infinite Jest* constantly refers to itself and its existence within the writing program. In other words, the novel locates itself in relation to other novels of the era—for example, Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. Indeed, like the annular structure of the narrative, the novel (and Wallace) cannot escape the recursive loop of program writing. I discuss Wallace's career as a writer to contextualize my argument. Second, the chronotope of the

writing program produces meaning only within institutions. As I will argue in Chapter One and Chapter Two, the chronotopic collapse of the world of the novel into nothingness and meaninglessness—the reduction of narrative—can only be remedied through prescription to the chronotopic program of AA and Ennet House. I briefly examine Wallace’s unfinished, posthumously published novel about the Internal Revenue Service, *The Pale King*, in relation to this institutional production of meaning; the characters in the novel find meaning through their work at an I.R.S. regional operating center in Illinois. Third, I argue that the chronotope of the writing program in *Infinite Jest* reveals a certain kind of conservatism and, moreover, fetishization. Indeed, the novel offers utopian institutions to counter a dystopian society. The chronotope of the writing program, however, also has a tendency to fetishize any sort of difference—in particular, racial Others. While the novel has a vast, white cast of characters (a kind of exclusion, to be sure) I argue that the bigger issue is the novel’s fetishization of language. In particular, an early section in the novel relates the stream-of-consciousness of Clenette, a black character, in a stereotypical vernacular. This section, originally written as a character-sketch while Wallace was an M.F.A. student at the University of Arizona, reads like a “sampler” on black consciousness (Wallace, *Signifying Rappers* 20). I see this fetishization as a literary problem—an effect of the chronotope of the writing program. In this way, even Clenette’s dialect fits within the chronotope of the writing program and, allegorically, the all-encompassing chronotope of the program: nothing exists outside of the program.

In summary, I argue that the chronotopes in *Infinite Jest* delimit the narrative possibilities of the novel—at the thematic level, but also at a formal level. The chronotope of isolation reduces the narrative to collapse and nothingness; I locate this collapse in the excessively descriptive form of the text in the chronotope of isolation. In response, the chronotope of recovery in Boston AA and Ennet House produces a regulated retrieval of narrative. The chronotope of recovery allegorically reflects the chronotope of the writing program, which regulates the world inside of the novel from outside of the text. Finally, the chronotope of the writing program exposes an all-encompassing chronotope of the program that envelops *Infinite Jest* in its entirety.

For the most part, I ground my argument in my textual analysis of *Infinite Jest*. Further, I supplement my reading with findings from my trip to the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, Austin, which houses Wallace's archive. Their incredible collection includes manuscripts of his major works, his correspondences with other authors, and his back-and-forth with Michael Pietsch from *Infinite Jest*'s early drafting stage to its publication. Beyond my original research, I use a number of valuable secondary and critical sources. Two reader's guides—Stephen Burn's *Infinite Jest: A Reader's Guide* and Bell and Dowling's *A Reader's Companion to Infinite Jest*—help me flesh out the thorny particulars of the novel. Further, Bakhtin's "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," McGurl's "The Institution of Nothing: David Foster Wallace in the Program," and Severs' *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books: Fictions of Value* are foundational to my argument. Using these sources as my footing, I construct my argument for *Infinite Jest*'s programmatic orderliness.

## Chapter One

### Isolation

In such a world, a man can *only* function as an isolated and private individual, deprived of any organic connection with his country, his city, his own social group, his clan, even his own family.

—M.M. Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel”

When the historians find us we’ll be in our homes

Plugged into our hubs

Skin and bones

A frozen smile on every face

As the stories replay

—Father John Misty, “Total Entertainment Forever”

### Inhabiting the Chronotope

In this chapter, I will discuss the effects of the chronotope of isolation in the world of *Infinite Jest*. The chronotope of isolation is manifest in the dystopian outside world, the American living room, the tunnels of Enfield Tennis Academy (E.T.A.), a bathroom stall, and even the consciousness of Hal Incandenza during the novel’s opening episode. I will argue that the descriptive, informational form of these sections chronotopically reflects the reduction of narrative for a number of characters.

Additionally, I will use the concept of the chronotope of isolation to flesh out the specifics of the dystopian world of *Infinite Jest*, thematically and formally. The particulars of the novel’s world are confusing and tangled; I will clarify and organize these complications by discussing them in relation to this chronotope.

### Chronotopic Consciousness

The opening episode of *Infinite Jest*, commencing under the ambiguous header, “Year of Glad,” presents the world through the narration of a disturbed

character, inhabiting the chronotope of isolation within his own consciousness: Hal Incandenza, a seventeen-year-old tennis prodigy on a recruiting trip to the University of Arizona. Hal's narration of his perceived reality does not correspond with the reality of his environment; this dissonance becomes explicitly clear as the episode goes on. When the university administrators ask him to reconcile his uncannily brilliant application essays with his recent "subnormal" test scores, Hal does not—seemingly cannot—speak (*IJ* 6). Instead, Charles Tavis—Hal's uncle and the headmaster of E.T.A., which Hal attends—answers every question for him. The peculiar situation worsens when the administrators ask Tavis and Aubrey deLint, an E.T.A. coach, to leave so that Hal can speak for himself. While Hal's defense of his academic merit appears somewhat coherent to the reader, the mortified exclamations of the university administrators suggest a rupture between Hal's inner narration and his outer appearance. One Dean cries out after Hal speaks, "What in Gods name are those...those *sounds*?" (*IJ* 12). Yet, the plot of this first episode, which ends with Hal in the hospital, reveals only the tip of the iceberg. To glean a deeper understanding of Hal's collapse, along with the collapse of the world of the novel, it is necessary to analyze the episode's formal elements in relation to the chronotope of isolation.

Wallace points towards collapse in the first several sentences of the novel through their descriptive form. The opening episode begins with Hal narrating factual but empty information:

I am seated in an office, surrounded by heads and bodies. My posture is consciously congruent to the shape of my hard chair. This is a cold room in University Administration, wood-walled, Remington-hung, double-windowed against the November heat, insulated from Administrative sounds by the reception area outside, at which Uncle Charles, Mr. deLint and I were lately received.

I am in here.

Three faces have resolved into place above summer-weight sportcoats and half-Windsors across a polished pine conference table shiny with the spidered light of an Arizona noon. These are three Deans—of Admissions, Academic Affairs, Athletic Affairs. I do not know which face belongs to whom. (*IJ* 3)

Here, Hal presents detailed information about his environment. He describes the specifics of the physical room: the “cold room” is “wood-walled” and “double-windowed”; the conference table is “polished pine” and “shiny with the spidered light” of noontime. As Burn argues, however, his description is “revealingly empty of human agency” (39). While he provides a data set relating the objects in the room, his descriptions refute any sense of personhood. To borrow Georg Lukács’ theorization, description transforms people into “conditions” and “still lives”; Hal’s descriptions reveal that he has been reduced to a still life (Lukács 139, 140). Indeed, throughout the novel, this level of description precisely indicates the “conditions” and “still lives” that the characters embody in the chronotope of isolation (Lukács 139). In this context, Hal’s initial description appears ironically apt; he is “surrounded by heads and bodies,” rather than human agents. Ultimately, though, Hal might physically be “in here,” (i.e., in the room), but it is unclear whether or not he is in the same sphere of reality as the other “heads and bodies” in the room. Over the course of this first section, it becomes clear that Hal is, in fact, completely and only in his own head.

Hal’s narration also suggests a complete break between inside and outside—between Hal’s idiolect and public language, and moreover, between Hal’s inner experience and the novel’s outer world. Hal, stuck in his own consciousness, inhabits the chronotope of isolation: he perceives and processes timespace differently than the rest of the characters in the room. While most manifestations of chronotopes

correspond with the outside world, this manifestation demonstrates the extent of Hal's retreat into himself. Furthermore, it contrasts the chronotope of isolation from the episode's institutional setting.<sup>6</sup>

Specifically, the chronotope of isolation reveals itself within Hal's consciousness through the apparent dissonance between Hal's narration and the responses of other characters in the room. When trying to explain to the skeptical university administrators that he is "not a machine," Hal relates a few potted statements about philosophy; for example, "I believe Hobbes is just Rousseau in a dark mirror. I believe, with Hegel, that transcendence is absorption" (*IJ* 12). These statements reveal nothing about Hal; they are just rehearsed comments about philosophy, devoid of substance. Furthermore, this potted language exists only "in here," in Hal's head. The university administrators experience an entirely different Hal. Instead, they hear "*Subanimalistic* noises and sounds...Like some sort of animal with something in its mouth" (*IJ* 14). These humorous yet disturbing descriptions reveal the dissonance between Hal's inside self and outer appearance—as he pleads, "I am not what you see and hear" (*IJ* 13). He cannot communicate at all with the outside world. Further, if Hal's outer appearance suggests "something only marginally *mammalian*," his inside self lacks depth on another scale (*IJ* 15). While he can relay potted statements to the reader, along with encyclopedic information referencing his condition—"there are, by the *O.E.D.* *VT*'s count, nineteen nonarchaic synonyms for *unresponsive*, of which nine are Latinate and four Saxonian"—this hollow description suggests Hal's inner isolation and emptiness (*IJ* 17).

---

<sup>6</sup> As I will demonstrate in my second and third chapter, institutions are characteristic of the chronotopes of recovery and the writing program.

Yet there is more to this disturbing episode than Hal's psychosis. As Bell and Dowling contend, "the book opens with a narrator who's looking straight into the eyes of the terrifying possibility that the world may be psychotic" (13). In other words: what if Hal's breakdown is actually an appropriate response to a collapsed world—a world populated by disjointed "heads and bodies"? While I hesitate to read Hal's psychosis so generously, I argue that his narrative collapse, along with those of a multitude of characters, are directly and indirectly connected to the collapsed world of the novel—a world overrun by information overload, entertainment, and addiction (all of which are thematic characteristics of the chronotope of isolation). Ironically, the first characters to which the novel inscribes this descriptive overload (other than Hal) are the university administrators who eventually diagnose Hal as psychotic. First, though, they try to define him through facts about his life. In an odd passage, the Dean of Admissions tells Hal:

You are Harold Incandenza, eighteen, date of secondary-school graduation approximately one month from now, attending the Enfield Tennis Academy, Enfield, Massachusetts, a boarding school, where you reside... You are, according to Coach White and Dean [unintelligible], a regionally, nationally, and continentally ranked junior tennis player, a potential O.N.A.N.C.A.A. athlete of substantial promise, recruited by Coach White via correspondence with Dr. Tavis here commencing... February of this Year... You have been in residence at the Enfield Tennis Academy since age seven. (*IJ* 3-4)

Here, the Dean of Admission relates information about Hal's life, but only on a superficial, fact-based, descriptive level: his age, date of graduation, residence, tennis ranking. This description, while helpful for the reader to know at the start of the novel, offers a sterile, static depiction of Hal. On a stylistic level, this passage reads

almost like an encyclopedia entry—factual but emotionless. In the place of narrative, Wallace inserts maximalist description.

At the end of the first episode, the reader perceives the dissonance between Hal's inside and the outside world; moreover, the astute reader might infer that a broken world might have produced Hal's collapse. Yet questions remain: what is the "Year of Glad"? What do all of the acronyms stand for? And what can be made of Hal's ruminations, including: "I think of John N.R. Wayne, who would have won this year's WhataBurger, standing watch in a mask as Donald Gately and I dig up my father's head"? (*IJ* 17). While the novel answers these first two questions through encyclopedic description in the episodes to come (on which I will elaborate below), it never fully answers the third. Hal's story remains a mystery. As the reader eventually discovers, this is because the first episode is actually the end of Hal's narrative; Hal's breakdown is the last event to happen in the novel, chronologically. The reader, then, finds herself aligned with the "nurse's aide with quick-bit nails, a hospital security guy, a tired Cuban orderly" who Hal predicts will ask him: "So yo then man what's *your* story?" (*IJ* 17). In other words: what sort of dystopian world has produced Hal? What does the map look like? And finally, how different is the timespace of *Infinite Jest* from the author's, or the reader's in any given moment? As Stephen Burn points out, mapping *Infinite Jest* is an immensely difficult, and perhaps impossible, task (24). Nevertheless, I will attempt to structure the world of the novel thematically and formally through the chronotope of isolation. To do so, I will turn to the rest of the novel, paying particular attention to the narrative form.

## Broad Strokes

The chronotope of isolation permeates the structure of the world of *Infinite Jest*. Before digging into the specifics, I must sketch an outline of the novel's backstory. I start with Johnny Gentle, the "Famous Crooner" from Las Vegas who, in an "angry reactionary voter-spasm," becomes President of the United States (*IJ* 382). Gentle, "the first U.S. President to ever swing his microphone around by the cord during his Inauguration speech," embodies the hegemony of consumer culture and entertainment in *Infinite Jest*. While Gentle's character is undoubtedly comical—the reader learns the most about Gentle through descriptions of a puppet show—he is not so different from another U.S. president who began his career in Hollywood: Ronald Reagan. And in the wake of the 2016 election of Donald Trump, Gentle's rise to power seems, more than ever, "hardly an exaggeration" (Bell and Dowling 23).

Gentle's political party, Clean U.S. Party (CUSP), rises to relevance in a "post-Soviet and –Jihad era" without a foreign enemy (*IJ* 382). In this post-Cold War, anachronistic version of a future North America—that, despite the absence of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, resonates in the real United States in 2017—CUSP scapegoats dirt. Gentle's efforts to "clean up" the United States and create a "Tighter, Tidier Nation" ultimately result in the absorption of Canada and Mexico into an interdependent Organization of North American Nations (O.N.A.N.) (*IJ* 382). In short, the United States empties out and then bequeaths northern New England to Canada, but makes it a massive waste-disposal region, the "Great Concavity" (spawning a wave of anti-O.N.A.N, Quebecois terrorism—I will get to this later). To pay for this enormous endeavor, CUSP and Gentle invent Subsidized Time: the

highest-bidding company or organization can pay for naming rights to a calendar year.

While *Infinite Jest* layers parody by describing Gentle's backstory in the childish form of a puppet show, the consequences for the world of the novel—and the resonances in 2017—are decidedly serious, even disturbing. Gentle runs and wins on a platform of aestheticism and consumerism, asking Americans “simply to sit back and enjoy the show” (*IJ* 383). To flesh out the manifestations of this culture, I will turn to the narrative form and analyze a few specific passages.

*Infinite Jest* dispenses description at a startling rate, though it does not move the narrative forward; instead, description reduces the narrative to zero. In many sections of the book, a frustrated reader might complain, the plot screeches to a halt as maximalist description takes over. Often, these sections take an encyclopedic form: the narrator defines a phenomenon of the world of *Infinite Jest*, and then goes on to list a series of consequences. These passages do not appear at the beginning of the novel; rather, the narrator intersperses information in dense sections throughout the novel.<sup>7</sup> The first encyclopedic block of text concerns a futuristic version of television and its effects:

---

<sup>7</sup> From the very first episode, the reader has already seen (and been confused by) terms and acronyms having to do with O.N.A.N. While it becomes clear relatively quickly, for example, that companies can buy naming rights to a year, the chronology of these years does not appear until page 223, when the reader finally realizes that Hal's breakdown (during the Year of Glad) occurs in the novel's final year; in the same vein, an explanation for Subsidized Time and its origins in the formation of O.N.A.N. is not revealed until nearly 400 pages into the novel. Additionally, the narration drops early hints about a certain “unlabeled cartridge”—a film—that has mysteriously rendered a medical attaché incapacitated in his living room, along with all of the characters who come looking for him (*IJ* 54). Not until much later does it become clear that this cartridge is the fatal Entertainment (more on the Entertainment to come at the end of this chapter).

Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment: InterLace Telentertainment, 932/1864 R.I.S.C. power-TPs w/ or w/o console, Pink2, post-Primestar D.S.S. dissemination, menus and icons, pixel-free Internet Fax, tri- and quad-modems w/ adjustable baud, Dissemination-Grids, screens so high-def you might as well be there, cost-effective videophonic conferencing, internal Froxx CD-ROM, electronic *couture*, all-in-one consoles, Yushityu nanoprocessors, laser chromatography, Virtual-capable media-cards, fiber-optic pulse, digital encoding, killer apps; carpal neuralgia, phosphenic migraine, gluteal hyperadiposity, lumbar stressae. (*IJ* 60)

Much of this passage appears unintelligible; indeed, it is a list of technology-related (and occasionally made-up: “post-Primestar”) words that seem nonsensical. Upon closer inspection, however, this information overload indicates a critical pillar of the collapsed world of *Infinite Jest*: technological advancement to the extreme. This derivative of television, “Telentertainment,” promises revolutionary viewing experience via “screens so high-def you might as well be there,” “all-in-one consoles,” and “killer apps”; moreover, the experience is tailored specifically to the viewer’s needs: “electronic *couture*.” This idea of electronic *couture* permeates *Infinite Jest*; in this world, consumer-capitalism has reached a point where a viewer can consume exactly what he or she demands at that very moment. Despite the appeal of such entertainment, however, there is a caveat: this alluring form of entertainment compromises the health of its consumers, who might experience, as the narration suggests, “carpal neuralgia, phosphenic migraine, gluteal hyperadiposity, lumbar stressae.” The human body, then, reacts negatively to this artificial stimulation—a viewer, sitting prone and facing the screen in his or her living room (in the chronotope of isolation) might experience nerve pains in his or her hands, migraines, weight gain, and/or back pain.

This exact passage reappears, verbatim, on page 620. After the repeated passage, the narrator unloads the consequences of this electronic couture in much more detail: 50% of metro Bostonians now work at home; 50% of public education is “absorbable at home on couches”; a specific exercise program, which features “kicking and genuflecting,” disseminates every day at 7AM; and 94% of entertainment is consumed at home, “an entertainment-market of sofas and eyes.” This technological revolution produces a fractured society, in which people never need to leave the “dreamy familiarity” of their living rooms for any reason. Work, exercise, and entertainment can all be accessed without interpersonal communication or interaction in this chronotope of isolation. After describing the new need of electronic couture, however, the narrator goes on to explain an ironic reversal: this emphasis on “personal spectation” paradoxically leads consumers to have a “passion for standing live witness to things.” Socially deprived metro Bostonians find themselves enthralled by people-watching; people gather in “Gapers’ Blocks” to watch car accidents, robberies, and construction (*IJ* 620). In the pervasive chronotope of isolation, gathering in a crowd becomes a novelty.

This sort of reversion abounds throughout the novel. Another term for this kind of moment is *annular*. Before continuing with my analysis of the repeated section, I will briefly define this term and its significance in *Infinite Jest*. The concept of annularity is crucial, and quotidian, in the world of the novel; it has thematic and formal consequences. The term generally refers to a circular shape. A brief history of annularity within *Infinite Jest*: before founding E.T.A., James Incandenza (Hal’s father) developed a theory of waste management called “annular fusion,” which

E.T.A. player Ted Schacht explains to a younger player, Idris Arslanian, as “a type of fusion that can produce waste that’s fuel for a process whose waste is fuel for the fusion” (*IJ* 572). Annular fusion is critical to Johnny Gentle’s reconfiguration of North America; the process occurs in the wastelands of the Great Concavity. Furthermore, annularity reflects the narrative structure of the novel. Mario Incandenza, Hal’s brother, offers the following visual: “just imagine somebody doing somersaults with one hand nailed to the ground” (*IJ* 570). Annularity describes infinite concentric circles; similarly, the novel continuously loops back on itself, dispensing information throughout that points the reader to exactly where she just was—the preceding pages. Most notably, the physical end of the novel, on page 981, directs the reader immediately to its physical beginning on page three—Hal’s collapse in the first episode, the chronological end of the novel—for reexamination in new light.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup>Another informational section that asks a question regarding an annular reversion: why, after the invention of video-telephoning and a period of huge popularity, did consumers decide that they actually preferred voice-only telephones? The narrator lists three reasons: “(1) emotional stress, (2) physical vanity, (3) a certain queer kind of self-obliterating logic in the microeconomics of consumer high-tech” (*IJ* 145). The overwhelming stress of video-calling results in a number of disastrous inventions, such as High-Definition Masking—whereby subjects could alter and enhance their physical appearance over video-calling, leading them to be “reluctant to leave home and interface personally with people who, they feared, were now habituated to seeing their far-better-looking masked selves” (*IJ* 149). Such cascading consequences ultimately lead to the demise of video-calling and the reversion to regular phone-calling. In sum, the narrator describes this circular fad of video-calling by referring to the “classically annular shape” of the curve of consumer technology—eventually, the technology self-obliterates due to the “unforeseen disadvantages for the consumer” (*IJ* 150).

Michael Pietsch proposed that Wallace cut this section on video-calling. Wallace, however, refused: he argued that the section was critically important for showing the implications of technological advancement in the world of *Infinite Jest*. He wrote to Pietsch:

I decline to cut this. For one, it’s one place that seriously explores the implications of the futuristic setting....a world w/ digital home-entertainment is essential (to me), but it sets up certain questions, like no videophoning... This answers this, and in a way that relates both to digitalism and narcissistic fear in the US character (plus it’s funny). (Wallace to

Returning to the repeated encyclopedic passage, we can see that the reversion to gathering in a crowd reflects a kind of thematic annularity. Furthermore, the passage points toward annularity on a formal level. First, the mere fact of its repetition suggests an annular looping of the narrative. Moreover, the stylized descriptive language affects a kind of circular, annular stasis. The repeated section—a list of mostly unfamiliar words derived from a technology-specific, quasi-academic or -scientific dialect—seems like an impenetrable babble of descriptive language that moves nowhere; the narrator lists bizarre features without mediation or explanation. Even when, in the second instance, the narrator elaborates with statistical facts about the consequences in metro Boston, the sheer amount of information, dispensed sentence after sentence, proves overwhelming and distracting—even boring. For example, one could easily get caught up in the nonsensical details of “Ms. Tawni Kondo’s” workout, which features 60 million Americans participating in “cosmetic psychology” (*IJ* 620). Here, the narrator couples information overload with the humorous imagery of millions of human beings “kicking and genuflecting,” but doing so in chronotopic isolation: millions of individuals in millions of houses, all across the country, in synchronous form (*IJ* 620). Furthermore, the narrator ends the passage with a redundant, annular fragment, seeming to call out the reader specifically:

And (get this) 94% of all O.N.A.N.ite paid entertainment now absorbed at home: pulses, storage cartridges, digital displays, domestic décor—an entertainment-market of sofas and eyes. (*IJ* 620)

The narrator emphasizes the importance of this final fragment with an apparent parenthetical interpellation of the reader. What follows, however, does not particularly resonate on a narrative level. This fragment can be broken down into three sections that demonstrate its annularity. The first section, after addressing the reader, offers yet another statistic about home entertainment; the second section is a list, describing the items comprised by home entertainment; the third section points to the home entertainment market, “of sofas and eyes”—of indulgent relaxation and consumption. While the final section might resonate with the reader more than the first two, each section essentially offers the same information—just in different terms. At the level of the sentence (or in this case, the fragment), *Infinite Jest* manipulates and repackages language, which results in annular description; nothing moves forward. This stylistic maneuver serves several crucial purposes that illuminate the world of *Infinite Jest* and the role of the reader as interpreter of this world. Annularized information overload—both at the level of the sentence and in the details themselves—works to distract: to pull the reader into concentric circles with the isolated characters in the novel. Formally, this information overload reflects the collapse of “recognizable selfhood” that plagues many characters in the novel (Burn 40). To flesh out these consequences, I will turn to the characters in collapse themselves and the isolated environments they inhabit.

### **Characterization in Isolation**

The collapse of “recognizable selfhood” for many of the novel’s characters—especially those with drug addictions, like Hal—can be located in the descriptive

form. This form is directly tied into the manifestations of the chronotope of isolation that the characters inhabit. In this chronotope, time slows down, effectively reducing narrative. The novel indicates this reduction of narrative through its descriptive form. Furthermore, the chronotope of isolation reveals itself in specific spaces (most commonly, the living room). In this way, space dominates the chronotope of isolation; however, time responds to this space in particular ways. Poor Tony Krause, a homeless transvestite addict in withdrawal from heroin and cough syrup, exemplifies this relationship as he suffers in a public bathroom stall:

Time began to pass with sharp edges. Its passage in the dark or dim-lit stall was like time was being carried by a procession of ants, a gleaming red martial column of those militaristic red Southern-U.S. ants that build hideous tall boiling hills; and each vile gleaming ant wanted a minuscule little portion of Poor Tony's flesh in compensation as it helped bear time slowly forward down the corridor of true Withdrawal. (*IJ* 302)

For Krause, time slows down and takes on a physical quality. As he withdraws in the unsanitary, lonely bathroom stall, time eats away at him gradually. He is completely overwhelmed by this spacetime, until finally—after nearly two weeks in the stall, which surely felt like years in this chronotope—he makes it out into Boston, only to have a seizure on the subway. For characters in collapse like Krause and Hal, chronotopes of isolation produce a reduction of plot to zero and a breakdown into minimal narrative function.

While the extent of Hal Incandenza's psychosis is revealed in the first episode (which, recall, is the chronological end of the book), his collapse is imminent throughout the years before the Year of Glad. By the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment (Y.D.A.U.)—the year before the Year of Glad—the reader learns that

Hal has “pretty much nothing at all” inside of him, “he knows” (*IJ* 694). Hal is left “empty but not dumb”: anhedonic, but still a walking, breathing knowledge-base (*IJ* 694). Indeed, he has committed to memory a significant portion of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which he can recite on command; his memory is so exact that, when asked by fellow E.T.A. student Jim Troeltsch to define the word “acutance” in preparation for an upcoming exam, he “can see the page of text right there, all highlighted, all yellowed up” (*IJ* 97). Despite Hal’s ability to regurgitate information and describe his surroundings—for example, listing the number of objects that correspond to the color blue in a given room—his internal selfhood and thus his narrative function are minimal (*IJ* 508).

We can assume that Hal’s lack of internal selfhood stems, at least in part, from his addiction to marijuana—more specifically, his addiction to smoking marijuana covertly. Hal smokes marijuana alone, deep in the underground tunnels of Enfield Tennis Academy: “Hal likes to get high in secret, but a bigger secret is that he’s as attached to the secrecy as he is to getting high” (*IJ* 49). Despite his attachment to secrecy, Hal “tends to know way less about why he feels certain ways about the objects and pursuits he’s devoted to than he does about the objects and pursuits themselves” (*IJ* 54). While he “broods” on his tendency while high in the tunnels, he does not fully question it (*IJ* 54). To do so would be to open up his internal self:

...to be really human (at least as he conceptualizes it) is probably to be unavoidably sentimental and naive and goo-prone... in some basic interior way forever infantile, some sort of not-quite-right-looking infant dragging itself anaclitically around the map, with big wet eyes and froggy-soft skin, huge skull, gooey drool. (*IJ* 695)

This conceptualization of what it means to be human suggests Hal's entrenchment in the chronotope of isolation. He detests and thus rebukes his internal self. Importantly, however, Hal is also lonely for this "hideous internal self, incontinent of sentiment and need, that pules and writes just under the hip empty mask, anhedonia" (*IJ* 695). Despising what he is lonely for, the narrator suggests, is "one of the really American things about Hal, probably"; his conceptualization of the internal self has been so skewed that he hates the fact that he is lonely for a sentimental, emotional self. Ironically, in the quest to "not be Alone," Hal ultimately ends up lonely, smoking marijuana in a chronotope of isolation, despising what he is lonely for (*IJ* 694).

For most other characters in the novel, the chronotope of isolation is manifest in the living room. As the above analysis of the encyclopedic sections reveals, the living room is a place of solitary, lonely consumption: of entertainment and, often, drugs. Ken Erdedy typifies the narrative parameters of the living room chronotope. Erdedy is a marijuana addict who, when the reader first encounters him, has tried to quit "maybe 70 or 80 times before" by throwing out all of his paraphernalia and telling his dealer to cut him off after each "last time"—another of the novel's annular loops (*IJ* 18). Eventually, Erdedy ends up in Ennet House, the recovery house that brings together a number of characters. In his living room, however, Erdedy anxiously awaits the arrival of a woman who promised to bring him 200 grams of marijuana for "one last final time" (*IJ* 18). The episode begins with these following lines:

Where was the woman who said she'd come. She said she would come. Erdedy thought she'd have come by now. He sat and thought. He was in the living room. When he started waiting one window was full of yellow light and cast a shadow of light across the floor and he

was still sitting waiting as that shadow began to fade and was intersected by a brightening shadow from a different wall's window. (IJ 17)

Here, free indirect discourse allows the reader into Erdedy's present consciousness.<sup>9</sup> As the narration suggests, however, Erdedy's narration is delimited by his timespace. For example, the first three sentences each package the same anxious sentiment in a different way; effectively, the prose repeats itself twice. Further, Erdedy "sat and thought" in the living room, but idly sitting and thinking are all that he does as the afternoon fades away. Shadows replace the yellow light as Erdedy waits for a substance that he can only consume while alone and that no longer gives him pleasure (IJ 22). Eventually, when the telephone and the intercom buzzer sound simultaneously, Erdedy finds himself "splay-legged...entombed between the two sounds, without a thought in his head" (IJ 27). In this chronotope, Erdedy's narrative breaks down entirely, to a point where he can no longer think.

Another example that illuminates the consequences of the living room concerns Hugh Steeply's father, whose addiction to the television show, "M\*A\*S\*H," spirals out of control. Steeply, an agent for the United States Office of Unspecified Services—a revamped version of the C.I.A.—tells the story of his father to Rémy Marathe, a member of the Quebecois terrorist group "Les Assassins en Fauteuils Roulants" (A.F.R. or in English, "Wheelchair Assassins").<sup>10</sup> The ongoing conversation between Steeply and Marathe takes place on an outcropping above Tucson, Arizona. Lengthy, convoluted excerpts of the conversation appear throughout the novel, providing context for the A.F.R.'s discontent with O.N.A.N. and their

---

<sup>9</sup> For more on the functions of free indirect discourse, see Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, Ch. 8.

