

INFINITE JEST, POSTMODERNISM, AND IRONY:

A GUIDE TO HAPPINESS IN OUR

CONTEMPORARY AGE

by

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To T—

One of the loveliest of us human beings.

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ABSTRACT

I examine David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, looking at the ways in which it speaks to our current cultural moment. I posit that Wallace, in the novel, is able to use his story to comment on the ground-clearing nature of irony, technological abstraction, and post-postmodernism, and suggest that the post-postmodern future makes individuals catatonic. I also argue that Wallace predicted many of the ironic features of post-postmodernism because he lived and wrote in a generation that came after postmodernism. Wallace identifies TV as quintessentially post-postmodern, where meaning is neutralized through a Fredric Jameson's idea of pastiche—a kind of irony that only seeks to reference itself.

The opening scene of *Infinite Jest* shows a young man unable to speak to adults, and unable to extoll his virtues. Hal, the main character in the scene, loses his ability to speak. And if readers take Hal's metaphorical catatonia a step farther, they will see a Hal representative of a millennial generation, also unable to speak. Hal is a post-postmodern child, buried by a culture of irony and Jameson's pastiche and depthlessness, where diatribes on metaphysical aboutness are more important than the meaning of things themselves. Wallace defines this problem, in the novel, as a central obsession and avoidance of the cultural feeling of "anhedonia," the radical abstracting of things that were once full of meaning of affective content. Soren Kierkegaard also defines this problem as "infinite absolute negativity," where individuals can become purely ironic and absent from society, gaining a kind of perverse negative freedom. On the other hand, the novel, I argue, not only posits the tyranny of this newfound perverse freedom in Western culture, but also laments the backlash of overt sincerity that is equally oppressive, represented by the AA parts of the novel. In end, I argue Wallace's novel laments the fact that we are losing something essential human when it comes to making our own choices about what to believe in, in our contemporary age.

Infinite Jest, by David Foster Wallace, might just be the most significant American novel to come along in the last thirty years. The novel is a giant undertaking by the late Wallace, as it includes more than a hundred pages of endnotes, an overwhelming cast of characters and locations, and nearly a thousand pages of actual front to back text. The novel includes math equations, first and third person narration, character essays, diatribes by Wallace himself, film scripts, and an index of over a hundred fictional films (with near senseless data, like run-times, color, sound, inventory numbering, etc.). Yet, despite all this self-aware gimmickry, the novel itself has come to be known as Wallace's most sincere work, a narrative commenting on the nature of humanity, what it means to have spirituality, and how to find happiness in our troubled Western society. In many ways, Wallace wrote a guide to happiness for particular problems he saw on the horizon for American individuals.¹ Wallace had created a very complex and definite cultural vision. But some of his commentary on culture got buried in what he called in an interview with David Lipsky, published in *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself*: "...this kind of miasma of hype around the book, that feeds on itself."² Little, Brown and Company, the publisher, had marketed the book and Wallace's distinct bandana wearing character as an image worth watching.³ Wallace stated in the same interview: "[I] have written a book about how seductive image is, and how very many ways there are to get seduced off any

1. Wallace wrote *Infinite Jest* about and for Americans, as he saw the problems of the novel particular to American sensibilities. However, it should be noted that these problems are present elsewhere in the world (particularly in Western societies with access to a large amount of readily available entertainment). I will be using the term "U.S. culture" and "American culture" from here on forward for ease of writing, even though I am well aware of the far reaching implications of the issues that Wallace was addressing.

2. David Lipsky, *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip With David Foster Wallace*, (New York: Broadway Books, 2010), 186.

3. *Ibid.*, 26-28.

kind of meaningful path, because of the way the culture is now. But what if, you know, what if I became this grotesque parody of just what the book is about?"⁴ Regardless, Wallace became a runaway success for an educated reader base. Since then a scholarship has emerged out of novel. Articles range from the analysis of Wallace's use of the complexities of narrative performance in *Infinite Jest*,⁵ to an analysis of entertainment as understood by Wallace's plot devices.⁶ But there was always a fear that because of marketing and hype, that real sincere criticism would fall by the wayside. Despite some academic attention, many of the novel's themes have been left relatively untouched. Some of this has to do with the complexity of the novel itself, and another part of it has to do with the fact that so few essays exist that explicate and unpack the novel with an eye for a larger scope. But if taken seriously, Wallace was able to craft a rare thing—a novel of phenomenal depth and complexity, and a work of art which reflects on the realities of our age, future ages, and the ever-looming question of real long-term happiness in a society that seems to entice every desire. And it is my goal in this essay to take some of these themes in the novel, about happiness, irony, postmodernism, and explicate them in a way that will not only give background and academic analysis, but also a kind of potential trajectory about the state of our world post-*Infinite Jest*.

What is interesting to note about the novel is that it was published in 1996 and the events in the novel are set roughly in present time. The characters in the novel recognize subsidized time, where each chronological year after the nineties has been sold to corporations. So in the

4. Ibid., 191.

5. Frank Louis Cioffi, "'An Anguish Become Thing': Narrative as Performance in David Foster Wallace's 'Infinite Jest,'" *Narrative*, 8 no. 2 (2000), 161-181.

6. Phillip Sayers, "Representing Entertainment(s) In *Infinite Jest*," *Studies in the Novel*, 44 no. 3 (2012), 346-363.

novel, characters refer to years dedicated to their commercial sponsors, such as Year of Dairy Products from the American Heartland, or Year of the Trial-Size Dove Bar.⁷ In other words, Wallace writes about my millennial generation and the current youth U.S. culture. Wallace stated in the Lipsky interview: "...I believe it's 2009, but don't quote me [apologies to Wallace]. You know, I wanted it set in just enough so our kids would be in adolescence."⁸ The novel depicts a U.S. culture (or O.N.A.N: U.S. united with Mexico and Canada) as a post-postmodern climate, complete with a Netflix-like Television (film-cartage distribution) and what seems to be an endless supply of entertainment. This is a shockingly similar climate to current U.S. culture. Like many of the great science-fiction writers, Wallace made an accurate prediction about the future. Although Wallace's predictions contain their own characteristic 1990's idiosyncrasy, his predictions are nonetheless unique; they aren't predictions centered around scientific advancement, or authorial government control, but rather around growing societal trends, the results of what was hip, and the way people consumed entertainment. Wallace treated these issues with utmost scrupulousness and complexity, delivering a novel with not only giant predictions, but also a novel containing the sensitivity to detail and resonating nuance that most overtly hyperbolic science-fiction loses sight of. Wallace, writing for over five years, delivers a novel that is not a two-dimensional prediction about totalitarian governments, or the horrors of technology, but about how we, as U.S. citizens, as a society entering a new millennium, are our own worst enemies through our own consumption of entertainment and our use of irony. As David P. Rando's "David Foster Wallace and Lovelessness," recognizes, Wallace's emotional

7. David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, (New York: Bay Back Books, 2006), 223. Wallace doesn't make it explicitly clear, but I believe this dating system started on or a year after the year 2000. So the final year in the novel, Year of Glad, the ninth year, is either 2009 or 2008.

8. Lipsky, *Although of Course*, 56.

opposition to irony has remained generally unrecognized by his critics.⁹ Rando writes, “what Wallace does best is... dramatize as vividly and with as much pathos as anybody before him the struggle and failure to differentiate gooey sentiment from the sentiment of irony.”¹⁰ And so it is a goal here to illuminate and dissect this struggle with sentiment and irony in Wallace’s novel.

Before one can get to the idea of irony, which Wallace in many articles and in his novel was keen on talking about, I think it is critical to understand some of the nuances of postmodernity. Wallace grew up in a generation that was caught in the midst of growing postmodern fervor and a rising sense of pop culture hovering around the television. Born in 1962, Wallace became culturally aware, wrote a philosophy thesis, graduated college, published his first novel, and received a MacArthur Fellowship award, all after the 1960s counter-cultural revolution.¹¹

What I am conveying, is that not only did Wallace grow up with the sensibilities of a generation (or two) prior to mine, but he also grew up with the sensibilities of a generation established in postmodernity, or a cultural milieu already laden with presumptions about the roles of image fiction, television, and a self-conscious negativity towards media, a culture and Western world where ironic modes ruled supreme, where the euphoria for the image of something was far more important than what it actually was. It was a world dominated by the iconic and saturated television screen; and unlike the modernist era that came before, it was a world that offered no predictions about the growing trends of a capital world—no optimism, or alienating pessimism—

9. David P. Rando, “David Foster Wallace and Lovelessness,” *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 59 no. 4 (2013): 576.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Lipsky, *Although of Course*, 3-4.

because in the postmodern TV-based reality, after the remains of intellectual meta-narrative analysis got stowed away in academic culture, a certain kind of ironic detachment in popular culture arrived. By the time Wallace started writing, he lived largely in a culture with this growing ambivalence towards modernism and culture itself. Moreover, the postmodern moment Wallace engaged in came after the great cultural revolution of the 1960s in the U.S. In this postmodern cultural moment, he was one of the voices to speak of and measure this culture after its revolution. Postmodernity represented a society no longer unified around historical homogeneity or aesthetic styles, like modernism, but instead carried around the ideal that humanity was at the end of time and that the only thing left to uncover was the eclectic combination of culture that seemed to be going nowhere at all.¹² Although Wallace was born in the 1960s, he was one of the first of his generation to really see the after-effects of early postmodernity and the counter-cultural movement. That is to say, he was able to reflexively look back upon postmodernism and critique it from a more generationally removed perspective.