<sup>10</sup> For more on A.F.R., see Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 1055n304.

attempt to sabotage the United States by distributing the fatal Entertainment to American viewers. More on the Entertainment to come shortly, but for my purposes here, Steeply and Marathe serve to situate the broader theoretical questions of the novel. As they literally look down over “most of U.S.A. area code 6026” from the outcropping, they discuss the “U.S.A. drive for spectatorship” (*IJ* 88, 318). In this context, Steeply shares the story of his father.

Steeply’s father’s addiction to M\*A\*S\*H started as a seemingly benign habit: he scheduled his Thursday nights around the show, when new episodes would air. When “syndication” began, however—reruns of episodes, “where local stations bought old episodes and chopped them up and loaded them with ads”—Steeply’s father found the reruns “not to be missed,” either (*IJ* 640). Steeply recalls: “For a while, this one station even had a ‘M\*A\*S\*H’ hour, two of them, back to back, every night, from 2300. Plus another half an hour in the early PM” (*IJ* 640). Here, we see the intersection of addiction, information overload, and entertainment in the chronotopic living room. Steeply’s father’s habit becomes problematic, an addiction, precisely as the show—the entertainment *du jour*—is “loaded...with ads” and broadcasted at an excessive rate. This intersection develops as Steeply’s father begins to write extensive notes on the show:

It was at some point during this gradual shift [to syndication] the notebook first appeared. He began writing notes in a notebook as he viewed. But only when viewing ‘M\*A\*S\*H.’ And he never left the notebook lying around where you could get any kind of look at it. (*IJ* 641)

As the show becomes excessively loaded with information, Steeply’s father doubles this overload by taking copious notes. Furthermore, Steeply’s father, like Hal, is secretive about his addiction. Also like Hal, he loses his ability to communicate:

eventually he is “no longer able to converse or communicate” except in relation to M\*A\*S\*H (*IJ* 642). In the isolated spacetime of the living room, he loses his human agency. He is unable to hold a productive conversation; to leave his chair near the TV to use the bathroom; to extract himself, or be extracted from, the world of M\*A\*S\*H. Finally, the result of his loss of narrative and agency is emptiness, loneliness, and—as for viewers of the fatal Entertainment—death.<sup>11</sup>

### Fatal Entertainment

The mysterious Entertainment is the purest manifestation of the chronotope of isolation. The Entertainment, titled “Infinite Jest,” was the last film created by Hal’s father, James Incandenza, before his grisly suicide-by-microwave.<sup>12</sup> Ironically, as Incandenza’s ghost informs Donald Gately (more on this scene later), he created the film as a last-ditch effort to “contrive a medium via which he and the muted son could simply *converse*” (*IJ* 838). The “muted son” mentioned here is, of course, Hal. By creating something “so bloody compelling,” Incandenza hoped to “reverse thrust on a young self’s fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life” (*IJ* 839). The result, however, is the opposite. The Entertainment compels its viewers to the point

---

<sup>11</sup> Wallace also had to argue for the inclusion of this M\*A\*S\*H episode. In the drafting stages of the novel, Pietsch suggested that he cut the episode. Wallace replied that he was “stumped” as to why Pietsch wanted to cut it. Besides the episodes that describe the medical attaché’s demise, Wallace argued, this one was “the clearest scenario of what lethal entertainment’d look like” (Wallace to Michael Pietsch, [1995] 19 February, Box 3, Folder 3, Little Brown and Company Collection).

<sup>12</sup> In a seemingly self-referential moment, the reader learns that Incandenza changed the name of the film to “Infinite Jest” from “The Face of the Deep,” which he found too pretentious. The actress in the film, Joelle Van Dyne, thought that “skull-fragment out of the *Hamlet* graveyard scene” was even more pompous: “talk about pretentious, she’d laughed” (*IJ* 238). The legacy of *Infinite Jest* allows us to read this sentence as a metafictional self-reference to the novel’s perceived pretension.

that they cease to be interested in anything else; embodying annularity, they watch the film over and over again. Instead of producing dialogue, the Entertainment causes viewers to lose all narrative and motor function. Eventually, they succumb to death.

The two accounts of the Entertainment's content, however, complicate this reading of the Entertainment as "bloody compelling." The first account comes from Molly Notkin, a friend of the actress in the Entertainment, Joelle Van Dyne (who eventually ends up in Ennet House, recovering from her addiction to cocaine); the second comes from Joelle herself. Both give their testimonies in interviews with Steeply and his boss, Rodney Tine (the head advisor of President Gentle). Molly Notkin offers a splintered, unreliable version of Joelle's testimony, so I will focus on Joelle's descriptions. From Joelle, the reader learns that she is featured in two scenes. In the first, she walks through a glass revolving door; as she moves through, she sees someone in the door that she recognizes but has not seen in a while. Joelle explains, "I keep going around in the door to follow the person out, which person is also still revolving in the door to follow me in, and we whirl in the door like that for several whirls" (*IJ* 939). The two characters are stuck in an infinite, annular loop; in trying to both enter and exit the circular structure simultaneously, neither character can do either. As Holl notes, despite their efforts, they cannot achieve their mutual goal: to converse with one another (Holl 33). This scene, then, reflects the annular shape of the novel, while also pointing toward a key facet of its narrative form: the temporal and situational breakdown of dialogue and narrative that the chronotope of isolation produces. Still, though, nothing about this scene seems particularly compelling for a viewer.

Similarly, the second scene appears to be repetitive, circular, and tedious. Apparently shot through a wobbly lens designed to “reproduce an infantile visual field” and placed in a crib, the scene features Joelle in a white gown, apologizing to the camera: “there were at least twenty minutes of permutations of ‘I’m sorry’” (*IJ* 940, 939). While Joelle notes that Incandenza may have edited down this scene—her conscious state of being suggests that she never actually saw the film—it nevertheless appears infantile (as intended by the lens) and boring. Moreover, as Konstantinou argues, the film’s formal techniques work to infantilize the viewer herself (Konstantinou 102). Not only does the Entertainment represent narrative stasis on the screen, but the viewer, too, is reduced to zero.

Both scenes that Joelle describes suggest that the Entertainment is anything but entertaining. Indeed, contrary to what Incandenza’s wraith tells Gately, Joelle explains that Incandenza called his films “entertainments” ironically (*IJ* 940). The Entertainment, Incandenza joked with Joelle, was “too perfect to release—it’d paralyze people” (*IJ* 940). Yet the irony ends up playing itself: the Entertainment taps into a quasi-American cultural system whose subjects find this collapse of narrative, and the resulting loss of internal selfhood, irresistibly seductive. Tedium, ironized, is the ultimate entertainment. Thematically, then, the fatal Entertainment interlaces the pillars of the dystopian world of *Infinite Jest*: technological advancement and addiction. Formally, it is the literalized epitome of the chronotopic effects of isolation—the total reduction of narrative to zero—that I have discussed throughout the chapter. In Chapter Two, I will examine the novel’s thematic and formal response to collapse in the chronotope of isolation: redemption in the chronotope of recovery.

## Chapter Two

### Community

Postmodern irony and cynicism's become an end in itself, a measure of hip sophistication and literary savvy. Few artists dare to try to talk about ways of working toward redeeming what's wrong, because they'll look sentimental and naive to all the weary ironists. Irony's gone from liberating to enslaving. The postmodern founders' patricidal work was great, but patricide produces orphans, and no amount of revelry can make up for the fact that writers my age have been literary orphans throughout our formative years.

—David Foster Wallace, Interview with Larry McCaffery

Gately remembers his first six months here straight: he'd felt the sharp edge of every second that went by.

—David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*

### Chronotope of Recovery

While entertainment, drugs, and information overload cause the chaotic collapse of narrative for many characters in *Infinite Jest*, the institutions of Ennet House and Boston AA offer characters a “way out”—a redemption of narrative that is coherent and productive (*IJ* 981). These institutions embody the chronotope of recovery. This chapter will flesh out the specifics of narrative reclamation in this chronotope, focusing on Donald Gately and his recovery from drug abuse and alcoholism. As I will demonstrate, however, Gately's recovery is fundamentally bound up in the recovery of other characters. Community is foundational to this process. In this chronotope, characters co-create narrative through their shared dialect, participating in a Wittgensteinian language game. This chapter deals with the recovery of narrative as shared language within the chronotopic parameters of institutions; Chapter Three will reconsider the question in relation to the chronotope of the writing program.

### The Recovery of Narrative

While Hal Incandenza serves as the novel's main focal point of collapse in isolation, Don Gately inscribes an opposing trajectory: towards redemption, community, and value. As I will discuss later, Gately's recovery necessitates a move backwards—to a narrativization of his Bottom/Finished moment. Gately's narrative, however, not only concerns his recovery. As a "live-in Staffer" at Ennet House, he facilitates and monitors the recovery of other addicts, while still struggling with his own (*IJ* 208). Furthermore, he is responsible for much of the plot's (limited) advancement: at various points throughout the novel, Gately (often indirectly) contributes to the story's movement—in both positive and negative ways. The ambiguity surrounding his narrative (e.g., his apparent connection to the initial distribution of the lethal Entertainment versus his implied attempt to help Hal destroy its master copy) gives nuance to the work of institutionalized recovery in the novel.<sup>13</sup>

*Infinite Jest* first introduces Gately in one of his worst moments. Desperate for money to buy narcotics, Gately "disastrously" decides to "allow a nonviolent burglary to become in effect a robbery" by tying up and gagging the flu-ridden, Francophone owner of a Brookline home—who turns out to be Guillaume DuPlessis, the "most

---

<sup>13</sup> The ambiguity here actually works on two levels. First, while Gately appears determined to destroy the master copy (as Hal mentions during his psychotic break, "Donald Gately and I dig up my father's head," and corroborated by Gately's dream in the hospital—more on this soon), he was also responsible for the Entertainment's release through his robbery of Guillaume DuPlessis (*IJ* 17). Second, Wallace actually leaves it up to the reader to draw the above connections, leaving Gately's narrative (along with the rest of the plot) ambiguously incomplete at the novel's "end." As Severs and Marshall Boswell both argue, this ambiguity propels the reader outside of the text (Severs 132). I would push this analysis further: Gately's narrative ultimately brings the reader back *into* the text to reexamine the opening episode.

famous anti-ONAN organizer north of the Great Concavity” and possessor of a cartridge of the lethal Entertainment—and ultimately leaving him to suffocate to death (*IJ* 57). Also in this episode—as a “for instance” example of his “Don’t-Get-Mad-Get-Even” personality—the reader learns about Gately’s graphic defacement of an Assistant District Attorney’s toothbrush (*IJ* 55). Described as an “unclean and violated” narcotics addict who is the “size of a young dinosaur,” Gately seems, at first glance, an unlikely choice for the novel’s redeemer (*IJ* 55). These two moments, however, leave Gately in “the sort of a hell of a deep-shit mess that can turn a man’s life right around” (*IJ* 60). Worried that the A.D.A. will connect the dots, Gately looks for asylum. He finds it in Ennet House.

Furthermore, the narrative implications of Gately’s robbery of DuPlessis—though unclear to the reader at this point in the novel—are dire. As the reader learns in a footnote, Gately steals DuPlessis’ collection of “upscale arty-looking film cartridges” (*IJ* 985n18). Presumably, one of these cartridges is a master cartridge of the lethal Entertainment.<sup>14</sup> In a conversation with Hal, a disguised James Incandenza refers to his “family’s sordid liaison with the pan-Canadian Resistance’s notorious M. Duplessis” (*IJ* 30). Furthermore, another footnote references “Extremely unpleasant Québécois-insurgents-and-cartridge-related subsequent developments” after the robbery (*IJ* 985n16).<sup>15</sup> Gately’s rash actions have devastating narrative effects on the

---

<sup>14</sup> A master cartridge can be copied, but requires “special OS-codes and special hardware to run, and you need licenses for both the codes and the hardware”; any cartridge purchasable by a consumer is “Read-Only” (*IJ* 1054n301).

<sup>15</sup> For a detailed mapping of the cartridge’s movement, see Burn, *A Reader’s Guide*, 32-33. Burn plots its movement as follows: “Incandenzas → DuPlessis → Gately & Kite → Sixties Bob → Antitoi Brothers → A.F.R.” (33). Burn aptly notes that the cartridge’s circulation is ultimately a “true circle,” or annular: the A.F.R. arrives at E.T.A. at the “end” of the novel with the cartridge, presumably, in hand (Burn 33).

rest of the novel. Through his work at Ennet House and his participation in Boston AA, however, Gately gets a shot at recovery—not only from addiction, but also a recovery of narrative.<sup>16</sup> While chronotopes of collapse lead many of *Infinite Jest*'s characters to solipsism, anhedonia, and the end of narrative, the chronotope of recovery in Boston AA and Ennet House permits the reclamation of narrative through community, shared experience, and the ritualistic enactment and performance of language.

Before delving into the specifics of narrative recovery in AA, it is worth examining the narrator's in-depth portrayal of the condition of the addict as he enters AA. As the narrator explains, the addict first arrives at AA meetings at the "Bottom" of his "Substance-career" (*IJ* 347). After an overwhelming accumulation of "Losses"—of employment, friends, health, and the agency to choose to ingest the Substance—the addict is "Finished" (*IJ* 347). The narrator explains, "You cannot get drunk and you cannot get sober; you cannot get high and you cannot get straight. You are behind bars, you are in a cage and can see only bars in every direction" (*IJ* 347). The "Substance" imprisons the addict entirely; it leaves him or her to rot, devoid of agency and, indeed, of substance.<sup>17</sup>

This "Finished" moment exemplifies Marathe's argument about the inherent flaws of the United States society's conception of "freedom," which he relates to

---

<sup>16</sup> One could argue that, oddly enough, by unknowingly distributing the lethal Entertainment, Gately actually moves the narrative towards stasis: the Entertainment is the most prominent cause of narrative collapse in the novel.

<sup>17</sup> The novel offers two episodes that the reader might consider Gately's "Bottom." First, the aforementioned robbery of DuPlessis leads Gately to Ennet House and AA; therefore, one might read this episode as his Bottom. However, Gately's Dilaudid binge with Gene Fackelmann—the final episode related in the novel, though it occurs chronologically before the robbery—is more likely his true Bottom. I discuss this scene in detail later in the chapter.

Steeply on the outcropping above Tucson (*IJ* 320). Marathe argues that in the United States, “Freedom is the freedom-*from*”; that is, no one tells an individual agent that he or she must subscribe to any doctrine or act in any particular way (*IJ* 320). Yet, as Marathe questions, if no one tells an individual how to act, how can he or she learn how to choose the right action? This directionless “freedom to choose” leaves the individual up to his or her own uninformed devices—to choose drugs or entertainment without any consideration of consequences (*IJ* 320). It is precisely this “freedom” that, in turn, imprisons the addict in the “cage” with “bars in every direction” (*IJ* 347). In this cage, the choices—finally—are few. In fact, as the narrator explains, the addict has only two choices: to kill him or herself or to “Come In”:

you can either take up the Luger or blade and eliminate your own personal map...or you can get out the very beginning of the Yellow Pages or InterNet Psych-Svce File and make a blubbering 0200h. phone call and admit to a gentle grandparentish voice that you’re in trouble, deadly serious trouble... (*IJ* 348)

To “eliminate” one’s “own personal map”—a ubiquitous euphemism for suicide in the novel—is to confront the literal end of narrative (of consciousness). The only other option for the addict is to try AA: to listen to other addicts, to share his or her own story, and to perpetually reconstruct narrative by participating in meetings.