For Wallace and others, postmodernity presented some unforeseen problems when it came to how it affected American culture. If the 1960s represented a spiritual change in culture, its people, and literature, then we must ask—what about the world changed so radically?¹³ In “E Unibus Pluram” this is one of the questions Wallace attempts to answer.¹⁴ In the essay, originally

12. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), xv.

13. I think spirit (not necessarily religious) is probably the best word to describe the changes in a particular age that reflects on how a people perceive their world around them. A change in perception means a change in a people’s spirit.

14. David Foster Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never do Again*, (New York: Back Bay Books, 1998), 21-82.

published in 1991, Wallace discusses a generational connection between postmodernism and TV culture:

The emergence of something called Metafiction in the American '60s was hailed by academic critics as a radical aesthetic, a whole new literary form, literature unshackled from the cultural cinctures of mimetic narrative and free to plunge into reflexivity and self-conscious meditations on aboutness. Radical it may have been, but thinking that postmodern Metafiction evolved unconscious of prior changes in readerly taste is about as innocent as thinking that all those college students we saw on vision protesting the Vietnam war were protesting only because they hated the Vietnam war.... This high-cultural postmodern genre, in other words, was deeply informed by the emergence of television and the metastasis of self-conscious watching. And (I claim) American fiction remains deeply informed by television... especially those strains of fiction with roots in postmodernism....¹⁵

Following Wallace's logic, readers can conceive of postmodernity not only as some intellectual or academic movement (perhaps also as some sort of elite evolution of thoughtful art forms), but also a common societal reaction to changing values. There was this new medium of constant image and sound laying about in nearly every American home to contend with. And Wallace grew up with it. Wallace understood what it was. Metafiction, postmodernity, Image fiction, were all various reactions to this new way of seeing, understanding, cutting-up, dissecting, bisecting, and processing culture through the TV. As Wallace argues and proves, time and time again, TV equals postmodernity—the radical new aesthetic that shrugged off modernism.

Of course, this connection between TV and postmodernity is not entirely unique to Wallace's thinking. Many others have suggested a similar rationale looking back. Peter Schneck, in "Image Fictions: Literature, Television, and the End(s) of Irony" also posits a similar connection. He writes:

The new media sensibility of the Sixties encouraged new concepts of cultural experience as a 'mixed affair,' where reality and representation flowed freely into each other. But only when new modes of experience eventually were complemented with new concepts

15. Ibid., 34.

of authority that no longer insisted on the centrality of author and work but, rather, on that of ‘production,’ ‘text,’ and ‘the reader’ most broadly defined, was television able to come into its own as the central authority of postmodern culture. The ‘death of the author’ thus also proved to be highly productive metaphor for a new understanding of cultural products that relied on images rather than words to transmit their messages.¹⁶

Schneck thinks that all these ideas that are commonly associated with postmodernism and its aesthetic character, like the production of the text, the fragmentation of the subject, what he also calls a culturally ‘mixed affair,’ free flowing representation of objects and subjects, and of course the ‘death of the author,’ were all facets of the character of TV. Certainly, with TV’s shifting nature, its channel-surfing mode of user operation, and with its ability to place emphasis on what Wallace called the “watchableness” within our culture, readers may start to see how TV comes to challenge a traditional hegemony of culture and literature.¹⁷ TV, with its authorless streaming of image and voice, seems to be the archetype of the fragmentation of the subject, and the ‘mixed affair’ so rightly of interest to postmodernists. If modernism ever had a kind of universality to it, then postmodernity, along with TV, brought that kind of faith to its knees and replaced such a faith in the universal with a faith made of a river of images caught in a glass tube.

To better explain this phenomenon, I want to look at a part of Fredric Jameson’s *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, where in the introduction Jameson points out that the safest way to grasp postmodernism is to think of a culture caught in an age that has forgotten how to think historically.¹⁸ Postmodernism is an aesthetic, a cultural milieu, a

16. Peter Schneck, “Image Fictions: Literature, Television, and the End(s) of Irony,” *American Studies*, 46 no. 3 (2001), 417.

17. Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram,” 26. Wallace spent considerable time writing about the type of human beings raised in a society to self-consciously know and be watched without seeming watched.

18. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, ix.

philosophy and grand-narrative, that asks how do we do what we do?—but in a particular way that implies ruptures and subtle shifts, rather than a central path or linear form to the structure of grand meta-narratives.¹⁹ And yet, such thinking is also problematic because postmodernism doesn't submit to this historical expression of grand-narratives despite, to some extent, being one. Postmodernism rejects the idea that one can trace a series of data points to a definite line or form. Postmodernism is a cultural perspective, that, like the TV, places an almost surreal emphasis on the image outside of time or place. Jameson argues that modernism thought compulsively about the New, and tried to watch that which was coming into being; and that Modernists thought about the subject, or the thing itself, but the postmodern, "...[merely] look[ed] for breaks, for events rather than new worlds, for the telltale instant after which it [the thing] is no longer the same...."²⁰ In other words, the postmodern places a supreme emphasis on the image of the thing rather than the essence or history of the thing itself. The meta-narrative (the story we tell ourselves above all other stories) has more to do with the sensory details, rather than defining that New thing or having it exist in more spiritual or historical terms. It is emphasized in the postmodern analysis, with the postmodern reader, literature does its best to portray events, scenes, and zones of contact, but is not didactic and cannot be mined for any kind of universal values or history. In a way, postmodernism places a supreme emphasis on the most present kind of analysis. The modernists, as Jameson sees it, were interested in general tendency, and they thought about the thing itself in the most utopian and essential way.²¹ Even if the

19. Meta-narratives are often traditionally ideas associated with some form of spirituality: God, religion, good & evil, history, etc.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

modernists were pessimistic, there was at least some kind of rightful blame, grand-narrative of misguidance, and perhaps a solution at hand. But the postmodern lived in the nonessential moment, the present, refusing to acknowledge any greater grand-narrative as anything more than a present construction of the present moment, much like the operation of a user surfing TV channels.

Another way of looking at the phenomenon, that perhaps more closely ties it to the way TV works, is to view the postmodern as a kind of “schizophrenic” aesthetic.²² Jameson writes about the schizophrenic as being critical to the aesthetic of the postmodern with its “meaning effect,” which is its own kind of surface-level superficiality.²³ In Jacques Lacan’s terms, Jameson writes of this “meaning effect,” stating that it is the way a culture produces meaning, in that, “[m]eaning [is] generated by the movement from signifier to signifier.”²⁴ The signifier to signifier connections made in Western culture eliminate a need for history, or any other narrative outside of a more momentary stimulation. Living in this kind of nonessential moment is precisely what TV illustrates and gives to its watchers. Individuals no longer see the world as a kind of universal, but rather as a fragmentation or cityscape of random lights and signals, channels, and random sound-bites of information that have no unified principle. Rather, these eclectic elements only serve an obsession with stimulation: to get you to go, to do, to verb, without context (to follow a rhythm without any rhyme). Jameson argues that postmodern culture embraces this kind of schizophrenic treatment of the sign and signifier.²⁵ No longer is any faith

22. Ibid., 26.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid., 27-29.

placed in the signifier to signified connection. Rather meaning is this “meaning effect” (or what would appear to be meaning from its movements alone), and merely the proliferation of signifiers that don’t narrow one into any meaning, but perhaps all meanings at once, simultaneously, without direction, with unlimited, unrestricted, unrestrained freedom that means everything and nothing all at once. One sign leads to another and another, and no greater signified things can be found amongst the mess of signifiers generating more signifiers. Thoughtless capitalism: we buy, we consume, reflexively, with only the slightest provocation. We are here, we are present, and that is simply what matters most. Another way to represent this is in Jameson’s notion of the pastiche, where there is a kind of disappearance of the subject.²⁶ Pastiche no longer deals with the modernist notion of parody, based on defining the subject through opposition of another subject, but rather merely through the referencing of culture for its own sake.²⁷ In a way, postmodernism, using the pastiche is able to hollow out the meaning of things and make them idle signifiers without the signified connection. TV and pop culture does this kind of eclectic mash-up all the time.

Wallace demonstrates this long form in his essay with an example from the *St. Elsewhere* TV show, wherein *St. Elsewhere* followed the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*’s syndication, and dealt with a patient who held the delusional belief that he was Mary Richard from *Mary Tyler Moore*.²⁸ It turns out in the episode’s resolution that the patient was just a lonely person without an identity, who says in the episode’s conclusion, “...figured it was better to believe I was a TV

26. Ibid., 16.

27. Ibid.

28. Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram,” 30-32.

character than not to believe I was anybody.”²⁹ The episode ends with a freeze-framed airborne hat—mimicking *Mary Tyler Moore*.³⁰ It’s a simple throwaway ploy at first glance, but the point Wallace is trying to make is that there is something overtly hollow about this kind of use of irony. The reference certainly isn’t parody, it’s more of a homage akin to how pastiche works. Unlike parody, such a reference seeks to say nothing about its source material, other than to signify it. These kinds of TV and popular references as a larger concept, as a phenomenon that defines how culture works and uses irony, falls in line with Jameson’s idea of pastiche. It is culture for culture’s own sake. Signifiers that have no meaningful signified other than: ‘did you get it?’ Such pastiche is clever, and academically one could argue it helps viewers reckon with meta-narratives, but to what end?—it is hard to say. Rather, perhaps, it serves as entertainment, as a subjectless, author-less, and self-reflective, empty entertainment that is as visceral and cyclically empty as the schizophrenic experience without reality.

Wallace was able to explain this cultural phenomenon in an especially concrete way with the example of television as a medium, or in other words, he frequently shows readers how television is quintessentially postmodern. Television is needlessly self-reflexive, passive, subjectless, author-less, and, of course, schizophrenic. As Wallace writes in “E Unibus Pluram”:

The best TV of the last five years has been about ironic self-reference like no previous species of postmodern art could ever have dreamed of. The colors of MTV videos, blue-black and lambently flickered, are the colors of television. Moonlighting’s David and Bueller’s Ferris throw asides to the viewer every bit as bald as an old melodrama villain’s monologued gloat. Segments of the new late-night glitz-news After Hours end with a tease that features harried earphones guys in the production booth ordering the tease.

29. Ibid., 31.

30. Ibid.

MTV's television-trivia game show, the dry titled Remote Control, got so popular it burst out of its MTV-membrane and is now syndicated band-wide.³¹

Even in Wallace's descriptions, readers see the reality of television as being that cultural anti-authority that is this stream of "meaning effect." Television has no centralized meaning, no message or motto, no coat of arms, no guiding principle, but rather the constant stream of the proliferation of signifiers to the will of more and more signifiers. Television shows and commercials that embrace this aesthetic find great success in postmodern culture. Wallace, in an analysis of a popular Pepsi commercial, which showcases a Pepsi van pulling up on the beach and loudly playing a distinctive gulping sound accompanied by a refreshing vocal expression that draws all of the beach's crowd to the van, tells readers that the commercial is as much "tongue and cheek" as it is an authentic advertisement.³² And the guiding principle of the commercial, which ends with the words, "Pepsi: the Choice of a New Generation," has more to do with Pavlovian response to stimuli rather than actual "Choice."³³ This kind of call and response, stimulation-based advertising, exemplified by a Pepsi commercial, is of great interest to Wallace. Such an advertisement on TV speaks so directly and maybe even disparagingly to his generation, saying, 'you are stimulated by image and sound, drink Pepsi, feel stimulated, because that is what matters; you can trust that; you can put your faith, hopes, dreams, into that image alone, etc.' What was a choice doesn't matter, only the response seems to matter in the narrative of the commercial. The commercial uses that "ironic self-reference" so revered in the

31. Ibid., 33.

32. Ibid., 59-60.

33. Ibid.

postmodern art world to capture its viewer's attentions and desires without end, without answer, and without a grounded signified of any kind.

Of course this is all very capitalistic, pessimistic in some respects, and still a slight discoloration of postmodernity in all its potential meanings. How is it that someone can utter phrases in U.S. culture like "that film was quite postmodern," or perhaps, "he is so postmodern"?³⁴ Without further clarification, when phrases like these are offered, I am inclined to believe most in the room have no idea what the speaker is saying. A lot of this ambiguity has to do with the fact that academics, artists, fiction writers, and even pop-cultural gurus have been using the same terminology (postmodern, postmodernity, postmodernism) for almost three generations now. While the terminology may carry with it similar aesthetic outlooks, it would be ludicrous to believe that it philosophically performs the same task in measuring Western culture. Wallace writes specifically of this, stating:

Whether or not 1990's youth culture seems as grim to you as it does to me, surely we can agree that culture's TV-defined pop ethic has pulled a marvelous touché on the postmodern aesthetic that originally set out to co-opt and redeem the pop. Television has pulled the old dynamic of reference and redemption inside-out: it is now television that takes elements of the postmodern—the involution, the absurdity, the sardonic figure, the iconoclasm and rebellion—and bends them to the ends of speculation and consumption. This has been going on for a while. As early as '84, critics of capitalism were warning that 'What began as a mood of the avant-garde has surged into mass culture.'³⁵

What Wallace is saying, in fewer words, is that 1980's television marks a pivotal change in the way postmodern culture, postmodernism, and postmodern art, works. However this is complicated by the fact that culture's term, postmodern, for all that has happened since sometime after WWII and during the 1960s counter-cultural revolution, does not fall in line with this new

34. "Quite postmodern" is quite odd, as if something can have a lot of the "postmodern" in it.

35. *Ibid.*, 64-65.

thing, this more pastiche thing, where the “redemption [got turned] inside-out.” Postmodernism underwent a kind of radical change, wherein the old references to pop culture were once a way to salvage and “redeem the pop,” but are now seen as a way for capitalism to take such elements and use “them [for] the ends of speculation and consumption.” And by way of what happened after or around 1984, this old postmodern process of reference was inverted. The fact that *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*’s first chapter was published in 1984 adds to the intrigue. The pop wasn’t redeemed anymore by ironic modes, but rather was in service to such ironic rebellion. The postmodern aesthetic of the 1960’s is a different strand of postmodern DNA from that of the 1980’s, and perhaps a key change was experienced somewhere in the 1980’s.³⁶ If the postmodernist’s goal was to break and decentralize cultural narratives, to show audiences that the world was not made of universalities, then what one could call what came after postmodernity, the post-postmodern, took this a step further. If the postmodernist used pop culture to show how the narratives of pop culture were toxic, then the post-postmodern stole that aesthetic and didn’t care to show the audience anything more than pastiche. The classic postmodern aesthetic attempted to challenge a people’s meta-narratives within a culture, the post-postmodern simply takes the same aesthetic and uses it to avoid the question of meta-narratives entirely. The avant-garde postmodern became mass culture, and in mass culture the postmodern became post-postmodernity, which ruled with Wallace’s notion of “speculation and consumption.”

If this sounds dark, or somewhat like a loss of faith, I believe that Wallace would have wanted you to consider that impression. It is perhaps all too strange that the general population

36. I don’t know if 1984 is the exact year that would mark this type of change. I don’t think Wallace’s mention of this year is necessarily in reference to Jameson’s work. However, I point such things out for reader curiosity.

hasn't realized the gravity of this shift, or its greater cultural consequences. I am not saying that today's TV shows or other art forms don't promote any value, but I am saying that what readers and critics today consider postmodern, at least nominally, has changed in form dramatically.

Wherein in the classic postmodern sense, the postmodern aesthetics attempted to make a kind of peace with pop culture, to watch over it, use it, to be always aware of its darker implications, and to recognize pop culture as a constructed narrative without a capital on truth, however, in today's vain of postmodernity, what I like to call post-postmodernity (a term Wallace used as well), we now have a postmodernity that whole-heartedly absorbs pop culture without being weary.³⁷ This post-postmodernity seems to regurgitate pop culture for the sheer sake of consumption and digestion of pop culture and its self-sustainability. In some ways, post-postmodernity is the extension, the pessimistic end goal, or doomsday, of the older postmodernism.

However, the older postmodern age, spear-headed by the radical 1960's counter culture, redefined how Americans understood the universal, or even what was to be called true. A former culture's ideas were overrun with a new kind of Americana. The old Americana held its faith in universals, which were soon revealed to be full of holes, fabrications, and lies. A new kind of radical faith was placed in the image itself instead. After all, we can trust the image can't we? The photo can't lie. The newsman during Vietnam could spin the wildest of tales, but only the photos of violence, of monks lighting themselves aflame, deliver something resistant to fabrication. Wallace writes about this:

Television's classic irony function came into its own in the summer of 1974, as remorseless lenses opened to view the fertile 'credibility gap' between image of official disclaimer and the reality of high-level shenanigans. A nation was changed, as Audience.

37. Tore Rye Anderson, "Pay Attention! David Foster Wallace and his Real Enemies," *English Studies*, 95 no. 1 (2014), 7-14. A term Anderson, Wallace, and others like Jonathan Franzen have used to describe a wave of authorship coming after the postmodern authors.

If even the president lies to you, whom are you supposed to trust to deliver the real? Television, that summer, got to present itself as the earnest, worried eye on the reality behind all images.³⁸

But even that “worried eye,” that essential function of placing truth back into the realm of images has faded from contemporary American society as readers might expect to see it in today’s television and Internet culture. With the advent of entertainment like *Jackass*,³⁹ reality television, countless hours of streaming internet videos, and the audacity of YouTube to continue to stream content for you until you demand it stops (rather than the other around), a new form of culture presents us with a perhaps more evolved form of the postmodern... something truly ironic, jaded, and so entrenched in the stimulation that images offer, that the awareness it fosters and the critique of itself that it offers, is only to justify its own existence. And thus Americans enter the horrors of post-postmodernity. A postmodernity with the volume turned all the way up—where the irony is only present for its own sake. Wallace eventually comes to the final realization of what Television, postmodernity, and ultimately what Western culture in many ways embodies, by stating:

Television’s greatest minute-by-minute appeal is that it engages without demanding. One can rest while undergoing stimulation. Receive without giving. In this respect, television resembles certain other things one might call Special Treats (e.g. candy, liquor), i.e. treats that are basically fine and fun in small amounts but bad for us in large amounts and really bad for us if consumed in the massive regular amounts reserved for nutritive staples.⁴⁰

Readers may paint a picture of an American and Western culture that has an inescapable relationship to the abusive nature of drugs, but unlike crack, cocaine, methamphetamines, or oxycodone, these new drugs are accepted, furtively, coming into our lives by means that seem

38. Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram,” 36.

39. *Jackass*, MTV, April 16, 2016 (originally aired October 1, 2000-February 17, 2002).

40. Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram,” 37.

harmless: the TV, the internet, and the entertainment of passivity. And Wallace wrote an entire book called *Infinite Jest*, about Western culture's so-called "Special Treats" that he believed were analogous to addiction.⁴¹ And this issue of addiction would come to be a post-postmodern issue of my generations's time.