Boston AA offers a “way out” of the cage of addiction—a kind of freedom, yet of a different sort than the freedom discussed by Marathe. The parameters of the institution of Boston AA actually protect the addict from “Out There”—from freedom to choose (*IJ* 359). To get out of the cage, then, one must actually “Come In”—give oneself over to structure and regulation, physicalized by the church basements of AA meetings and the “whitewashed New England brick” walls of Ennet House (*IJ* 197). As Gately comes to see, the “Sergeant at Arms” of Boston AA actually operates “Out

There.” Gately arrives at this understanding of the Sergeant at Arms through a dream. In the dream, he and rows of “totally average and non-unique U.S. citizens” kneel in a church basement with glass walls. He notices that no one seems to be “coercing them into kneeling, and yet there was this sense of some compelling unspoken reason why they were all kneeling” (*IJ* 358). When one man tries to stand up, he is hooked by a “giant shepherd’s crook” and pulled outside; only then does Gately notice the “extraordinarily snappily dressed and authoritative figure,” wearing a “yellow smily-face circle” mask, standing outside the glass walls (*IJ* 358-59). Through this dream, Gately comes to this realization about AA’s Sergeant at Arms:

AA’s disciplinarian looked damn good and smelled even better and dressed to impress and his blank black-on-yellow smile never faltered as he sincerely urged you to have a nice day. Just one more last nice day. Just one. (*IJ* 359)

The Sergeant at Arms compels addicts to stay in AA not by force, but conversely by inviting the addict to relapse—to have “Just one more...Just one.” While it might seem odd that an enforcer of order would operate in such a backwards way, this kind of Sergeant at Arms affirms that the cage of addiction is “Out There,” disguised as freedom. Further, the smiling face recalls the “vapid U.S.A.-type circular smiling heads” on cartridges of the fatal Entertainment (*IJ* 36). This equivalence between relapse and the Entertainment connects two major causes of narrative collapse, suggesting that both manifest themselves similarly in the chronotope of isolation.

### **Language Games**

Boston AA’s dialect defines the parameters of the chronotope of recovery; members must subscribe to the specific language of AA. At first glance, this dialect

appears to be a conglomeration of clichés. The reader might briefly concur with Erdedy, who complains of the “off-putting jargon” and the “psychobabbly dialect” at meetings (*IJ* 360). This jargon includes, as Ennet House resident Geoffrey Day—a “red-wine-and-Quaalude man”—lists with a tinge of irony: “One day at a time. Easy does it. First things first. Courage is fear that has said its prayers. Ask for help. Thy will not mine be done. It works if you work it. Grow or go.” (*IJ* 272, 270). Day, who “manned the helm of a Scholarly Quarterly” before Coming In, struggles to “learn to live by clichés”; his literary background inhibits his ability to accept such a simplistic, cliché-filled, quasi-religious dialect (*IJ* 272). Yet, according to Gately, the “clichéd directives” of Boston AA “are a lot more deep and hard to actually *do*”; the language, then, requires a kind of doing on the part of the speaker (*IJ* 273). Through its repeated enactment, or performance, the dialect works.

The doing of language in Boston AA is consistent with Ludwig Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language games. In essence, Wittgenstein argues that an individual understands the meaning of a word or phrase (and can use that word or phrase) only through his or her enmeshment in a language game—a linguistic system that is practiced, cultivated, and applied in a specific environment. Importantly, all language operates in these games; in other words, there is no outside of language games. In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein uses the analogy of chess to explicate the similarities of understanding a game (like chess) and understanding language. He begins, “When one shews someone the king in chess and says: ‘This is the king,’ this does not tell him the use of this piece—unless he already knows the rules of the game up to this last point: the shape of the king” (13). In other words, the phrase “This is

the king” becomes meaningful if one knows the rules of the game. Otherwise, the name of the piece is meaningless; further, one would not even know that this object is a piece in a game. Indeed, he continues, to say “This is the king” only resonates “if the learner already ‘knows what a piece in a game is.’ That is, if he has already played other games, or has watched other people playing ‘and understood’—*and similar things*” (13). Here, he argues that one learns to play games through practice and observation. If we conceptualize language as a game like chess, we see that one learns language—i.e., learns how to negotiate language in an environment—through similar processes of acculturation. In the chronotope of recovery in *Infinite Jest*, then, addicts engage in a language game that is manifest in the performance of a specific dialect.

Furthermore, the clichés of the Boston AA language game function as a “binding commonality” for addicts (*IJ* 349). By definition, a cliché is a phrase that is universally known and understood. Common discourse would argue that its universality leaves the phrase banal and devoid of true meaning. In Boston AA, however, the opposite is true. The clichés, in fact, connect addicts; addicts perform this connection through speaking Commitments: “where some members of one Group commit to hit the road and travel to another Group’s meeting to speak publicly from the podium” (*IJ* 343). As the narrator explains, these Commitments are unique to Boston AA. While AA everywhere is divided into Groups, only in Boston do these Groups travel to other meetings to speak. Indeed, an individual will only share his or her story in front of another Group. In a Commitment speech, the individual enacts AA’s twelfth step of “Giving It Away”: “You give it up to get it back to give it away”

(*IJ* 344). In this chronotope of recovery, sobriety is a “cosmic loan” that cannot be paid back; it can only be paid “forward” through these Commitments (*IJ* 344). As Severs notes, “Giving It Away” contrasts with Hal’s lamentation that Americans “are virtually unlimited in their need to give themselves away” (*IJ* 53). In Hal’s formulation, this American need to give oneself away manifests itself in one of two ways (or for Hal, apparently both): drug abuse or “ambitious competitive pursuit” (*IJ* 53). In both cases, giving oneself away leads to a collapse of narrative and a loss of agency. Conversely, “Giving It Away” in Boston AA creates an economy of language that can be exchanged with others in a communal pursuit of recovery. The only way “to hang onto sobriety,” the narrator explains, is to engage in this performance of giving it away to others; the speaker and the audience, then, both benefit from this symbiotic exchange (*IJ* 344). While the speaker narrates his or her story (which is itself a performance of narrative recovery), the audience is tasked with “Identifying,” or empathizing, with the speaker. Identification can be achieved, the narrator describes, because “all the speakers’ stories of decline and fall and surrender are basically alike, and like your own”; in other words, members of AA share a narrative loop (*IJ* 345).

I distill the steps of this narrative loop below:

Fun with the Substance → Gradually less fun → Physical need for the  
 Substance → Losses → More Losses → Denial → Physical and psychic pain →  
 Bottom/Finished → Coming In → Recovery (*IJ* 345-47)

Significantly, the “Recovery” phase of this loop never ends; instead, it must be practiced, performed, and earned each day—like a smaller circle within larger,

concentric ones. The addict must always renew his narrative by engaging in AA's economy of language. Importantly, this recovery phase is painful: "the way it gets better and you get better is through pain" (*IJ* 446). *Infinite Jest* graphically demonstrates the pain associated with recovery; narrative recovery requires that one "'Get In Touch' with why it was that you used Substances in the first place"—confronting and remembering the specifics of one's past (*IJ* 446). This is certainly the case for Don Gately, who after eight months sober, starts "to almost reexperience things that he'd barely even been there to experience, in terms of emotionally, in the first place"—including witnessing his alcoholic step-father's routine beatings of his alcoholic mother (*IJ* 446). The recovery of narrative requires the visceral remembering of one's past into a coherent whole. Further, recovery is a fragile condition. Another kind of annular looping—relapse—bolsters its contingency. Again, the annular structure of the novel mirrors the stakes of its narrative. In this case, annularity suggests both the danger of potential relapse and the only way to avoid it: subscription to and performance of a dialect, in utterance and in action. The implications of this shared narrative loop can be fleshed out through an analysis of the specific narrative form of these Commitments in the novel, to which I will now turn.

### **But For the Grace of God**

As I mention above, members of AA share a dialect that encourages Identification. In this dialect, the clichéd slogan, "Here But for the Grace of God," serves crucial functions that illuminate the novel's (and AA's) "intuitive approach to language," as Severs writes (114). For Gately, however, the slogan resonates beyond

his employment of it. Severs aptly traces the lineage of the slogan to its original Latin, *Dei Gratia* (DG, read: Don Gately) meaning “By the grace of god” (Severs 113). Its inverse (GD, read: “God-damned”) also appears in the novel in a number of instances: e.g., Ennet House resident Geoffrey Day, who, due to his obnoxious and difficult demeanor, “could end up being an invaluable teacher of patience and tolerance” for Gately (Severs 113; *IJ* 270). Another GD is Guillaume DuPlessis; as discussed earlier in the chapter, Gately’s involvement in DuPlessis’ death leads him to Ennet House. Juxtaposed with DG, these “doppelgängers” serve as obstacles for Gately: he must overcome them in his recovery process (Severs 113). While this reading positions Gately as the graceful, blessed hero, the slogan of AA adds a layer of ambiguity by pointing to the “general *deprivation* of grace” in the world of the novel, rather than its ubiquity; “Here But For the Grace of God” suggests the dangers of “Out There” beyond the timespace of AA meetings (Severs 113).

In addition, “Here But for the Grace of God” introduces the ambiguous and complex relationship between Boston AA and religion. As the third of its twelve steps, Boston AA suggests that every member to submit his or her “Diseased will” to a “Higher Power,” or a “God as you understand Him” (*IJ* 443). The “God” in the slogan is not a specific God; rather, the addict decides his or her own Higher Power. Its significance, however, is derived through the utterance and doing of the slogan.

Gately, for example, struggles to conceptualize a Higher Power. In a Commitment speech at the “Tough Shit But You Still Can’t Drink Group,” Gately reveals, “he was ashamed that he still as yet had no real solid understanding of a

Higher Power” (*IJ* 442).<sup>18</sup> Unlike other addicts, Gately has “0 in the way of denominational background or preconceptions” (i.e., he did not grow up in a religious household) and therefore feels unable to conceive of a Higher Power—much less choose one for himself (*IJ* 442). Nevertheless, Gately enacts the slogan. Following AA’s instructions, he “hits the knees” and “asks for Help” every morning; after each sober day, he “hits the knees” again and says “Thank You, whether he believes he’s talking to Anything/-body or not, and he somehow gets through that day clean” (*IJ* 443). Gately’s enactment and reenactment of the slogan—despite his lack of clarity on its significance—demonstrates the performative significance of AA language. He likens his understanding of a Higher Power to a “hitter that’s on a hitting streak and doesn’t change his jock or socks or pre-game routine” (*IJ* 443). As Severs argues, this sports metaphor suggests Gately’s grateful enactment of a “chance to play,” as E.T.A. coach Gerhardt Schitt says of tennis (Severs 119; *IJ* 84). For Gately, though, the stakes are much higher than those of an E.T.A. tennis player; his task-oriented performance exceeds the games played by the individualized, “self-competitive” tennis players at a private establishment that promotes isolation (*IJ* 84). In other words, his relationship to language—cultivated through AA’s Wittgensteinian philosophy of language (as a kind of doing)—is far more productive than the disjointed language of E.T.A. By productive, I mean producing narrative. Its opposite is the language of E.T.A., which I will now briefly examine.

---

<sup>18</sup> The name of this Group suggests, in a humorous way, that excuses are not acceptable in AA—more on this shortly.

An episode early in the novel offers a particularly revealing example of language at E.T.A. In the locker room after practice, several exhausted players sit around discussing synonyms:

Group empathy is expressed via sighs, further slumping, small spastic gestures of exhaustion, the soft clanks of skulls' backs against the lockers' thin steel.

'So tired it's out of *tired's* word-range,' Pemulis says. '*Tired* just doesn't do it.'

'Exhausted, shot, depleted,' says Jim Struck... 'Cashed. Totalled.'

...

'Beat. Worn the heck out.'

'Worn the *fuck*-all out is more like.'

'Wrung dry. Whacked. Tuckered out. More dead than alive.'

'None even come close, the words.'

'Word-inflation,' Stice says... 'Bigger and better. Good greater greatest totally great. Hyperbolic and hyperbolicker. Like grade-inflation.' (*IJ* 100)

As Severs argues, this passage depicts a “group empathy” that varies from the “Identification” of AA. He writes, “shared language here, even as the boys collectively define their state, complicates the mute agreement of ‘sighs’ and ‘shared gestures’” (Severs 130). In AA, shared language allows for group empathy; here, group empathy is separated from—and complicated by—language. Further, their attempts to define their exhaustion through “synonym proliferation” ironically fail: “None even come close” (*IJ* 100). Finally, Stice “both ends the group’s language game and gets its rules wrong,” as Severs notes—offering superlatives of “comparative valuation” rather than synonyms (Severs 130). In this scene, the E.T.A. players exchange and accumulate language as a game—yet one that is separate from meaning, thus putting pressure on Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language games (as enacted by members of Boston AA).

Beyond its connection to Gately's name and its quasi-religious connotations, AA's slogan, "Here But For the Grace of God," serves to bolster the performative significance of language in the novel—despite, as Joelle Van Dyne points out, its grammatical senselessness. She complains to Gately (through free indirect discourse) during a raffle break at White Flag AA meeting that the expression is "literally senseless": the subjunctive phrase only makes sense if it introduces a conditional clause (*IJ* 366). In a moment that parallels her with the "Militant Grammarian," Avril Incandenza (Hal's mother), Joelle fails to see the value of the slogan because of its grammatical inaccuracy (*IJ* 288). In other words, she misses the importance of the slogan because, as a newcomer, she is not (yet) in the chronotopic language game of recovery in AA. The meaning of the slogan is not derived from proper grammar; rather, it comes from its situated, chronotopic position within the language game.

Gately, on the other hand—enmeshed in this language game, though barely literate—cannot comprehend Joelle's complaint. This inability to "Identify" leaves him in a panic, perhaps amplified by his attraction to Joelle:

For a second it seems inevitable that at some point in his life he's going to get high again and be back in the cage all over again, because for a second the blank white veil levelled at him seems a screen on which might well be projected a casual and impressive black and yellow smily-face, grinning, and he feels all the muscles in his own face loosen and descend kneeward; and the moment hangs there, distended... (*IJ* 366-67)

Joelle's analysis of "Here But For the Grace of God" disrupts Gately's tentative faith in AA, leaving him vulnerable. Further, as Severs notes, Gately recognizes "a version of himself (i.e., his initials)...and recognizes as well his potential cancellation" (114). Gately's shaky sense of agency, built on slogans like this one, starts to unravel as Joelle unpacks the language. Time swells—narrative begins to collapse—as he

envisions his “inevitable” relapse back into the “cage” of addiction; Joelle’s veil becomes a “screen” on which beckons the distinctive “smily-face” of the Entertainment and of the Sergeant at Arms. This moment demonstrates at once Gately’s fragile, contingent condition as an addict in recovery but also his means of resisting. When the raffle director, Glenn K., brings the Group back together for the raffle drawing, Gately snaps out of the “distended” moment, asking “silently for help to be determined to try to really hear or die trying” (*IJ* 367). In other words, he invokes a Higher Power to help him “Identify” with the speakers—thus enveloping himself in the protective layers of the AA community. This community and its shared language, once again, serve as the antidote to individuated relapse.