Infinite Jest attempts to make a myth out of the Western world's rise of irony. The novel, in certain ways, laments the powers of irony, but also creates its own world with an intention to show culture something new and becoming. The story attempts to make the reader consider culture, and where we are as Americans and as people, are headed. *Infinite Jest* is about the nature of irony; it's about the postmodern sensibilities and the coming post-postmodernity of a soon-to-be generation; it's about the dangers of TV-like "signifier to signifier" connections and the "meaning effect" Jameson writes about; it's about how we've lost our ability to think historically or what it means to communicate like humans; and it's about asking ourselves whether we know what real, true, authentic happiness really is anymore. It takes American culture and holds it out before us, showing readers that the most toxic and addictive parts of our culture, the parts that are killing us, are the parts that try to convince us that true happiness is easy, or at least should be easy. So easy, that all we have to do is buy this, marry that person, look like that, or attain this one job, consumer good, or lottery winnings. Happiness, in the Western world, with all its technology and access to entertainment and knowledge, should be so gosh darn easy. In fact, many in the Western world, who are so privileged, often report feeling wrong or unnatural when they can't be happy with all that they have. *Infinite Jest* paints a greater predictive reality of people living in a world trying to convince themselves that happiness is easy, simple, or something that can be acquired without perspective and wisdom. A fictional

41. Lipsky, *Although of Course*, 79-81.

people convinced that happiness is external and that the pursuit of pleasure is the same thing as happiness and is certainly not addictive. A people convinced that human beings are simple creatures of a kind of science that adds human and pleasure together to equal happiness regardless of context. Of course, *Infinite Jest* showcases the post-postmodern as well, and the surrounding culture and irony which prevents us from having to deal with the fact that underneath we all feel this mindless pursuit of pleasure is a lie, and that we know for a fact that happiness isn't easy—and we've built an entire cocooning post-postmodern culture around us that suppresses this one all dominating lie. In many ways, the novel posits that true happiness is a challenge we refuse to face, because it is so hard to ante up to, so much so, most of us would rather lie to ourselves with entertainment, with mindless irony, with drugs, with anything that can remove that deep spiritual reality that says, 'I'm not happy, and its going to take a long time to figure out how and why.' *Infinite Jest* puts it bluntly to Western readers (which is why it can be challenging to read): happiness is not easy. Wallace puts this dopamine based drive for pleasure, like a mouse in a cage pushing a lever incessantly for food, to the test, and has a straight-faced sobering talk with his readers that asks of them: what is real happiness to you?

However, such questions are by no means easy to address and so the novel is nearly a thousand pages. It is truly a story of epic, and more importantly, mythic proportions. I can only claim to scratch the surface of all its potential implications. In broad strokes, the novel is about the Incandenza family and their generations.⁴² There is, like in the tradition of myth, a clear

42. Three of the generations are of utmost importance to the story: Hal, James, and James' father. Hal's great-grandfather is referenced but plays a minor role.

sense of father-son-type repetition.⁴³ Also, much as in myth, there is a sense of cultural education and maturation, much like in the tradition carried on by the bildungsroman genre.

The Incandenza family lives in a kind of present-near-future, with various elements of technological fantasy, although the world is probably designed to resemble today's reader's contemporary culture. The novel's primary locations are Enfield Tennis Academy, Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House, the Tucson, Arizona area, and the greater Boston area. The novel jumps around from year-to-year, with each year bearing the title of a corporate sponsor. In the early chapters of the novel, a linear reading can be confusing for those who insist upon a chronological order, as the years give, at first, no tangible indication of when the events of the novel are happening. This is especially true once readers finish the novel and understand that the novel's final year (the Year of Glad) is the first segment of the novel.⁴⁴ So, *Infinite Jest* begins at the end. Thus the novel doesn't quite unlock its story to the reader, for these reasons, until a second reading or 're-thinking' is considered. Nor does the novel seem to provide any kind of conclusive ending.⁴⁵

For now, I want to narrow my focus on the Year of Glad (the beginning and end of *Infinite Jest*) and the novel's central character: Hal. The novel opens (and closes) with this scene of Hal applying to the University of Arizona, with various adults on one end of the bargaining table extolling his virtues, his genius essays, his nationally ranked tennis ability, his elite status academically, and his connections to his semi-famous academic father and mother. On the other

43. There are also various plot allusions to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

44. Or readers may cleverly deduce this with the handy use of page 223.

45. Many clues and plot items are left unturned or unresolved on purpose. The novel is prone to various Internet theories of elaborate natures that attempt to tie in all the various elements and characters.

end, is the coach and dean and various other university officials asking questions, making sure these defensive adults haven't twisted Hal's arm into going to their school.⁴⁶ The oddity of this scenario increases the longer the scene plays out, as Hal doesn't say a word. His thoughts are there, he is literate, intelligent, analytical, emotional, and observant, but he doesn't speak. Finally, after some time, the Dean encourages Hal to speak. And Hal speaks, intelligently, insightfully, and with great passion and personality. But everyone looks on at him in horror. Readers read Hal's words in the novel, but the characters within the novel are apparently revolted. Hal is stating: "I am not just a boy who plays tennis. I have an intricate history. Experiences and feelings. I'm complex."⁴⁷ None of these words are coming through though, and the Dean, Coach, and various other university directors are reacting to Hal's voice in such a way that suggests that some kind of awful, terrible, screeching, noise is coming out on their end. Hal is then pinned to the floor, restrained, and taken away to a hospital. A childhood memory is spliced into the middle of this episode. A young toddlerish Hal is holding up a piece of strange basement moss to his mother, Avril, who is panicking in the realization that her son has eaten the moss. She cries: "My son at this! Help!"⁴⁸

The novel's opening scene, juxtaposed with Hal's memory, is dramatic. Wallace is showing the reader how to read his particular view of culture in the opening sequence. Already we see members of this future society valuing stimulation over feeling. The external of what is heard is of utmost importance to the university officials, rather than Hal's internal feeling (which we, as readers, are given access to). Perhaps merely seeing and hearing a boy make terrible

46. Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 3-5.

47. *Ibid.*, 11.

48. *Ibid.*

sounds and then sending him to the hospital is a natural reaction for some. But Wallace makes a clear point of showing us Hal's thinking, Hal's insides and reactions, and readers see and hear what they can't see and hear otherwise—that which is inside of Hal. Hal clearly has deep feelings and doesn't want to be locked away, but the administration officials don't seem to be too concerned with what is underneath. For readers, what is wrong?—is the obvious question Wallace draws attention to, because Hal doesn't talk or sound like everyone else. One of the greater mysteries of the novel is figuring out what happened to Hal. If the Year of Glad is the future, what made Hal this way? Did his vapid exterior-focused culture do this, or was it something else? Was it the moss in the memory? Later in the novel, Hal alludes to taking DMZ, a kind of powerful DMT offshoot (one of the most powerful hallucinogenic drugs known to humanity): could that have possibly altered Hal? These are all implications Wallace wanted readers to consider. Hal's state is catatonic, and the question remains: what makes one catatonic and unable to speak? What makes one so trapped in a kind of shell? What makes one trapped in an interior of the self? These are thematic questions the novel poses throughout.

One of Hal's essays is published in the novel. An essay Hal wrote in the seventh grade, which received a B/B+ because it didn't properly set up the conclusion with anything more than a rhetorical flourish and subjective institution, or so the title of the section tells readers.⁴⁹ Besides Wallace poking fun at the strict conventions of formal essay writing, the essay speaks to the climate of Hal's culture and also his own future catatonic state. In the essay, Hal writes about *Hawaii Five-O* and *Hill Street Blues*, two TV shows that were no doubt of importance to Wallace. Hal first labels Steve McGarret, from *Five-O*, as the classic modern American hero, i.e. someone "...not weighed down by administrative State-Police-Chief chores, or by females, or

49. Ibid., 140

friends, or emotions, or any sort of conflicting demands on his attention.”⁵⁰ McGarret, in Hal’s essay, is also a man of action and the kind of rightful action that always manages to solve the crime and affirm right and wrong: “...McGarrett single-mindedly acts to refashion a truth the audience already knows into an object of law, justice, and modern heroism.”⁵¹ However, in contrast to McGarrett, Hal details *Hill Street’s* Captain Frank Furillo. Hal introduces him as a “*post-modern hero*.”⁵² Captain Furillo is weighed down and restrained by his fictional life on TV. He is beset by many petty distractions. He is “...a virtuoso of triage and compromise and administration.”⁵³ Frank gets to the end of the day, and has no solid grip on life or any kind of reaffirmation of the truth and rightfulness of police work. He plays a whack-a-mole game with crime and moral ambiguity that viewers find enticing to watch. However, at the end of the essay, Hal speculates about what might come after this postmodern hero.⁵⁴ Hal writes:

What kind of hero comes after McGarrett’s Irished Modern cowboy[?]. . . . The jut-jawed hero of action (‘Hawaii Five-O’) becomes the mild-eyed hero of reaction (‘Hill Street Blues,’ a decade later) But what comes next? What North American hero can hope to succeed the placid Frank? We await, I predict, the hero of non-action, the catatonic hero, the one beyond calm, divorced from all stimulus, carried here and there across sets by burly extras whose blood sings with retrograde amines.⁵⁵

50. Ibid., 141

51. Ibid.

52. Ibid.

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid., 142.

55. Ibid.

From this essay, readers understand that Hal's condition isn't some random mishap; his own character's seventh-grade essay foreshadows his state. And if readers are willing to go a step further and view Hal as a mythic character, a character that carries within him the voice and intent of a generation of young men and women like himself, then readers can see Hal metaphorically representing the very state and potential doom of a generation. The generation of a hero who is a reaction to a reaction. Particularly, that catatonic state, where feeling is trapped on the inside, unable to be expressed to the outside world. And this feeling of stuff being trapped on the inside, unable to escape outward, is an essential theme. Many of the characters suffer the same afflictions as Hal. Combined with the shocking opening scene of the novel, readers will get the sense that Hal is moving towards this moment and state of the catatonic. These themes are reflective of Wallace's beliefs about the future of postmodern cultural narrative. Make no mistake about it, Wallace seeks to mythologize this narrative, this belief in the postmodern reality with not only its history, but also its potential trajectory. Hal's joke about a post-postmodern hero who has to be hauled around by extras, and who lacks stimulus, is a very particular expression of Wallace's belief about contemporary irony and entertainment.