Just after Gately and Joelle’s conversation—as Gately tries his best to “really hear”—the slogan appears again in a particularly gruesome Commitment speech. Again, the slogan produces a level of ambiguity. An unnamed speaker tells a horrific, gratuitous story from her childhood in which her adoptive father would place a Raquel Welch mask on and then rape her deformed, “invertebrate” sister (*IJ* 370). Her father remained “oblivious (But for the Grace of God, in a way) to the fetally curled skinny form of the adopted daughter lying perfectly still in the next bed”—the speaker (*IJ* 372). Despite the seemingly singular horror of the speaker’s story, the parenthetical insertion of the phrase suggests the story’s likeness to the narratives of the audience—and that others Identify with this speaker.<sup>19</sup> However, the addition of “in a way” to the end of the phrase complicates this reading. Severs points out the absence of grace in the speaker’s horrific story; indeed, the “grace” to which the

---

<sup>19</sup> As Severs writes, the phrase is “inserted parenthetically, as though it comes not from the speaker or listeners but the all-important zone of shared identification between them” (114-15).

speaker refers is her avoidance of being “promoted to the role of Raquel” (*IJ* 372). The ambiguous “in a way” also suggests the ambivalence of the audience as they try to Identify with a speaker that seems to be making excuses for her addiction (Severs 115). AA’s “real root axiom” rejects any “subcurrent of explanation” because it so easily becomes “*Excuse*”:

The *Why* of the Disease is a labyrinth it is strongly suggested that all AAs boycott, inhabited as the maze is by the twin minotaurs of *Why Me?* And *Why Not?*, a.k.a. Self-Pity and Denial, two of the smily-faced Sergeant at Arms’ more fearsome aides de camp. The Boston AA “In Here” that protects against a return to “Out There” is not about explaining what caused your Disease. It’s about a goofily simple practical recipe for how to remember you’ve got the Disease day by day and how to treat the Disease day by day... (*IJ* 374)

In this maze of *Why*, the addict risks relapse by individuating his or her story through “Self-Pity” and “Denial,” conceptualized as “minotaurs” in this metaphor.<sup>20</sup> As the narrator explains, AA protects the addict through a “goofily simple practical recipe”: the addict must perpetually accept the fact that he or she has the Disease (for example, by stating at the beginning of every meeting, “I am an alcoholic”) and treat it through daily repetition (*IJ* 374).

Furthermore, at the level of form, this parenthetical insertion disrupts the language game of AA. Stripped of the grounding location of “here” or “there” from its front, and made ambiguous by the addition of “in a way,” the words no longer comprise the AA slogan; it is a different utterance altogether (Severs 115). Moreover, if we read the insertion as belonging to the unnamed narrator, the phrase drips with irony—countering the “maximally unironic” space of Boston AA (*IJ* 369). Indeed, the narrator mediates the story through free indirect discourse: interspersed with the

---

<sup>20</sup> This reference to Greek mythology is one of many in the novel, positioning the recovering addict (Gately) as a hero.

speaker's words are those of a narrator positioned at ironic distance, adding humor to an otherwise dismal and horrific story.<sup>21</sup> This ironic narration doubles the speaker's "undercurrent of explanation," both of which are condemned by AA's language game. One must eschew both irony and excuses in the chronotopic program of AA.

### Work

While chronotopes of collapse lead to the reduction of narrative to zero, the chronotope of Boston AA leads to a harshly regulated recovery of narrative through the "binding commonality" of AA's language (*IJ* 349). Wallace implicitly argues for our need of institutions to regulate society; otherwise, perceived freedom leads to collapse. Another institution that permits the recovery of narrative is Ennet House, to which I will now turn.

Ennet House is inextricably linked to Boston AA in the novel. The halfway house, located just down the hill from E.T.A., requires its residents to attend an AA (or a Narcotics Anonymous equivalent) meeting each night. Ennet House, then, serves as an extension of AA; the residents have the chance to practice further their narrative recovery in shared spaces. Indeed, Ennet House exemplifies the chronotope of recovery: "Time is passing. Ennet House reeks of passing time. It is the humidity of early sobriety, hanging and palpable. You can hear ticking in clockless rooms here" (*IJ* 279). In the space of Ennet House, time thickens and takes on olfactory and auditory qualities; the space chronicles each passing second—much like Ennet House resident Randy Lenz, who does not wear a watch but obsessively needs to know the exact time. Furthermore, the goal of residency in Ennet House is to "buy these poor

---

<sup>21</sup> The narration also implicates the reader and her ironic distance from the text.

yutzes some time,” as Gately reminds himself daily: “some thin pie-slice of abstinent time, till they can start to get a whiff of what’s true and deep, almost magic, under the shallow surface of what they’re trying to do” (*IJ* 271). Indeed, addicts arrive at Ennet House “clueless”—not only at the Finished point of their Substance careers, but also without any understanding of how to do “what they’re trying to do,” i.e., recover (*IJ* 271). Even Gately, over four hundred days sober in November of the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment, knows that “he too is probably mostly still clueless, still”; recovery cannot be mastered—only managed (*IJ* 271).

While Boston AA proposes a dialect (but few rules otherwise—the Sergeant at Arms suffices), Ennet House strictly regulates its residents in order to facilitate the management of recovery. Each resident has a weekly “Chore”; each must attend an AA or NA meeting every night; curfew is 11:30 sharp. Failure to comply can result in a number of penalties: i.e., a week of “Full House Restriction” (only able to leave to go to an AA meeting) or getting “Discharged” (forced to leave) (*IJ* 601). As a live-in Staffer, Gately enforces Ennet House’s regulations. In addition, he tracks the location, behavior, and “Chore-performance” of each resident in a “Daily Log” (*IJ* 593). For Gately, these duties “are divided pretty evenly between the picayune and the unpleasant”; one could imagine any resident feeling the same way about the rules themselves. Similar to the language of AA, however, the rules of Ennet House provide a steady, daily structure to individuals severely lacking it. Furthermore, the regulations bring the residents and staffers together in another binding commonality: through their Chores, the residents participate in the maintenance of a shared, communal space. Moreover, Ennet House residents engage in the metro Boston

community at-large: each must work a menial, “humility job” in order to remain a resident (*IJ* 361). Even as a Staffer, Gately maintains his job as a janitor at the Shattuck Shelter for Homeless Males in Jamaica Plain. The work itself is horrific (“There’s human waste in the showers on a daily fucking basis”) but also humbling; after his shift, Gately “rides the Greenie back up the hill with his Gratitude-battery totally recharged” (*IJ* 434, 445). As Severs points out, “Greenie” refers to the Green Line of Boston’s metro system, but is also lingo for amphetamines: “once addicted to downers, he now has a salutary daily upper” (Severs 117). Gately finds this new upper, however, in his humbling service to others, rather than in a substance.

### **Modes of Communication**

As McGurl explains, Gately’s heroism comes from his position as a live-in Staffer at Ennet House (“The Institution of Nothing” 38). In one of the most climactic moments of the novel, Gately goes from filling out the “picayune” daily Log to defending Ennet House and its residents from armed, vengeful Canadians. Their fury is justified: minutes prior to this episode, resident Randy Lenz kills their dog as a psychotic coping mechanism. As the Canadians chase Lenz around his car, Gately steps outside: “Everything now slightly slows down; at the sight of an Item held on his residents there’s almost a kind of mechanistic click as Gately’s mind shifts into a different kind of drive” (*IJ* 608). Gately, upon seeing the “Item” trained on his residents—Boston slang for firearm—enters a different mode of consciousness. Embodying the chronotopic purpose of Ennet House—“to buy these poor yutzes some time”—Gately becomes a human shield for Lenz, who cowers behind Gately’s

massive body (*IJ* 271). Gately thus literally enacts the cliché, “You’ll Have to Go Through Me”; following the model of AA, his words become performative as he takes on the assailants (*IJ* 611). Furthermore, he acknowledges and accepts the risk that he might go to prison for fighting back. Again aligned with AA’s philosophy, he sees himself as “just one part of something bigger he can’t control” (*IJ* 612). He does his best to protect his community from “Out There” by bludgeoning two of the three assailants (*IJ* 611). Ultimately, though, the community responds symbiotically: when Gately is shot in the shoulder and incapacitated, residents Bruce Green, Nell Gunther, Clenette H., and Yolanda W. take care of the “third Nuck” (*IJ* 614). Afterwards, “Many hands slide under [Gately’s] back” as the residents carry him inside the protected walls of Ennet House (*IJ* 619).

While the above episode showcases Gately’s capacity for heroics (and for applying his ferocity to a good cause), his greatest trials occur afterwards in the hospital. In immense pain, and robbed of his voice by a tube running down his throat, Gately must fight every urge to succumb to the painkillers that the doctor recommends. He drifts in and out of consciousness as he grapples with relapse:

The memory of Talwin makes parts of his Gately didn’t know could drool drool...if the Pakistani goes ahead and offers Demerol again Gately won’t resist. And who the fuck’ll be able to blame him after all. Why should he have to resist? He’d received a bona fide Grade-Whatever dextral synovial trauma. Shot with a professionally modified .44 Item. He’s post-trauma, in terrible pain, and everyone heard the guy say it: it was going to get worse, the pain. This was a trauma-pro in a white coat here making reassurances of legitimate fucking use. (*IJ* 888)

Here, Gately wavers on the edge of “*Excuse*”—antithetical to the ethos of Boston AA, though a reader might agree that this situation constitutes “legitimate fucking

use” (*IJ* 888).<sup>22</sup> Despite these valid circumstances, Gately ultimately knows that he must resist. He applies the language of AA and its emphasis on “Abiding” in the present: “No one single instant of it was unendurable. Here was a second right here: he endured it” (*IJ* 860). Here, Gately’s recovery from the gunshot wound physicalizes his recovery in AA: both leave him in excruciating pain that he can only endure through “Abiding...between heartbeats” (*IJ* 860).

Furthermore, Gately’s recovery necessitates a reliving of his Bottom; to complete the reclamation of his narrative, he must put together the pieces of his past—especially the pieces that he would rather ignore. Gately’s Bottom occurs in the Year of Whopper (seven years prior to Y.D.A.U.) during his time as a burglar and an enforcer/debt collector for a bookkeeper named Whitey Sorkin.<sup>23</sup> In short, Gately’s colleague, Gene Fackelmann, takes advantage of a betting mix-up and steals \$250,000 from Sorkin; he then promptly buys 37,500 10-mg. Tablets of Dilaudid to binge (*IJ* 931). When it becomes clear to Fackelmann—and Gately—that Sorkin has found out about the scam, Fackelmann “made a fucking beeline for their luxury-stripped home and familiar safe-feeling hearth and had plopped down and immediately fired up his Sterno cooker and cooked up and tied off and shot up” (*IJ* 932). Gately, upon encountering Fackelmann in the gutted home, ends up letting him “fix them both up but good, and told himself he was doing it to keep Fackelmann company...and (maybe worst) believed it was true” (*IJ* 933). Reflecting in the hospital, Gately corrects this misunderstanding of “company”; this moment contrasts

---

<sup>22</sup> Implicit in this passage is an interpellation of the reader as an individual outside of the AA language game.

<sup>23</sup> Gately and his associate, Fackelmann, would also rent luxury homes with a fraudulent credit card and then sell all of the apartment’s furnishings before relocating (*IJ* 892).

with the community of AA, in which characters co-create narrative. Here, in this chronotope of drug-induced isolation, narrative goes to zero; Fackelmann ceases to say anything except “That’s a goddamn lie” (*IJ* 935). Despite their narrative stasis, the world around them continues to move forward; Sorkin sends a “whole entourage-type group of people” to kill Fackelmann (*IJ* 975). Up until this point, the narration is retrospective; here, however, the focus switches. Gately actually experiences the final moments of his Bottom as if the events were actually happening. He “wakes up” from a fever dream not in the hospital, but lying on the floor next to Fackelmann again—effectively transcending time and space to return to this moment. Sorkin’s entourage, however, spares Gately from witnessing Fackelmann’s horrendous, slow death. They inject Gately with “pharm-grade Sunshine” that knocks him out, just as they begin to drop some sort of liquid in Fackelmann’s sewn-open eyes (*IJ* 979). Gately reawakens in the final sentence of the novel: “And when he came back to, he was flat on his back on the beach in the freezing sand, and it was raining out of a low sky, and the tide was way out” (*IJ* 981). While it might seem odd that the novel ends on such a note, this final sentence suggests the possibility of redemption and recovery of narrative—for Gately and for others—in the collapsed world of the novel. By reliving his Bottom, Gately arrives at a “way out.” Furthermore, “way out” points the reader back towards the opening episode of the book—Hal’s “in here”—and suggests the possibility of recovery even for Hal.

Beyond this recovery of Gately’s Bottom, the final episodes also complicate and flesh out the novel’s relationship to language. As I have argued throughout this chapter, utterance and performance of a specific dialect are essential to narrative

recovery in AA; however, as I mention above, Gately cannot speak in these final episodes. Faced with this apparent contradiction, one might read Gately's inability to speak as an ironic reversal of his opening episode, in which he ruefully ignores the pleas of the French-speaking, congested Guillaume DuPlessis before gagging and killing him. In addition, one might interpret Gately's muteness as reminiscent of Hal's opening episode: Gately feels the "drowned panic of not being able to ask questions or have any input into what somebody's saying," while Hal experiences the "familiar panic at feeling misperceived" (*IJ* 826, 8). These two versions of speechlessness, however, diverge at a fundamental level, reflecting each character's relationship to language. Hal—far from mute during his breakdown—produces "Subanimalistic noises and sounds," yet cannot communicate at all with the people around him (*IJ* 14). In contrast, Gately still can communicate at some level; despite his muteness, he still performs the language game of AA. First, as discussed earlier in the chapter, AA Commitments require communication between the speaker and the listener. Though the speaker performs the language, the listener must actively engage, too: "*hearing* the speaker means like all of a sudden hearing how fucking similar the way he felt and the way I felt were," as Gately tells his Ennet House residents (*IJ* 365). The speaker and listener, then, share the language; the former's words become those of the latter. I apply this notion to Gately's episodes in the hospital. His visitors from Ennet House speak to him as if performing Commitments speeches; as listener, Gately must hear them and Identify to engage in this relationship. Tiny Ewell, for example, tells Gately about his childhood as the mastermind of a fraudulent operation called the "Money-Stealers' Club" before launching into his insecurities about

recovery (*IJ* 810). Though he cannot respond, Ewell's story doubles Gately's own past as a burglar; further, it presages his reliving of his Bottom in the novel's final pages (Severs 124). In other words, Ewell and Gately communicate through their shared language.

Beyond his wordless communication with Ewell and his other human visitors, Gately, in his semi-conscious state, communicates with the wraith (ghost) of James Incandenza. The two converse without actually speaking; instead, they communicate within Gately's consciousness. More importantly, however, words that Gately "knows he doesn't know from a divot in the sod" begin to enter his "brain-voice...with roaring and unwilling force" (*IJ* 832).<sup>24</sup> Out of context, the list of words that comes "crashing through his head" means nothing to him (*IJ* 832). As Wittgenstein would argue, however, the meaning of a word cannot be separated from its use in a language game. Gately enacts this notion when he asks himself (via free indirect discourse in the text), "Does *wraith* mean like a ghost, as in dead? Is this a message from a Higher Power about sobriety and death? What would it be like to try and talk and have the person think it was just their own mind talking?" (*IJ* 833). Here, Gately arrives at the meaning of the word, "wraith," through its use; he understands the word in the context of a language game. Gately's experience of "lexical rape," despite this callous nomenclature, points toward the idea of shared language that goes even beyond the dialect of AA (*IJ* 832).

Finally, the interface between Gately and Incandenza's wraith connects the three major plot threads of the novel; however, it does so indirectly. As Severs points

---

<sup>24</sup> In his analysis of this moment, Severs draws an effective distinction between Gately and Hal: "Hal possesses words, while Gately is possessed *by* them" (Severs 132).

out, “while [the reader] readily recognizes the wraith as Himself [Incandenza], Gately cannot” (131). In other words, this moment asks the reader to reconsider her own involvement in the text. Indeed, one must piece together the novel’s clues in order to hypothesize what happens at the end of the novel. Hal’s line in the opening episode, “Donald Gately and I dig up my father’s head” and Gately’s dream (after the wraith’s visitation) about “digging some dead guy’s head up” with a “very sad kid” suggest that Gately and Hal meet outside the novel—in the missing year of content between the “end” of the novel in Y.D.A.U. and its opening episode in Year of Glad—and dig up a Master copy of the Entertainment from James Incandenza’s grave (*IJ* 17, 934). Further, the text leaves ambiguous whether they do, in fact, locate the copy; in Gately’s dream, the boy shouts, “*Too Late*” (*IJ* 934). As interpreter of missing data, the reader becomes explicitly involved in “making the text ‘communicate’” (Severs 132).

The story of *Infinite Jest* extends beyond the frame of the novel. If the reader does not see the structure, Wallace claimed, then “the book’s failed for you” (“Nothing” 29). In Chapter Three, I will argue that the problems of *Infinite Jest* run deeper than unresolved plot (which I see as a superficial problem). Instead, the novel’s chronotope of recovery, as discussed in this chapter, allegorically represents a chronotope of the writing program. This chronotope, I will argue, presents a number of literary problems that reveal *Infinite Jest*’s all-encompassing, chronotopic relationship to the program (the institution) as a category of social existence.

## Chapter Three

### Student Writer

If the Program Era is characterized by an increasingly prolonged intimacy of American writers with the ways and means of the institutions of higher education; by the historically novel rise and multiplication of creative writing programs and their staffing by writer-teachers; by the emergence, in that evolving professional matrix, of a constellation of late modernist aesthetic formations registering by turns the advent of mass higher education, the recognition of “diversity” as a primary institutional value, and the increasing prestige of big science and technology as crucial determinants of postwar narrative form; and characterized, finally, by the systematic centrality of authorial self-reference, or “autopoetics,” in generating those forms, then Wallace was, indeed, a Program Man if ever there was one.

—Mark McGurl, “The Institution of Nothing”

Education is the foundation of all learning.

—Roger Federer, Television Advertisement

### Chronotope of the Program

In my first and second chapters, I discuss the chronotopes of collapse and recovery, respectively, in the world of *Infinite Jest*. In this chapter, I look beyond the frame (as the unresolved plot demands) to arrive at a (more) complete understanding of the novel. In the drafting stage, Wallace wrote to Michael Pietsch that the novel’s “last ¼ must seem really shitty and unclear” to a reader that does not understand the book’s structure (Wallace to Michael Pietsch, [1995] 19 February, Box 3, Folder 3, Little Brown and Company Collection). I follow Wallace’s directive and look outside the novel; I find, however, a writer whose work inhabits a chronotope not unlike that of the recovery institutions of *Infinite Jest*: the chronotope of the writing program. In turn, this chronotope feeds back into the novel—revealing an allegory of program existentialism at the heart of *Infinite Jest*.

Foundational to understanding *Infinite Jest* as a Program Era text—and Wallace as a Program Era writer—is Mark McGurl’s argument in his book *The*

*Program Era* and in his essay “The Institution of Nothing: David Foster Wallace in the Program.” Wallace and *Infinite Jest*—deeply connected, for example, to Thomas Pynchon and his 1973 novel, *Gravity’s Rainbow*—emerge out of an authoritative literary tradition that has regulated and streamlined literature. In this chapter, I build on McGurl’s argument, reasoning not only that *Infinite Jest* has the characteristics of a Program Era novel but that, moreover, the programs of *Infinite Jest* (specifically Ennet House and Boston AA) are allegories for the writing program. Taking this one step further, I argue that the writing program is an allegory for the all-encompassing program. By program, I mean the organization of society through systematized, regulated institutions, both inside and outside of the novel. Because the program structure encompasses *Infinite Jest* entirely, nothing exists outside of programs.<sup>25</sup> I see this problem of allegory in the chronotopic parameters of Program Era writing, as they are manifest in the form and discourse of *Infinite Jest*. First, *Infinite Jest* is highly self-reflexive. In other words, the novel is aware of, and constantly referring to, its existence in the writing program. Such self-reflexivity is comprehensive; like the enclosure of the institutions in *Infinite Jest*, the chronotope of the writing program envelops its inhabitants—both inside of the text (the characters) and outside of it (the

---

<sup>25</sup> I differentiate this existential program from another kind of program in *Infinite Jest*: the television program. We see the television program in the story of Steeply’s father, as discussed in Chapter One. Even the television program, though, exists within the chronotopic parameters of the all-encompassing program; as I argue throughout the chapter, nothing is outside of the program. Steeply’s reflections on the program refer to his father’s addiction to M\*A\*S\*H\*, though he might as well be describing the novel’s (and Wallace’s) programmatic existentialism:

Then at some point it was as if he was no longer able to converse or communicate on any topic without bringing it back to the program. Without some system of references to the program...Though it wasn’t as though he was wholly uncritical of it. (*IJ* 642)

author and reader). I see this enclosure in Wallace's relationship with metafiction—a self-reflexive form that he criticized publicly for its irony and insincerity, yet that he struggled to remove from his own work (any self-reflexive refutation of self-reflexivity is naturally flawed).

Further, the regulated recovery of narrative in Boston AA and Ennet House is an allegory for the writing program: in both cases, the individual—enclosed in the chronotopic parameters of the program—is given language to use and rules to obey. In this way, I see *Infinite Jest* as a student novel—not only written by a student of the program, but allegorically representing the relationship of the student to the program through the characters that inhabit the chronotopic institutions of recovery. In addition, another parameter of the chronotope of the writing program concerns the problem of making meaning. In the writing program, the writer learns to make meaning; outside of the enclosure, one only finds meaninglessness or nothingness. Similarly, meaning-making occurs in the program in *Infinite Jest*; outside of it, in the chronotope of isolation, time slows down as narrative is reduced to zero. Time presses forward only in the space of the program.

Additionally, although the chronotope of the program is encompassing, there exists a problem of community and representation. The program inherently appropriates voices, identities, and communities. In *Infinite Jest*, this appropriation is manifest in the workshop-style exhibition of a minor black character's consciousness in an early section. This section at once excludes the character (Clenette) from the shared language of the novel (discussed in Chapter Two), while allegorically characterizing her only through her relation to the three major chronotopic threads of

the novel: isolation, recovery, and the writing program. Ultimately, the chronotopes of the novel allegorically support the program (the institution) as all encompassing. Indeed, when we examine the novel as an allegory for the writing program, it becomes evident that nothing exists outside of the program. It is useful to conceptualize the all-encompassing program as a Sierpinski gasket—a fractal figure that Wallace once used to describe the form of *Infinite Jest*. This figure maintains its “classic geometric outline, the triangle, but fills it with more and more detail” (“Nothing” 39).<sup>26</sup> An outermost triangle contains an infinite accumulation of inner triangles. The entirety of the novel is contained in this bound infinity of the program: although the novel is filled with endless detail, every detail is within the parameters of the program.

### **The Autopoetic Novelist**

Although I generally hesitate to interpret a novel using biographical details from the author’s life, I agree with Samuel Cohen that one cannot “fully understand *Infinite Jest* without reckoning in what Wallace was feeling and thinking about writing and about himself as a writer at the time he wrote it” (Cohen 59). Wallace’s relationship to his writing and to himself as a writer is crucial to the final form of *Infinite Jest* as a novel. First, the biographical pervades the novel in several places: Hal’s marijuana addiction and junior tennis career reflect Wallace’s own substance use and tennis proficiency. Moreover, Granada House, a recovery house in Brighton where Wallace—armed with a notebook and pen—lived for several months in 1990,

---

<sup>26</sup> For a detailed description of the Sierpinski Gasket and how it relates to the structure of *Infinite Jest*, see McGurl, “The Institution of Nothing: David Foster Wallace in the Program,” 39-40.

became Ennet House in *Infinite Jest*; a supervisor and cook at Granada House named Big Craig inspired the character of Don Gately (Max 141). Furthermore, beyond these character- and setting-based influences, *Infinite Jest* came to fruition out of Wallace's uncertainty about his place in the American literary tradition. The self-reflexivity of the novel demonstrates this uncertainty. McGurl calls this kind of writing "autopoetic": the author is keenly aware of his or her authorship and his or her place in the academy (*Program* 34). Building on this idea, I argue that the effects of autopoetic writing in *Infinite Jest* are chronotopic and allegorical. This autopoiesis delineates, in part, the timespaces of *Infinite Jest*: narrative only moves forward in the programs of Boston AA and Ennet House. Outside of these institutions, there is certain nothingness—a stoppage of time and narrative—that can only be remedied by Coming In and subscribing to the program.

As D.T. Max's research shows, it is difficult to determine when exactly Wallace began to work on *Infinite Jest* as a novel; clearly, however, its earliest sections came into existence in the chronotope of the writing program. Indeed, he began to write fragments of the narrative in 1986, during his time in the Master of Fine Arts (MFA) program at the University of Arizona (Max 159). In an interview with Marshall Boswell, Wallace said, "I started *IJ* or somethin' like it several times. 86, 88, 89. None of it worked or was alive. And then in 91-92 all of a sudden it did" (Max 318n15). Although one can only speculate about what, exactly, made *Infinite Jest* come "alive" for its author, it is clear that Wallace's time in the MFA program at Arizona influenced his relationship to writing and to his own work. Such influence undoubtedly began to take root even earlier—in his childhood as the son of two

college professors and in his stellar undergraduate career at Amherst College (“Nothing” 32). The chronotope of the program, which he inhabited all his life, delimited the narratives that he could produce. In particular, these narratives are highly autopoietic—concerned with their existence, and the author’s existence, in the chronotope of the program.

In the program at Arizona, Wallace found himself at odds with both his fellow students and professors, though for seemingly different reasons. At the time, students at Arizona—and indeed, at most MFA programs in the country—were practicing minimalism. Wallace took issue with the formal elements of minimalism—simple, short sentences—which “gave the reader little experience of what it was like to be assaulted the way in real life their characters would be” (Max 60). A maximalist at his core, Wallace identified more with postmodernists: Pynchon, DeLillo, and (for a time) Barth.<sup>27</sup> His professors, mostly trained at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, disliked minimalism as well; however, they also rejected postmodernism as belonging to “a different era and condition”—its time, they felt, had passed (Max 60). Instead, they favored the realist short story: character-driven with an arc from crisis to epiphany. Needless to say, they were not fans of Wallace’s prose. For example, on Wallace’s story, “Here and There,” his professor, Jonathan Penner, commented: “There’s a fine and moving story here, David...It’s about half this long.” Wallace, who rarely took criticism well, responded by mocking Penner publicly and continuing his experimental work (Max 64).

One might surmise, given the tension between Wallace and others at Arizona, that his work would reject the creative writing program and the institutionalization of

---

<sup>27</sup> More soon on Wallace’s falling out with Barth’s work.

literature. The above distinctions, however, paint an incomplete picture of the chronotope of the writing program. First, though it might seem obvious, it is important to note that Wallace—along with all of his peers at Arizona and nearly all of his contemporaries—attended college. This was not the case for writers in the United States before the post-World War II emergence of higher education; indeed, before 1945, a college education was not perceived as an “obvious, and still less a necessary, starting point for a career as a novelist” (*The Program Era* 30). Though creative writing programs did not explode until the 1960s, the increased emphasis on higher education in the United States from 1945 onward contributed to what Langdon Hammer calls the “culture of the school” (*Program* 30). In this culture, a regulated literary education became the primary means of learning how to write. The emergence of the MFA program only exacerbated this phenomenon. Amassed time in the space of the program, institutionally acknowledged and regulated by a hierarchy of degrees, became the norm for jumpstarting a writing career. This chronotopic, reflexive relationship between writer and institution organized and systematized writing under specific rules (e.g., “write what you know”) and conventions (form).<sup>28</sup> Wallace, for all of his subversion at Arizona, was nevertheless entrenched in this chronotope.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> The emergence of the writing program also added a financial dimension to writing. Beyond the exorbitant costs of undergraduate education, a Master of Fine Arts costs between \$50,000 and \$100,000 (La Berge 24). In La Berge’s words, “Students either enter these programs very rich or leave very poor”; in the Program Era, financial comfort is conducive—a near prerequisite, unless one is willing to accumulate massive amounts of debt—to a writing career (24-25).

<sup>29</sup> Wallace’s later career as a (rather strict) teacher of creative writing emphasizes his entrenchment in the chronotope of the writing program.

Furthermore, Wallace's efforts to distinguish himself from his peers, professors, and other writers actually points to the self-reflexivity of his work—a self-reflexivity that his contemporaries also ascribe to, no matter their formal style, due to their inhabitation of the chronotope of the writing program. McGurl discusses, for example, the struggle in creative writing programs between a “dominant conventional realism” and a “minority radical experimentalism” (*Program 33*). Many programs, such as Iowa and Stanford, remain committed to realism; other programs, such as Johns Hopkins, Brown, and SUNY Buffalo, support experimental writing. Yet, as McGurl explains, this struggle is “classically dialectical”—despite each side's refutation of the other, they nevertheless begin to “interpenetrate” (*Program 33*). A realist work concerning racial difference, for example, requires an “outside” observer of such difference—in the vein of the postmodern, experimentalist technique of reflexivity (*Program 33*). Similarly, a realist, minimalist writer like Raymond Carver would reject the formal experimentalism of a writer like John Barth; despite this formal difference, however, Carver's writing is “nonetheless rife with reflexive consideration of writing as an occupation and existential condition” (*Program 33*). This self-reflexivity or autopoiesis defines Program Era writing of all styles. Wallace, though he rejected minimalism along with the conventions of his professors, was still conditioned by the program to be a highly autopoietic writer—precisely due to his engagement, rejection, and incorporation of a multitude of literary forms.