Irony of course is the key topic of *Infinite Jest*, and to really grasp and understand Hal's character and his metaphorical post-postmodern condition at the end of the novel, readers must look at irony itself as a kind of meta-narrative. Wallace isn't using irony in *Infinite Jest* in the more standard sense of satirizing culture for a specific viewpoint, rather Wallace is attempting to use irony to mythologize irony itself—to bring the concept of irony to light. This might explain why the novel's future is not a strict dystopia or utopia, but some kind of fascinating gray morality projection. If readers read Hal as archetype, as protagonist, as Wallace's idea of a

millennial hero, then readers have to consider the meaning of Hal's arch—and the way Hal gets trapped inside himself. Irony is, I think, a more plausible explanation of Hal's condition.

And Wallace muses over irony in *Infinite Jest* in ways that do not suggest simple linguistic irony. Even postmodernity and post-postmodernity do not simply practice irony for mere aesthetic purposes, if one carefully observes the novel's characters and themes. Wallace states in "E Unibus Pluram," that irony itself and fear of ridicule, are an essential part of contemporary U.S. society and that the devices of that irony have his generation by the throat.⁵⁶ Wallace also states that: "This is because irony, entertaining as it is, serves an almost exclusively negative function. It's critical and destructive, a[nd] ground clearing. Surely this is the way our postmodern fathers saw it."⁵⁷ For Wallace, Irony is more than a mere linguistic device, irony is the central tenet of what makes postmodernity (and post-postmodernity) work, function, and operate. Irony has much larger implication for culture. And irony, in novel, becomes a kind of tyranny for a futuristic society that is not ruled by totalitarianism, but instead unlimited freedom and thus unlimited irony. It traps Hal and many of the other characters in complex ways direct authority can't.

Wallace was an avid reader, and found a particular interest in nineteenth century philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, who also wrote about irony as something much more than a linguistic trait. Kierkegaard saw it as an emerging cultural force. In other words, like Wallace, Kierkegaard was most concerned with irony and its effect on moralism.⁵⁸ According to Brad

56. Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," 49.

57. *Ibid.*, 67.

58. Brad Frazier, "Kierkegaard On The Problems of Pure Irony," *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 23 no. 3 (2004): 417-47.

Frazier, and his article, “Kierkegaard On The Problems of Pure Irony,” Kierkegaard in the nineteenth century characterized a type of irony that was absolute.⁵⁹ It was an irony he called, “infinite absolute negativity.”⁶⁰ However, for ease, Frazier refers to this phenomenon as “*pure irony*.”⁶¹ The idea behind pure irony asserts that individuals who embrace it will become attached to ironic modes, which allows them to remove themselves from what Kierkegaard called an “actuality” or something one treats sincerely.⁶² Thus these individuals will no longer be able to engage in any part of a sincere society. Any institution can be mocked, ridiculed, and made into a joke by the clever ironist. Such is the power of pure irony. The fear is that everything in life will become prey to irony’s tyranny:

“...[I]ronists... take a standpoint from which the social order appears to lose its meaning and normativity. They no longer find themselves, so to speak, in their various social roles. As a result, they become alienated from social institutions and others who do identify with and take seriously the goals and ideals of these institutions.”⁶³

According to Frazier, Kierkegaard defines this specific kind of irony as equivalent to the label of pure irony, in that a pure ironist seeks to escape all social functions, all institutions, not just one or the other, but all in totality, in order to gain what Kierkegaard called a “negative freedom.”⁶⁴ This negative freedom is illusive, because it might appear, for all intents and purposes, as an authentic freedom. Not belonging or being attached to something, or in essence, choosing

59. Ibid, 419.

60. Ibid.

61. Ibid.

62. Ibid.

63. Ibid., 420.

64. Ibid., 421.

nothing, seems to create the illusion of the choice of freedom. It certainly frees one from the bounds of having to deal with any institution that demands one's time and sincerity. This is a kind of freedom where individuals delimit themselves, and can mock and reference any one actuality without engaging in it, without being constrained or limited by it. Wallace, in his "This is Water" speech, spoke about this kind of freedom extensively, emphasizing to his audience that you cannot choose this kind of freedom.⁶⁵ It is a false freedom, and a negative freedom. A freedom that you become addicted to, and a freedom that only bears the illusion of choice:

Our present culture has harnessed those forces [of desire] in ways that have yielded extraordinary wealth and comfort and personal freedom. The freedom to be lords of our own tiny skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the center of all creation. This kind of freedom has much to recommend it. But of course there are all different kinds of freedom, and the kind that is most precious you will not hear much talked about in the great outside world of winning and achieving and displaying. The really important kind of freedom involves attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able truly to care about people and to sacrifice for them, over and over, in a myriad of petty little unsexy ways, every day. That is real freedom.⁶⁶

The alternative to Wallace's ideal "real freedom" is a kind of unconscious freedom. A freedom that allows one to expel all virtue and to simply be beholden to the darker side of the postmodern mythos: that stimulation-based existence of living in the moment. However, this negative freedom is precisely what makes irony, particularly radical ironists who in Kierkegaard's mind practice pure irony, so attractive and addictive. And such an ironic practice is certainly easier than having to devote oneself to "attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort." Wallace seems to suggest that irony is a way to gain a false freedom, and interestingly enough, a freedom without limits. But a "real freedom," and perhaps a more mature freedom, has the individual define his or her limits.

65. Wallace, *This is Water*, (New York: Little, Brown and Company), 2009.

66. *Ibid.*, 118-21.

While Hal may not necessarily be an ironist, the important aspect to note is that he falls victim to the irony around him in his culture. Hal, like many of the novel's characters, falls victim to an ultimate passivity and limitlessness. The world of *Infinite Jest* is a direct reaction to this ironic state elaborated, and the growing threat of a negative freedom. Wallace is unraveling this future society to show the readers the potential tyranny of irony. In the novel, two side characters, one who is involved with the Les Assassins en Fauteuils Roulants (A.F.R.), a wheelchair assassins terrorist cell fighting for the independence of Quebec, spend a considerable amount of time debating the morality of the novel's central feature: the film "Infinite Jest," a film created by Hal's father, James, that has the power to entertain watchers perfectly and completely. Anyone who views this film becomes nothing more than a mindless consumer of it, unable to pursue any other desire. The watcher merely takes in the stimulus of the film in a vegetative state, losing the ability to communicate, or do anything other than watch 24/7. In the world of the novel, the film, effectively, if the A.F.R. gets their hands on it, becomes an apocalyptic super-weapon—able to pacify a population. These characters, Marathe and Steeply, overlook the Arizona countryside as they debate the moral implications of the film, or "The Entertainment," as they sometimes refer to it. Steeply tells Marathe: "The American genius, our good fortune is that... [we] realize[d] that each American [was] seeking to pursue his maximum good results [which was] maximizing *everyone's* good."⁶⁷ The conversation continues with the acknowledgement that ideal of maximizing good is something learned as early as grade school. Steeply follows this explaining: "This is what lets us steer from oppression and tyranny. Even your Greekly democratic howling-mob-type tyranny. The United States: a community of sacred individuals which reveres the sacredness of the individual choice. The individual's right to

67. Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 424.

pursue his own vision of the best ratio of pleasure to pain: utterly sacrosanct.”⁶⁸ However, this logic, this devotion to a kind of undisciplined freedom is precisely what allows for the A.F.R., near the end of the novel, to unleash the most entertaining film ever conceived, which pacifies a large majority of the U.S. population. For it is not real choice that America worships, no, it is only “...the best ratio of pleasure to pain.” This is the logic that cripples the American society in the novel. And Hal acts as a kind of analogy for this in the novel. As Hal is losing touch with society, the society itself in the novel is losing touch with its own self, its own sense of choice, and its own spirituality. Once again though, in the bigger perspective, this is a meta-narrative conceding to the tyranny of irony in Hal’s world, and “Infinite Jest” concerns readers with a kind of metaphor for this existential irony, which allows individuals to take an extended leave of absence from their society. While debating over the film, Marathe and Steeply arrive at a logic suggesting that U.S. citizens, in some ways, deserve the all-consuming Entertainment, because they have not been taught to be free.⁶⁹ As U.S. citizens have not been taught “...how to make knowledgeable choices about pleasure and delay...”⁷⁰ Marathe concludes this thought with, “...this Entertainment? You know there can be no forcing to watch a thing. If we disseminate the *samizdat*, the choice will be free, no?”⁷¹ The simple logic being that the people of this future U.S. will choose their own death. “A U.S.A. that would die—and let its children die, each one—for the so-called perfect Entertainment...”⁷² How can this be? Once again: think about a kind of existential irony. A U.S. people, like Hal, have become trapped by a bizarre kind of new age

68. Ibid.

69. Ibid., 429.

70. Ibid.

71. Ibid., 430.

freedom that feeds untamed desire. If technology can be catastrophic, with the nuclear bomb, anthrax, or ICBMs, then Wallace posits, perhaps art and entertainment can totally waste humanity too. The point made by Wallace is that the characters of the novel, the occupants locked into such a society, will destroy themselves with their given freedom. Is it not blind devotion to freedom that makes one complete, whole, or even happy inside? How can this be? Is the American desire for freedom so perverse and pervasive that it is totally destructive?

This kind of irony Wallace is discussing in the novel is also detailed in Berel Lang's "The Limits of Irony" in which he introduces "skeptical irony" as opposed to "romantic irony."⁷³ Romantic irony is a more traditional and controlled concept of irony, where contradictions are introduced to make sense of the world. In Romantic irony, the oppositions exist for "...resolving the multiplicity of tensions of temporal appearance into the steady state of a unified consciousness that finds two sides to every story without, however being two sided-itself."⁷⁴ In a sense, Lang describes the kind of classic irony of the *Pride and Prejudice* variety, wherein the irony is directed at the contradictions of society to show readers the reality behind such oppositions with a kind of renewing clarity.⁷⁵ Jane Austen uses irony towards traditional English arranged marriages to demonstrate the double thinking and ridiculousness of an arranged marriage when it comes to love. In a sense, it is an irony that prescribes its own limits based on the author's values. On the other hand, Lang introduced skeptical irony, where "...irony...

72. Ibid., 318.

73. Berel Lang, "The Limits of Irony," *The John Hopkins University Press*, 27 no. 3 (1996): 571-88.

74. Ibid., 576.

75. Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1995).

appears not as a means but as an end in itself....”⁷⁶ Much like how Kierkegaard details what Frazier has called pure irony, skeptical irony is a kind of irony that has no limits.⁷⁷ Romantic irony has a more unifying and transcendental ideal, but skeptical irony does not, instead skeptical irony favors the ability to be free from all potential intention. Skeptical irony, much like Kierkegaard’s “infinite absolute negativity,” is of deep concern to Wallace. And the key to unpacking Lang’s idea of irony, as it pertains to the novel, is through an understanding of limits. Lang, in analysis of Kierkegaard’s thinking, finds a kind of modern concept of irony, coming out of Kierkegaard’s “infinite absolute narrativity,” which “...finds irony *limitless*....”⁷⁸ And with this idea, Lang states that irony seems to have “an infinite movement—perhaps regress, perhaps progress—that violates the supposed boundaries of every context in which it appears....”⁷⁹ Ultimately, Lang doubts as to whether this form of skeptical irony is truly limitless, but admits the possibility was certainly present in Kierkegaard’s thinking.⁸⁰ However the concept of limitless skeptical irony does find use as a centerpiece for those kind of post-postmodern ideals, which detail irony’s tyranny. Wallace certainly considered such infinitely limitless implications in his novel. Readers can see these implications in the motto of Wallace’s fictional tennis academy: “The man who knows his limitations has none,” and in an essential part of his description of the sport, “...what are those boundaries, if they are not baselines, that contain and direct its infinite expansion inward, that make tennis like cheese on the run, beautiful and

76. Lang, “The Limits of Irony,” 577.

77. Ibid.

78. Ibid., 571.

79. Ibid.

80. Ibid., 571-72.

infinitely dense?”⁸¹ The metaphor is fairly illusive, but I believe Wallace is discussing far more than just the game of tennis. There is an American culture out there, with its receding boundaries, that has lost this beauty and infinite density, an America that has become lost in the weight of the idea of limitless irony.

The reason the film can work on a U.S. audience is because they live in an ironic society which poses no limits, and permits and tempts individuals to get lost in the illusion of negative freedom. This is a freedom that is worshipped without thought, without consequence, and without self-analysis, to the point where such ideals become the mainstay of Wallace’s post-postmodern North American future. This negative freedom lives in the moment, is based on moment-to-moment stimulation, and is ultimately unfettered by any ties to any kind of reality or “actuality.” Through Hal’s catatonic state, and Hal’s essay, Wallace makes this idea of individuals lost in an ironic state, unable to attach themselves to any “actuality,” prime candidates for those who might be careless enough, in his futuristic society, to watch “Infinite Jest.” Much like Jameson’s idea of the pastiche and “meaning effect,” readers get a clear sense of what Wallace’s futuristic post-postmodern climate and existential (or skeptical) irony looks like. It is a climate in which the population is so passive to and pacified by an ironic culture for culture’s sake, that the only goal is entertainment and addiction at whatever the cost. To be sure, “Infinite Jest” is also a metaphorical drug for those who cannot fight off or resist addiction. In this way, “Infinite Jest” is totalizing; the film is a super-weapon that can’t be stopped, even if, by way of technicality, the viewership chooses its own catatonic death.

The novel is full of characters dealing with skeptical and pure irony, and avoiding or circumnavigating its problems. Mostly, Wallace makes this connection through AA and the

81. Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 83.

nature of addiction. Many of the characters in the novel's AA setting deal with irony in curious ways. And Wallace is making a direct commentary on the nature of his world when he calls AA an "irony-free zone."⁸² Don Gately, the novel's reformed crook and AA member, directly experiences this extremist reactionist view to the post-postmodern and ironic world outside of AA. Much in the same way reactionist groups crop up to counter serious political affiliations, AA acts as a kind of cultural group that reacts to the 'outside' world in *Infinite Jest*. To be a little more precise, Gately's AA at Ennet is all about full on "Sincerity," capitalized for emphasis.⁸³ As Wallace writes: "An ironist in a Boston AA meeting is a witch in church Sincerity with an ulterior motive is something these tough ravaged people know and fear, all of them trained to remember the coyly sincere, ironic, self-presenting fortifications they'd had to construct in order to carry on Out There, under the ceaseless neon bottle."⁸⁴ AA, in *Infinite Jest* acts as a bubble, separate from Out There. Because Out There is where irony reigns free. Keep in mind though, Wallace doesn't construct this as a straight-up confrontation with irony, no, AA in Boston wholeheartedly avoids the proposition. AA doesn't solve the problem that exists Out There, instead AA others it. Separates it. Quarantines the problem. AA takes these people, these people who have abused society and its addictions, who could not face their problems and hands out "Sincerity" as a kind of de-facto cure. But it's not Sincerity that eliminates the problem. If AA is the rejection of a drug, or more precisely a rejection of addiction, AA merely replaces that addiction with another and withdraws the individual from the 'real' world. Much in the same way the individual used the addiction to withdraw from what was Out There in the first place. Wallace

82. Ibid., 369.

83. Ibid.

84. Ibid.

does not for a second imagine that the cure for a new kind of post-postmodern existential irony is as easy as isolation from it. This very backdrop to the novel informs the spiraling and declining nature of an individual like Hal in this futuristic world.

Hal, of course, is slowly falling apart, slowly unraveling into a catatonic state. Hal's father, James, sees this growing catatonic state within his son, he sees that something is seriously wrong and withdrawn about Hal, and he attempts to stop it in the most drastic and catastrophic way. James' creation, "Infinite Jest," the film, is a misfired attempt to cure Hal. It is a film of ultimate pleasure that fails to bridge a lost father-son relationship and thus becomes a kind of new age super-weapon. Hal's withdraw is tragic, his interior world grows to a point where he fails to reach out to those around him. In a particularly vivid scene, Hal goes to what he believes is an NA meeting (narcotics anonymous) to counter his afflictions and combat his weed addiction.⁸⁵ He arrives at the meeting, after driving a significant amount of time, to a scene of an adult male, Kevin, embracing his "Inner Infant."⁸⁶ In this dramatic scene, Hal walks in on an unusual meeting already in progress, and witnesses an adult male crawling on the floor, crying, and unashamedly pronouncing his parental issues. The leader of the meeting is saying, "The energies I'm feeling in the group are energies of unconditional love and acceptance for Kevin's Inner Infant."⁸⁷ Kevin continues to sob even harder, and the group's leader asks everyone to name his or her feelings: "Maybe we could all name our feelings right now for Kevin and share how much

85. *Ibid.*, 804. It's not an NA meeting as Hal first believes. Hal receives a booklet that is in fact two years old due to a presumed clerical error.

86. *Ibid.*, 801.

87. *Ibid.*

we're caring for him...."⁸⁸ What proceeds are declarations of love for Kevin, while Hal watches. The leader then asks Kevin to identify his mommy and daddy in the room, as the scene transforms into some kind of perverse psychological reenactment for Kevin. Kevin says, "I'm feeling my Inner Infant standing holding the bars of his crib and looking out of the bars...."⁸⁹ The leader asks Kevin to point out who he wants love and affection from, and from Hal's perspective it looks like Kevin is pointing at him and crawling towards him. Hal feels a "wave of nausea."⁹⁰ And Hal wonders about the etiquette of leaving this type of meeting mid-session. Of course, Hal is utterly terrified, but Kevin is pointing to someone sitting behind Hal. Everyone else is crying out for Kevin's Inner Infant, in an unmistakably cultish way. Hal ponders:

[He, Hal,] had continually been held and dandled and told at high volumes that he was loved, and he feels like he could have told [Kevin] Bain's Inner Infant that getting held and told you were loved didn't automatically seem like it rendered you emotionally whole or Substance-free. Hal finds he rather envies a man who feels he has something to explain his being fucked up, parents to blame it on.⁹¹

This scene is arguably another point, that perhaps in an unusual way, changes Hal. Possibly another answer to his Year of Glad catatonic state. What Hal expresses is something extensively more problematic than what AA (or the entire Metro-Boston Recovery Options institution in the novel) makes it out to be. Happiness, irony, post-postmodernism, catatonic and withdrawn individuals, are not external problems solved by the exposure and bandaging of wounds. Wallace suggests, in this scene, that being Substance-free and having perfect parents and privileged upbringings does not equal any kind of inner peace, or any kind of distance or

88. Ibid.

89. Ibid., 802.

90. Ibid., 803.

91. Ibid., 805.

immunity to the problems of individual's addictions and their place within society. The problems inside of Hal and others are not of a simple one-to-one solvency. Kevin, ultimately, shows to Hal that the culture around treatment, around drug-abuse, is equally addictive, bizarre, and strangely enough of the quality that would viciously milk people's personal problems under the guise of finding happiness. In this scene, what Hal realizes, what the reader realizes, is that Kevin is exploited. And, that Sincerity too, can be exploited. Anyone who can provide a quick answer, even AA, is given unreasonable trust—to the point where Kevin gullibly reenacts a childhood state that sacrifices his dignity. As Wallace stated in the interview with Lipsky, "...there's [a real] *desperation* to give ourselves away to something."⁹² Using Kierkegaard's thinking, perhaps this is our need to have limits imposed on us. Given the state of our limitless world, perhaps this very limitlessness, this negative freedom, makes some of us, like Kevin, vulnerable to AA which creates limits for us. In the novel, readers can see this with certain AA characters as well.