Before *Infinite Jest*, Wallace's writing underwent a series of autopoietic transformations. His first novel, *The Broom of the System* (1987), was written as one of his undergraduate theses at Amherst College. (His second thesis, in philosophy,

took a mathematical approach to Wittgenstein). *Broom* follows closely Wallace's literary influences.<sup>30</sup> Michiko Kakutani, a *New York Times* literary critic, praised *Broom* while finding it very similar—both thematically and formally—to Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* “from its opening pages onward through its enigmatic ending.” His writing to come, she suggested, would benefit from “the exchange of other writers' voices for a more original vision” (Kakutani).

This quest for, and struggle to find, an “original vision” haunted Wallace in the years after *Broom*'s publication.<sup>31</sup> For example, although he respected John Barth, he believed that Barth's brand of postmodern metafiction—which constantly refers to itself, and reveals itself to the reader, as literature—was ultimately empty (Cohen 70). In his 1993 essay, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” Wallace blasts metafiction as “nothing more than a poignant hybrid of its theoretical foe, realism: if realism called it like it saw it, metafiction simply called it as it saw itself seeing itself see it” (161). Despite his ability to criticize metafiction, however, he struggled to wrest it from his own work. One early attempt, in particular—his 1989 novella, “Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way,” published as part of a story collection, *Girl With Curious Hair*—tries to use metafiction's “technical innovations for different ends” (Cohen 70). In a copyright disclaimer, Wallace designates the novella as “written in the margins” of Barth's “Lost in the Funhouse” (Cohen 70).<sup>32</sup> Indeed, “Westward” shares a number of (intentional) parallels with “Funhouse.” For example, Wallace registers the name of Barth's protagonist, Ambrose, in two ways:

---

<sup>30</sup> Cohen describes *Broom* as a “postmodernist apprentice novel” (68).

<sup>31</sup> To use Harold Bloom's term, Wallace struggled with an “anxiety of influence” (Cohen 74).

<sup>32</sup> Cohen revises Wallace's formulation, calling it a “palimpsest, written over the text of ‘Funhouse,’ from its details to its purpose” (70).

first, with his own protagonist, Mark Nechtr (read: nectar), and second, with the name of Nechtr's creative writing teacher, Professor Ambrose (Cohen 70).<sup>33</sup>

Furthermore, Wallace overuses the formal techniques of Barth's "Funhouse" in an attempt to expose their ultimate futility. As Cohen explains,

It attempts to do this by itself adopting [metafiction's] innovations, constructing its own funhouse, as Barth did, but pushing those techniques until they exhaust themselves, displaying what Wallace believes to be their solipsistic self-regard. (70)

In other words, "Westward" tries to acknowledge and criticize the self-reflexivity of the metafictional form through its own self-reflexivity: what I call (forgive me) a meta-metafiction. Such a task presents a thin line between success and failure. Upon reflection in an interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace called the task a "trap": "maybe 'Westward's' only real value'll be," he continued, "showing the kind of pretentious loops you fall into now if you fuck around with recursion" ("Interview with Larry McCaffery" 142). Recursion, though, is hardly the issue at hand: after all, as discussed in my first and second chapters, recursion (think: annular) plays a vital role in *Infinite Jest*, both structurally and thematically. Rather, the bigger problem seems to be Wallace's self-reflexive emphasis on overcoming the influence of his "literary fathers"—the writers that occupied the chronotope of the writing program before him (Cohen 71).

Pynchon, DeLillo, Barth: "literary fathers" they are, indeed. That Wallace saw himself as potential heir to their particular literary throne tells us plenty about how he saw himself as a writer. Yet, in the wake of "Westward," the self-reflexive pressure to live up to, and exceed, his forebears left the young author in crisis mode. Though I

---

<sup>33</sup> Only a Program Era text could, of course, feature characters indebted to the creative writing program.

can only speculate, and corroborate my speculation with his biographers, it seems that his self-assessed failure as a writer contributed to the breakdown that led to his time in Granada House. From the halfway house, Wallace wrote to his contemporary, Jonathan Franzen:

Right now, I am a pathetic and very confused young man, a failed writer at 28 who is so jealous, so sickly searingly envious of you and [William] Vollmann and Mark Leyner and even David fuckwad Leavitt and any young man who is right now producing pages with which he can live, and even approving them off some base clause of conviction about the enterprise's meaning and end. (Cohen 71)

Here, Wallace indicates his lack of conviction in his writing. While his white, male contemporaries were producing content—and more, found themselves at peace with their writing—he could not seem to find the “meaning and end” of his own work. While this confusion might reflect Wallace’s genuine lack of self-direction in his writing, it also demonstrates his self-assessment of his chronotopic place in American literary history. Wrapped up in the chronotope of the writing program, Wallace could only see his own writing in relation to previous generations.

By “E Unibus Pluram,” it seemed as though Wallace had arrived at a more thorough understanding of what contemporary fiction should look like. Many critics, however—Cohen and A.O. Scott, for example—have pushed back against this conventional reading of the essay, arguing instead that “E Unibus Pluram” remains stuck in the same recursive loop of his earlier work.<sup>34</sup> In the essay, Wallace argues that the nexus of television and postmodern fiction has produced a “self-conscious irony”—and that this irony has led to emptiness in American culture (161). For

---

<sup>34</sup> Cohen, for one, equates the essay to Barth’s postmodern manifesto, “The Literature of Exhaustion,” in terms of its critique of literary expression and advancement of new form (72).

Wallace, American irony implies, “I don’t really mean what I say”; any utterance, therefore, is devoid of meaning (183-84). In response to this crisis, Wallace calls for a group of literary “antirebels”:

Born oglers who dare to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse single-entendre values. Who treat old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and fatigue. (192-93)

Here, Wallace envisions a new literary generation that eschews irony, thus arriving at sincerity and morality—what Lee Konstantinou calls “postirony” (Konstantinou 84).

In response to the double-entendres of postmodern, metafictional irony, Wallace advances “single-entendre values”—a clever turn of phrase, to be sure, yet one that reveals the limitations of his critique (Scott). In his quest for sincerity, he cannot help himself from humorous, ironic wordplay.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, as he attempts in “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way,” Wallace again tries to subvert a self-conscious form through consciousness of that very form. This inability to move away from self-reflexivity highlights the all-encompassing nature of the chronotope of the writing program. Even in subversion, the Program Era writer constantly refers to the program.

### **Producing Meaning**

In the above synthesis, I demonstrate Wallace’s struggle to find his place in literary history—a struggle of timespace that is wrapped up in his self-conscious consideration of his writing as part of an autopoetic, Program Era literary tradition. I argue that his existence in the chronotope of the writing program delimits the

---

<sup>35</sup> As A.O. Scott puts it, Wallace “wants to be at once earnest and ironical, sensitive and cerebral” (Scott).

narrative possibilities of his work. With this context in mind, I now turn to *Infinite Jest*. I argue that *Infinite Jest* showcases a fully realized, chronotopic allegory for the program (regulated institutionalism as a means of human subsistence and fulfillment). If, as Wallace argues in “E Unibus Pluram,” a new generation of “antirebels” must turn to the moral and the sincere (the meaningful), *Infinite Jest* suggests that these “antirebels” should be bound to the program (192). An “antirebel,” the opposite of a rebel, adheres to the rules. Indeed, the novel presents a world as if it were a program; there is nothing outside of the program.

In “The Institution of Nothing,” McGurl advances a compelling way to read Wallace’s work, particularly *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*. While he acknowledges the vigor of Wallace’s critique of American culture, along with the grand forms of *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*, McGurl finds the author “most interesting” as a “strong *student* of the likes of Pynchon, and, more generally, as a highly reflexive inhabitant of the system of educational institutions that indebted him to a certain version of literary postmodernism” (“Nothing” 30).<sup>36</sup> McGurl insists on the categorical concept of “strong *student*,” which labels Wallace as a figure of the Program Era; moreover, it suggests Wallace’s role in the “*normalization*” of

---

<sup>36</sup> Technomodernism is the “certain version” of postmodernism that McGurl references here. A specific kind of postmodernism, technomodernism experiments with narrative form while also incorporating “a relatively new fascination with science, technology, and media” (“Nothing” 32). Although earlier modernism used technology as a means of presenting the “automated” human, a technomodernist writer “suggests that he might actually know how the gadgets work”; that is, the writer deploys technology with a keen sense of its function—in an “intimidating” way, for both Wallace and his maximalist, encyclopedic forebear, Pynchon (“Nothing” 32). Indeed, *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *Infinite Jest* share this technomodernism. Pynchon employs physics and engineering—rocket science, in essence—in a “world of interconnected technical systems” as means of writing about the American citizen, drug abuse, and U.S. culture; Wallace, writing about similar themes, instead used math, “poststructuralist literary theory,” and the “analytical philosophy of language”—the themes of his aforementioned second thesis at Amherst (“Nothing” 33).

institutionalization in the American literary landscape (“Nothing” 31). Building on McGurl’s categorization of Wallace as self-reflexive student, I argue that *Infinite Jest*’s relation to the program is chronotopic—that in the “organizing center” of the chronotope of the writing program, the “knots of narrative are tied and untied” (Bakhtin 250). Allegorically, the writing program oscillates inside and outside of *Infinite Jest*; the recovery programs in the novel carry the reader outside of the text, where the writing program reveals itself—only to bring the reader back into the text with a new sense of the all-encompassing chronotope of the program.

Despite his similarities with Pynchon and other writers, Wallace occupies a distinct place in the Program Era (“Nothing” 33). If other Program Era authors share an “ordinary commitment to institutions,” McGurl sees Wallace as “practicing an existentialism of institutions—which is to say, a commitment to the necessity of institutions in making and maintaining a ‘meaning of life’” (“Nothing” 34). As I discuss above, around the time he was writing *Infinite Jest*, Wallace was arguing for the restoration of the meaningful in American literature. In the novel, we see that the meaningful arises out of institutions: the chronotopic recovery of narrative, as discussed in Chapter Two, occurs in Boston AA and Ennet House. The meaning of life, for Wallace’s characters, must be found in these programs. The recovery of narrative within institutions presupposes the dangers of “Out There,” where solipsism and meaninglessness reign.<sup>37</sup> For Wallace, meaninglessness—nothingness, the end of narrative—has distinct power, and it abounds in *Infinite Jest*, serving as the novel’s central antagonist. The effects are evident in the chronotope of isolation. The fatal

---

<sup>37</sup> McGurl differentiates Wallace’s existentialism from an “ordinary” commitment to institutions through the “profound philosophic import, and even agency, it grants to the meaninglessness outside the door” (“Nothing” 34).

Entertainment, for example, reduces the viewer to nothingness. As Hal descends into psychosis, the reader learns that he has “pretty much nothing at all” inside of him (*IJ* 694). Poor Tony Krause, in withdrawal from heroin in a bathroom stall, “suddenly felt nothing, or rather Nothing, a pre-tornadic stillness of zero sensation, as if he were the very space he occupied” (*IJ* 305). Krause’s feeling of nothingness—self-recognition, perhaps, of his meaninglessness—culminates in his aforementioned seizure on the subway: his body literally collapses as a result, allegorically reflecting the chronotopic collapse of narrative that accompanies meaninglessness.

In terms of meaninglessness, McGurl finds an unlikely parallel to Wallace in a minimalist, Ernest Hemingway—particularly, in Hemingway’s short story, “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” (1933). In the story, an old, deaf man, who recently attempted suicide, sits in a café late at night. When one waiter asks why the old man tried to kill himself, the other waiter responds that he was in despair about “Nothing” (Hemingway 379). Later in the story, that waiter reflects:

It was a nothing he knew too well. It was all a nothing and a man was nothing too. It was only that and light was all it needed and a certain cleanness and order. Some lived in it and never felt it but he knew it all was nada y pues nada y nada y pues nada. Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name thy kingdom nada thy will be nada in nada as it is in nada. Give us this nada our daily nada and nada us our nada as we nada our nadas and nada us not into nada but deliver us from nada; pues nada. Hail nothing full of nothing, nothing is with thee.  
(Hemingway 383)

Here, Hemingway employs verbosity to differentiate nothingness from the orderly, concise minimalism of the café. This verbosity, generally uncharacteristic of Hemingway, abounds in the form of *Infinite Jest*—albeit at a much looser and frequent level. As I discuss in Chapter One, Wallace employs maximalist description to reduce narrative to zero—to nothingness—in the chronotope of isolation,

epitomized by the fatal Entertainment. While Hemingway suggests that refuge can be found in a nearly empty café, Wallace, in turn, “takes Hemingway’s mostly empty existential shelter and fills it with people, giving them rules to follow and things to say to each other” (“Nothing” 35). The institution of Boston AA exemplifies such a shelter; the stakes of sobriety are, indeed, existential for the addict. Ennet House, too, inscribes a similar set of rules for its residents. In other words, only through harshly regulated and moderated subjection to institutions—existence in the chronotope of the program—can the addict avoid meaninglessness and nothingness. Narrative only moves forward for the addict in the timespace of the program. Similarly, we might say, narrative only moves forward for the Program Era novelist in the timespace of the writing program.

We can glean an even better understanding of Wallace’s relation to the chronotope of the program through a brief discussion of *The Pale King*. Wallace’s final, unfinished novel—several hundred pages of which were found in a stack on his desk after his suicide—was assembled by the editor of *Infinite Jest*, Michael Pietsch (*The Pale King* vi). While *Infinite Jest* offers a dual-institution apparatus (Boston AA and Ennet House), *The Pale King* provides one: the Internal Revenue Service.<sup>38</sup> While presumably any reader in the United States would be familiar with, and probably disgruntled by, the IRS, Wallace takes the reader inside the institution in order to show its societal value. Interestingly, *The Pale King* has a “character-system” without a protagonist, to use Alex Woloch’s formulation (Woloch 14). Instead, the characters—all of whom are employees of the IRS regional headquarters in Peoria,

---

<sup>38</sup> As McGurl notes, the IRS’ institutional discipline works in two directions: “inward, toward its employees, and outward to the nation from which it collects money” (“Nothing” 47).

Illinois—share the spotlight. Many of the employees, for example, sit in front of a camera and share their experience at the IRS in an alleged PR campaign to “humanize, demystify the Service, help citizens understand how hard and important their job is. How much at stake” (*The Pale King* 100). Even the one character we might be tempted to read as the protagonist—due to his name, David Wallace—does not live up to that expectation (“Nothing” 48). Wallace’s notes on the novel, compiled in an appendix, affirm that even a finished version would have eschewed this potential protagonist: “Being individual vs. being part of larger things—paying taxes, being ‘lone gun’ in IRS vs. team player. David Wallace disappears 100 pp in...David Wallace disappears—becomes creature of the system” (*The Pale King* 546). These sentences do not suggest a loss of agency at the hands of the IRS; rather, to become a “creature of the system” is to be “part of larger things”—to become meaningful through existence in a chronotopic program. In this context, the programs of Boston AA, Ennet House, and the IRS become allegories for the creative writing program, which Wallace’s own writing inhabits spatiotemporally. In other words, the novel’s institutions are the non-literary version of the literary, while the literary is the aesthetic form of the institutions.