AA, for Don Gately, has its own cultish rules and impositions, as well as demands for Sincerity. For addicts, like Gately, this is an essential part of the solution for those who can no longer make their own limits. The AA rhetoric reinforces this:

The Why of the Disease [the reformer's addiction] is a labyrinth [and] it is strongly suggested all AAs boycott, inhabited as the maze is by the twin minotaurs of Why Me? and Why Not?.... The Boston AA 'In Here' that protects against a return to 'Out There' is not about explaining what caused your Diseases. 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....⁹³

The reality is that the definition of addict is not someone who is plainly addicted, but someone who is attempting to cover up something else, to separate themselves from what is Out There.

92. Lipsky, *Although of Course*, 157.

93. Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 374.

As Hal notes, it's not about being "Substance-free," it's about much more complex problems that'll probably take years or more to solve, with questions like: how do I find my limits? How do I set my own limits? Because without such limits in our lives, we will refuse to give shape to our lives and we will give ourselves away, and after a fashion, we are then made to be dangerously vulnerable to those ideas, institutions, and ideologies, which would shape our lives for us.

This particular vulnerability can be best represented by the AA passages of the novel, where the characters are hooked to Sincerity (capitalized), and by the passage where Hal watches Kevin suffer relived childhood trauma. Once again, this battle over individuals who are shaped by irony, is a battle that navigates itself around the limits of irony. The only cure for Gately and all those in AA, is not only the removal of irony, but the embracing of what irony lacked Out There: limits. This is, in part, represented by a belief in God: "They [AA] said to get creakily down on his mammoth knees in the A.M. every day and ask God As He Understood Him to remove the agonizing desire, and to his the old knees again at bight before sack and thank the God-ish figure for the Substanceless day just ended, if he got through it."⁹⁴ In a preceding passage, Gately is told that, from AA's perspective, it doesn't matter if he believed in God because what he "...believe[d] would magically change."⁹⁵ This belief in the "God-ish" figure, this "God As He Understood Him," is critical to AA. AA doesn't force any one particular belief, nor is the institution particularly concerned with the belief's kind of worship, because this belief in God is pursued for an entirely different reason: for its worldly sense of limits. If the Kierkegaardian "infinite negative freedom" exists Out There in the world of irony, pastiche, and

94. Ibid., 466.

95. Ibid.

addiction, God acts as the in the supreme opposition to that growing mass of secularism. God is the creator of limits, and God provides the missing grand-narrative that humankind has relied upon for centuries. It is something radically necessary to the microcosm of those individuals who've abused that American freedom Out There. The big being in the sky serves a function, it/him/her creates limits and puts up the necessary boundaries for someone to manage life for longer than a moment, and to understand that there is a purpose, and that there is something with boundaries and control. In AA, like in Wallace's novel, this belief in God doesn't have to be specified, but you can't be an unlimited atheist and expect to temper addiction. As one of the novel's other characters admits about drug addiction: "The ingenuity of the whole thing is beyond her.... It is the cage that has entered her somehow.... It no longer delimits and fills the hole. It no longer delimits the hole."⁹⁶

These American problems of limits and irony, however, can't be easily chalked up as some kind of generalist angst about addiction. If Skeptical irony, pure irony, infinite negative freedom, post-postmodernism, pastiche, the breakdown of limits, and the de-centralization of our Western culture, were united by a feeling that represented these concepts (or rather a kind of anti-feeling): anhedonia would be Wallace's label for it. Anhedonia stands as the reason such addictions exist. It is this limitless decentralization in psychological and spiritual form. The truth of *Infinite Jest* is that the world is falling apart, either from the mythic fall of a generation represented in Hal, the destructive powers of concentrated entertainment itself, as seen in "Infinite Jest," or the isolation of certain cultish sincerities disconnected from the outside world (like AA). Whatever the case, the feeling of anhedonia is what makes Hal and the rest of his futuristic world catatonic and withdrawn, unable to face the challenges in need of facing. In fact, in the novel, Wallace

96. Ibid., 222.

goes as far as to detail the president of O.N.A.N. as uncommunicable and unable to solve any kind of real problem.⁹⁷ And by the Year of Glad, it is suggested that nearly half of North America is wiped out by the A.F.R.'s unleashing of Hal's father's film "Infinite Jest." This happens in Wallace's fictional future without notice or concern, because the population in the novel is largely disconnected and anhedonic. Wallace describes this stating: "The anhedonic can still speak about happiness and meaning et al., but [have] become incapable of feeling anything in them, of understanding anything about them, of knowing anything about them, or of believing them to exist as anything more than concepts."⁹⁸ Hal's father famously killed himself with a microwave to the head.⁹⁹ But Wallace shows his readers that the sensation of the suicide, death by microwave, uncovers something deeper if we take a closer look at James. James' death is not about a microwave, but anhedonia. An anhedonia that is "...often associated with [a] crises that afflict[s] extremely goal-oriented people who reach a certain age having achieved all or more than all they'd hoped for."¹⁰⁰ It is an anhedonia that has to do with the fact that achievement doesn't automatically confer joy or meaning onto one's existence.¹⁰¹ Another one of the novel's AA characters, Kate Gompert, probably details this feeling of anhedonia best by stating that it is "...a kind of radical abstracting of everything, a hollowing out of stuff that used to have affective

97. Ibid., 440.

98. Ibid., 693.

99. Ibid. Wallace chooses a modern kitchen appliance lined in tin foil around the neck as the weapon that James I. commits suicide with. My best guess is that Wallace had a fascination with objects, ideas, and devices we consider to be precisely not dangerous, that in the end are incredibly harmful and full of unforeseen danger to us. A microwave is an obvious example, so is a seemingly harmless experimental film, and, of course, Wallace's personal nemesis: TV.

100. Ibid.

101. Ibid.

content.”¹⁰² In the end, if ever the goal of the postmodern world was to decentralize, to pull apart society and eliminate the big meta-narratives that we once thought we needed, then perhaps the swallowing of the postmodern pill has anhedonia as a labeled side-effect. Perhaps the use of delimiting existential irony has created an emotionless society, a catatonic society, and an anhedonic society where everything, conceptually, spiritually, emotionally, gets hollower and hollower for its individuals day-by-day. The world Wallace shows us in *Infinite Jest* certainly has this sense to it, with its use of mailed in entertainment tapes, defunct leaders, parental issues, dozens of addict-type characters, a father who goes mad watching re-runs of *M*A*S*H*, and a near corporate level Sincerity cult known as AA.¹⁰³ Even the once dearly held percept of God is hollow in use. *Infinite Jest* is about a world where all of this irony, this lack of belief, has surmounted to create a very empty kind of feeling, or anti-feeling.

Even though the novel does not end with Hal’s catatonic state, it chronologically spells the doom to which Hal’s generation is defined by and helpless to. Hal’s father, James, saw this regression in his son, but was powerless to stop it—and his ghost and apocalyptic film haunt the novel without resolve. *Infinite Jest* holds a similar trajectory in comparison to Hal’s catatonic condition. The novel seems to build to some grander realization and then putters out and purposely falters in the last hundred pages. Wallace, then, lets dark thoughts resonate; thoughts that pit two extremes that wind up loosing the reader in a maze without any one solution or conclusion. The extremes of the AA world present the reader with an irony-free world, with its imposition of limits and autocratic control, and the extremes of Wallace’s external world, the Boston area and the academy, present a world of near limitlessness, where human beings are

102. Ibid.

103. Ibid., 639.

incapable of regulating their own freedoms and addictions. Wallace suggests that even if we have the freedom to create our own limits, to decide how much beer we should drink, how much we should eat, and how much entertainment we should watch, we might well not be suited for the challenge any ways. What's fascinating about Hal, is that he falls pray to this kind of maze. Hal gets locked, stuck, trapped inside, in a way that suggests something about being human, really human, is incomplete in Wallace's fictional world:

...Hal, who's empty but not dumb, theorizes privately that what passes for hip cynical transcendence of sentiment is really some kind of fear of being really human, since to be really human (at least as he conceptualizes it) is probably to be unavoidably sentimental and naive and goo-prone and generally pathetic, is to be 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, goeey drool. One of the really American things about Hal, probably, is the way he despises what it is he's really lonely for: this hideous internal self, incontinent of sentiment and need, that pules and writhes just under the hip empty mask, anhedonia.¹⁰⁴

Hal embodies a kind of American post-postmodernism, because in Wallace's novel, Hal cannot ask for his escape or speak of his needs, much like the opening scene where he screeches to no avail. He "despises what it is he's really lonely for..." the internal, and that ability to express oneself in a real way. In Hal's case, like many other characters in the novel, anhedonia and addiction can be used to bury Hal and many other character's internal state, and thus despise the human. As Wallace states to Lipsky about the novel: "There's more [than] just this sort of desperate hunger, [and] enormous hole to be filled. And [yet there is] a real inclination to look outside, for consumer products mostly of varying kinds, to fill it. And that's what seemed really like, movingly American... to me."¹⁰⁵ The "desperate hunger" and massive hole we need to fill within ourselves, creates a real sense we are incomplete and not whole. And yet, we (as a culture

104. Ibid., 694-95

105. Lipsky, *Although of Course*, 156.

and as Americans) possess a lot of entertainment to fill the void inside of us—to become trapped inside like Hal. Like the world in the novel, something about this current landscape of technology makes us really ignorant to the problems of the soul, and allows us to fill up on junk food in the mean time—to fake any kind of real meaning with consumer products and vapidness. If the post-postmodern is also a figment of late capitalism, then it is a capitalism designed to conceal us, to work anhedonia into us, making for something empty in what it means to be human. It makes the human gooey, unreal, and embracing, amongst a sleek technologically refined and isolated post-postmodern paradise of pastiche and irony.