### **Conservatism and Fetishization**

*Infinite Jest*’s allegorical relation to the chronotope of the writing program reveals Wallace’s brand of conservatism. By conservatism, I mean that his writing offers conventional, institutional responses to societal problems. In other words, the writing program is an allegory for the institutional program as a social category. The

novel, for example, raises valuable questions about American society through the chronotope of isolation, as discussed in Chapter One; however, the response to those questions—steeped in institutional reverence, as discussed in Chapter Two—falls flat.<sup>39</sup> Put differently, the novel offers a chronotopic, utopian response to the dystopian chronotopes of the world it presents—both of which are intangible. Indeed, the best response to a consumer-capitalist, drug-addled, entertainment-obsessed America that the novel can offer is a community in which characters are tamed through their immersion in the chronotope of recovery—given rules to follow and regulated by a specific dialect in a delimited timespace. Although the novel sees the dystopian problems as systemic, they manifest themselves on the level of the individual (solipsism); the novel’s response, too, is systemic, but in its understanding of agency and community as only achievable through programmatic regulation. Gately, for example, becomes the hero of the novel through his own institutional commitment—both by defending the institution of Ennet House and by embodying the language game of AA as he fights through the pain of his wound and his urge to accept narcotics (“Nothing” 38). Allegorically, Gately exemplifies the sort of “antirebel” that Wallace envisioned for a generation of writers: a moral, sincere, sentimental human who (re)claims control of his own narrative by following a prescribed program over time. Here, we again see that the chronotope of recovery as depicted in *Infinite Jest* reflects the chronotope of the writing program.

---

<sup>39</sup> McGurl offers a particularly scathing reading of Wallace’s response to disorder. He writes: Clinging to institutional order, clinging for dear life, Wallace’s commitment is rather to a conception of therapeutic community in which what might have become political questions—and, by implication, motives for political contestation—are obediently dissolved into a series of individual ethical choices. (“Nothing” 36).

*Infinite Jest* presents an inner world whose inhabitants are protected by the chronotopic parameters of institutions—and it is tempting to read this view as a celebration of people existing with one another and navigating the world, despite the limitations of the framework. In this reading, we see Wallace’s work at its most sincere and moral, reflecting a belief in the human capacity for goodness. Despite this sincerity, however, the chronotopes of the novel actually fetishize characters who embody any kind of difference—specifically, racial Others.<sup>40</sup> Here, I draw a distinction between the overwhelming whiteness of the novel’s character-system and its representations of race. The whiteness of the character system reflects a certain kind of racial exclusion; however, I see this as of secondary importance to the novel’s fetishization of dialect. To portray mostly white characters is one thing; to represent minor black characters through fetishization of language is more problematic in its literary implications and effects.

Most clearly, we see the fetishization of language in an early section narrated by Clenette, a black woman in Ennet House who has a facilities job at E.T.A. Clenette is a minor character in *Infinite Jest*; she is scarcely represented in the discourse of the novel, in effect disappearing for several hundred pages before

---

<sup>40</sup> Wallace addresses otherness in *Infinite Jest* much like his technomodernist predecessors. In *The Program Era*, McGurl calls this phenomenon “technicity”: “even the ‘whitest’ technomodernism can function as a discourse of difference, producing a symbolic placeholder for a paradoxically non-ethnic ethnicity” (*Program* 62). As Toni Morrison knows about the black experience in the United States, McGurl argues, Pynchon (as discussed in note 36) knows about physics, thermodynamics, and engineering (*Program* 62). In the same vein, Wallace knows about mathematical systems and technology. Difference, for the technomodernist, is achieved through the self-reflexive acknowledgement of himself as a “tech-science wienie”—an identity only made possible by the “culture of the school,” by institutionalization (*IJ* 154; “Nothing” 44). As McGurl puts it, technicity is exposed as “pale substitute” for the “richly emotionally resonant communities and traditions” of Philip Roth or Morrison (“Nothing” 44).

reemerging at a critical narrative juncture. I read this fetishization as a problem of the chronotope of the writing program. Given the form of this section, it is not surprising that Wallace had initially written it as a character sketch for an MFA class at Arizona (Max 318n16). To be clear: this section of *Infinite Jest* actually originated in the writing workshop. While the version that appears in *Infinite Jest* includes a few narrative strands that give it relevance to the rest of the novel, it nevertheless reads like the sketch that it originally was:

Wardine say her momma aint treat her right. Reginald he come round to my blacktop at my building where me and Delores Epps jump double dutch and he say, Clenette, Wardine be down at my crib cry say her momma aint treat her right, and I go on with Reginald to his building where he live at, and Wardine be sit deep far back in a closet in Reginald crib, and she be cry. (*IJ* 37)

In this stream of consciousness narration, we see the objectification of a black dialect, but also of a (perceived) black consciousness. In contrast to most of the novel, a narrator does not intervene or mediate here, either in the discourse or in endnotes.<sup>41</sup> Instead, this section is merely represented thought—one of few stream of consciousness accounts in the novel. While the novel presents a shared language of community in the chronotope of recovery, as I argue in Chapter Two, this dialect seems to be outside of that framework. Allegorically, however, it reflects the chronotope of the writing program. First, the fetishization or commodification of different kinds of language—similar to how students at E.T.A. treat language—is an

---

<sup>41</sup> We might contrast this lack of mediation with another passage in the text relating to race. In free indirect discourse, Gately uses the word “nigger”; immediately, the reader is drawn to an apologetic footnote that explains, “his private term of blacks is *niggers*, which is unfortunately still all he knows” (*IJ* 1026n141). This detail complicates the reading of Gately as hero; however, its relegation to an endnote—even in a novel heavily reliant on endnotes—suggests its peripheral importance to Gately’s overall heroism. Moreover, in contrast with Clenette’s narration, Gately’s section includes an elaboration on his discourse by a mediator.

effect of the writing program. Although Wallace raised the problem of doing a “sampler on rap” in his book, *Signifying Rappers: Rap and Race in the Urban Present* (1990), Clenette’s narration reads like an exhibitionist “sampler” on black consciousness, written in and for an institutional setting (*Signifying Rappers* 20).

Further, Clenette, as a minor in the character-system of *Infinite Jest*, becomes allegorical in her relation to the major chronotopes of the novel: isolation, institutional recovery, and the writing program.<sup>42</sup> First, Clenette’s work at E.T.A. links her to the fatal Entertainment. The narration implies that she brings a cartridge of the Entertainment from E.T.A. to Ennet House, risking the dissemination of the fatal film inside the walls of the institution: “Clenette H. had brung in this whole humongous shitload of cartridges she said they were getting ready to throw in the dumpster up at the swank tennis school up the hill” (*IJ* 825). Marathe, during his visit to Ennet House (pretending to be an addict to gain information about Joelle) gathers that there “were of possibility real cartridges of the Entertainment” in the pile that Clenette has brought (*IJ* 752). Clenette, then, serves as the vector by which the Entertainment moves from E.T.A. to Ennet House—from Out There to inside the chronotope of recovery. Though subordinated in the discourse as a cleaner, Clenette allegorically embodies the possibility of collapse. Her dialect, decidedly outside of the shared language inherent to the chronotope of recovery, becomes a marker of difference that leads to negative narrative consequences. At the same time, however, Clenette still inhabits the chronotope of the writing program precisely as a character

---

<sup>42</sup> In *The One Vs. The Many*, Woloch explains that minor characters become allegorical through their relation to a protagonist, “who stands at the center of the text’s symbolic structure” (18). For *Infinite Jest*, it might be said that the program, rather than a specific protagonist, stands at the center: the symbolic structure of the novel revolves around the program.

sketch. Although her dialect does not fit into the shared language of recovery, it does exemplify the chronotope of the writing program. Allegorically, she is just another facet of the program—a consciousness tried on, tweaked, and appropriated over time in the space of the workshop.

*Infinite Jest* is a program novel in every aspect. In this chapter, I sustain the program in *Infinite Jest* as a literary problem. The program encompasses the novel so entirely that it becomes, in effect, the central—the only—symbolic structure of the novel. The world of the novel wholly exists within the program. Nothing exists outside of the program, even chronotopes of isolation—these timespaces reflexively refer to the chronotopes of recovery and of the writing program (which themselves are contained within an overarching chronotope of the program). Meaning is made within the chronotope of recovery through juxtaposition with nothingness. Further, the novel employs a workshop-style fetishization of language that brings the chronotope of the writing program to the forefront. Ultimately, the chronotope of the writing program feeds back through an all-encompassing, existential chronotope of the program. Through Clenette, we see the interconnectedness of *Infinite Jest*'s major kinds of chronotopes. In particular, we see that everything inside the novel exists only within the chronotope of the writing program—and that program writing is, in turn, an allegory for the program (the institution).

## Conclusion

### Bound Infinity

Schttit...nevertheless seemed to know what Hopman and van der Meer and Bollettieri seemed not to know: that locating beauty and art and magic and improvement and keys to excellence and victory in the prolix flux of match play...was a matter not of reduction at all, but—perversely—of expansion, the aleatory flutter of uncontrolled, metastatic growth—each well-shot ball admitting of  $n$  possible responses,  $n^2$  possible responses to those responses, and on into what Incandenza would articulate to anyone who shared both his backgrounds as a Cantorian continuum of infinities of possible move and response, Cantorian and beautiful because *infoliating*, *contained*, this diagnate infinity of infinities of choice and execution, mathematically uncontrolled but humanly *contained*, bounded by the talent and imagination of self and opponent, bent in on itself by the containing boundaries of skill and imagination that brought one player finally down, that...made it, finally, a game, these boundaries of self.

—David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*

So yo then man what's *your* story?

—David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*

### Regularity, Not Banality

As I have demonstrated throughout my thesis, the chronotopes of *Infinite Jest* set the boundaries for the thematic and formal possibilities of the novel. In the first chapter, I defined the chronotope of isolation in the world of the novel. I examined the thematic consequences of this chronotope in the dystopian world; moreover, I pinpointed its implications in the descriptive form. In the second chapter, I defined the chronotope of recovery in *Infinite Jest*. I argued that the timespaces of Boston AA and Ennet House serve as binding commonalities through which characters can recover a certain kind of regulated, meaningful narrative together. In the third chapter, I examined the allegorical relation between the chronotope of recovery and the chronotope of the writing program. The latter chronotope, I argued, permeates the novel: the writing program delineates the narrative of *Infinite Jest*, from a micro (at the sentence level) to a macro (at the level of theme and plot) span. Finally, I argued

that allegorically, the chronotope of the writing program recursively loops back into an overarching chronotope of the program. This chronotope, I resolved, ties together all three chronotopes (isolation, recovery, the writing program) into a whole. Effectively, the chronotope of the program functions within the novel (for the narrative itself) and outside of it (both for the institutionally bound author and, moreover, for the reader).<sup>43</sup> In this light, the question posed at the end of the novel's opening episode (my second epigraph above)—“So yo then man what's *your* story?”—becomes a communal question, one that can be asked of any character in the novel, of the author, or of the reader.

In closing, I reaffirm my argument that *Infinite Jest* is most compelling in its regularity. Once more, I clarify that by regularity, I do not mean banality. As I mentioned in the third chapter, Wallace described the shape of the novel as a Sierpinski Gasket: a geometrical figure that maintains the boundaries of an outer triangle, but is filled with infinite inner triangles. In relation to my argument about chronotopes, I see the outermost triangle as the chronotope of the program; everything is bound, regulated, and organized within it. I want to clarify, however, that this regularity holds within it an infinite wellspring of meaning—uncovering the annular search for meaning in the infinite, yet bound together, versions of human life—that chronotopically reflects Wallace's wisdom, sincerity, and authenticity. Consider, for example, the first epigraph to my conclusion. In this early part of *Infinite Jest*, E.T.A. tennis coach, Gerhardt Schtitt, describes how in tennis, he locates “beauty and art and magic and improvement and keys to excellence and victory” not through reduction, but expansion. This expansion of possibility, however, is

---

<sup>43</sup> Or, indeed, for the thesis writer.

“Cantorian and beautiful because *infoliating*, *contained*...mathematically uncontrolled but humanly *contained*” (*IJ* 82). The tennis player controls the infinite possibilities with her “skill and imagination”—her ability to stroke and guide the ball with artful, creative precision to a place within the boundaries of the game. Replacing the tennis player with Wallace, and the game of tennis with the chronotope of the program, I see *Infinite Jest* as exploring the infinite permutations of humanity in sprawling detail, all within the regularity of the program. *Infinite Jest*, I conclude, becomes beautiful, meaningful, and compelling precisely through its chronotopic regularity—as a “humanly *contained*” text that uncovers our binding commonalities.

## **Bibliography**

### **Archive Collections: Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin**

David Foster Wallace Papers  
Don DeLillo Papers  
Little, Brown and Company Collection of David Foster Wallace

### **Works by David Foster Wallace**

Wallace, David Foster. "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13.2 (1993): 151-94. Print.  
———. *Infinite Jest: A Novel*. Back Bay 10th anniversary pbk. New York: Back Bay Books, 2006. Print.  
———. *The Pale King*. Boston: Little, Brown, 2011. Print.  
Wallace, David Foster, and Mark Costello. *Signifying Rappers: Rap and Race in the Urban Present*. Ecco Press, 1990. Print.

### **Secondary and Critical Sources**

Bakhtin, M.M. "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel." *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Edited by Michael Holquist. Translated by Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981. Print.  
Berge, Leigh Claire La. *Scandals and Abstraction: Financial Fiction of the Long 1980s*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. Print.  
Burn, Stephen J. *David Foster Wallace's "Infinite Jest": A Reader's Guide*. Continuum, 2012. Print.  
Cohen, Samuel. "To Wish to Try to Sing to the Next Generation: *Infinite Jest's* History." In *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*. Edited by Lee Konstantinou and Samuel Cohen. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012. Print.  
Dowling, William C., and Robert H. Bell. *A Reader's Companion to "Infinite Jest."* Xlibris, 2005. Print.  
Hemingway, Ernest. "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place." In *The Short Stories*. New York: Scribner, 2003.  
Holl, Rainer. *The Narrative Game: The Reading of David Foster Wallace's "Infinite Jest" as Play*. Anchor Academic Publishing, 2013. Web. Accessed December 15, 2016.

- Hungerford, Amy. *Making Literature Now*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016. Print.
- Kakutani, Michiko. "Books of the Times; Life in Cleveland, 1990." *The New York Times*. December 27, 1986. Web. Accessed March 30, 2017.
- Konstantinou, Lee. "No Bull: David Foster Wallace and Postironic Belief." In *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*. Edited by Lee Konstantinou and Samuel Cohen. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012. Print.
- Lukács, Georg. "Narrate or Describe?" In *Writer & Critic and Other Essays*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1936. Print.
- Max, D.T. *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace*. New York: Viking, 2012. Print.
- McGurl, Mark. "The Institution of Nothing: David Foster Wallace in the Program." *Boundary 2: Duke University Press* 41.3 (2014): 27-52. Print.
- . *The Program Era*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009. Print.
- Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith. *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. New York: Methuen, 1983. Print.
- Scott, A.O. "The Panic of Influence." *The New York Review of Books* (2000). Web. Accessed March 28, 2017.
- Severs, Jeffrey. *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books: Fictions of Value*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017. Print.
- Spacks, Patricia Meyer. *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. Print.
- Wallace, David Foster. "An Interview with Larry McCaffery." *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13.2 (1993): 127-50. Print.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001. Print.
- Woloch, Alex. *The One Vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998. Print.