As intellectual as *Infinite Jest* can be at times, the entire novel, in my opinion, pivots and underscores feelings—particularly these anhedonic feelings associated with depression and dread. Make no mistake about it, it is a sad novel, a tragic novel—a novel that is hard to read because of these feelings. It represents a kind of new age mythic tragedy about our culture—about a decentralized and post-postmodern generation just now coming into adulthood. At the novel's core, *Infinite Jest* carries a lot of fears, with small doses of hope. If we ask ourselves: what is the point of intellectualizing? I think it would be nonetheless pointless and perhaps pretentious to say to intellectualize more. Rather, Wallace understood the true point of the intellect is to detail feelings that would otherwise be impossible to express. And in many ways, *Infinite Jest* sows a fabric of feeling that can only be the state of our world and the toxic idea that peace of mind, happiness, human fulfillment on this Earth is easily attainable in vapid American capitalistic culture. It is common knowledge that rich Western countries often test as some of the highest for depression and suicide. This is a problem we as people, I think, largely ignore, probably because it's really hard to make sense of. Probably because we feel we *should* be happy. The Western world is largely a paradise of entertainment, information, and labor, in

comparison to the rest of history and many other less fortunate places. The Western world is, in certain respects, a pinnacle of human achievement. But Wallace suggests in *Infinite Jest* that there is something else, culturally and spiritually, that is quite a bit more complicated than we like to acknowledge. Something, perhaps, we've lost amongst the greatest advancements of humankind. With the advent of new technologies, much like Wallace's prediction of Netflix with the film cartridge distribution, as well as Youtube, Facebook, and Google, our world, like that of Wallace's imagined world in 1996, is rapidly becoming a festering mass of mindless information. And the millennial question to ask in such a decentralized Western sphere of capitalism is: how do I deal with the large amount of information coming in? What if I just want to ignore it? Maybe, a generation can just sit back and guzzle entertainment, becoming utterly catatonic? It all certainly feels a little like the end of time, history, and God. It certainly feels like, at times, guzzling by the mouthful is the only thing left to do.

There are many theories and new age philosophies which project some of Wallace's key ideas, in the novel, into our current time. Jaron Lanier, in his book *You Are Not A Gadget* takes a very critical look at a digital age emerging after *Infinite Jest's* publication.¹⁰⁶ Lanier explains that there exists a renewed spiritualism that puts a surreal emphasis on a noosphere and a unity of Singularity: humankind merged with machine.¹⁰⁷ But as Lanier argues, this is not a positive notion. It only attempts to fill a kind of anhedonia we now experience in everyday digital technologies, with the fracturing of our world through search bubbles, personalized Facebook pages, and Netflix recommendations. With technology, the reality of the real human being is getting far more abstract than ever. This new "religion" of the Singularity where humanity can

106. Jason Lanier, *You Are Not A Gadget*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2011).

107. *Ibid.*, 21-23.

merge with the computer world, presents some of the same problems Wallace foreshadowed—a mindless delimited and ironically ‘free’ form of obedience. Lanier states, “The Singularity, however, would involve people dying in the flesh and being uploaded into a computer...,” and this is a notion and idea dangerously close to “Infinite Jest” the film.¹⁰⁸ The film in the novel and the singularity, represent the same kind of super weapon, a passive weapon that levels human troubles at the cost of one’s humanity. In this digital age, “Infinite Jest” becomes a technological possibility, because as Marthe and Steeply couldn’t help but consider, Americans would choose their own extinction with their freedom. And Lanier asserts that most digital age rhetoric is not only antihuman, for this reason, but also an act of “[s]pirtuality committing suicide. [With] consciousness [now] attempting to will itself out of existence.”¹⁰⁹ Facebook, Google, Netflix, promote user freedom, but only manage to give us a freedom to all be the same, to level ourselves with our own meaningless irony, with our own pastiche, and delimitation. Perhaps it’s a kind of negative freedom, removed from reality. And yet many of us eat it up whole heartedly as being some kind of grandiose singularity narrative that will somehow kill out our loneliness and sorrow, and the problem of being a choice driven individual in a fragmented and troubled Western world. Every personality page is the same, every search result is tailored to our whim, and every recommendation is a choice that effects nothing in the grand scheme of our lives. The digital age, and you can see this especially in online commercials, promotes unlimited ineffectual choice over real choice, over what Wallace would call “real freedom.” We are, in many ways, lost in an “infinite absolute negativity” of technological design. The choices of our age, are no longer war or love, republican or democrat, or even Pepsi or Coke, but instead, which movie to

108. Ibid., 26.

109. Ibid., 20.

quote, which wall posts to click on, which silly cat video to upload. In a secular age, without a unified God to bring us together, we are now seeking to make technology our God. And that is not spirituality, that, in my mind, is a kind of perverse desperation. This is the wrong cure for the problem of information overload. This is like watching the alcohol addict inject heroine.

There have been attempts to give today's post-postmodern climate an artistic make-over. Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, in "Notes on Metamodernism" have ambitiously tackled the death of the postmodern and proposed a new art form emerging with a new age sincerity: metamodernism.¹¹⁰ But their construction of the past postmodern movement is far too simple:

...[N]ew generations of artists increasingly abandon the aesthetic precepts of deconstruction... and pastiche in favor of aesthe-ethical notions of reconstruction, myth, and metaxis. These trends and tendencies can no longer be explained in terms of the postmodern. They express a (often guarded) hopefulness and (at times feigned) sincerity that hint at another structure of feeling....¹¹¹

However, this postmodern straw man fight doesn't quite get to the bigger issues I have discussed with the examination of *Infinite Jest*. Nor are the anhedonic problems of irony and pastiche that have plagued pop culture for three generations solved by the pronounced of a new underground art movement. I think Vermeulen and Akker are attempting to combat something far darker and more toxic than they realize. I think, that a mere revival of basic sincerity is a far too predictable reaction that doesn't address the complexity of irony, post-postmodernism, and anhedonia within culture. I believe even Wallace anticipated this simplistic backlash would happen in "E Unibus Pluram":

110. Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism," *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 2 (2010): 1-14.

111. *Ibid.*, 2.

The next real literary ‘rebel’ in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Dead on the page. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naive, anachronistic. Maybe that’ll be the point.¹¹²

It is a kind of reaction that is “quaint” and truly “naive,” but also strangely sincere. And yet it is also a reaction I don’t think Wallace could place a whole lot of faith in, with his downturned punchline “maybe that’ll be the point.” Vermeulen and Akker have spent a considerable amount of effort identifying the features of a new metamodern moment, but do little to write about irony, pastiche, limits, the decentralization of culture, and most importantly the anhedonic feeling, the emptiness of culture, and the darker human problems that now reside within us. The post-postmodern is more like that feeling of horror that various characters are plagued with in *Infinite Jest*. Kate Gompert talks to her doctor about such horror, stating: “I don’t know what to call it. It’s like I can’t get enough outside of it to call it anything. It’s like horror more than sadness. It’s more like horror. It’s like something horrible is about to happen. . . .”¹¹³ The problem with quaint naivety is that the post-postmodern is more a plague of culture than a surface-level idea or zeitgeist run amuck. It is a problem that can’t be cured by a metaphorical bandage of aggressive sincerity, or by a select few in underground culture. It comes with the anhedonic, the catatonic, the corrosion of an American world and empire built around an atheist mentality. Something is far more wrong than we care to admit. And it festers at a level that is far more spiritual than aesthetic. It’s not an idea, it’s an infestation at every level.

112. Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram,” 81.

113. Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 73.

Such an infestation will require a new way of detecting it and combating it. Practically, we need a new definition of evil. The world, the U.S., the pop-cultural Out There, will not solve its own anhedonic horror. Wallace was right to identify it, but that doesn't mean we can stand idly by. This post-postmodernism, this anhedonic hollowing out of pop-cultural, this abject vapidness, irony, and limitlessness, is cripplingly evil. Wallace makes a statement with this novel: our own freedom tyrannizes us, which is a profound idea that he proves time and time again, whether with the catatonic state of Hal, or the mindless obedience and sense of limits addicts need from AA. Wallace shows us a world where Marthe and Steeply can watch a U.S. choose its own demise. Once again, our freedom tyrannizes us, and we are slaves to our freedom: "[and] someone sometime let [us] forget how to choose, and what. Someone let your [U.S.] peoples forget it was the only thing of importance, choosing."¹¹⁴ Make no mistake about it, this is a major theme of *Infinite Jest*, and it flies in contrast to everything we understand as American in a post-postmodern capitalistic world. It shows how our own life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness is all too often deft and vain to satisfy. It shows how our American culture cares a great deal about providing a large quantity of self-referencing culture, but cares very little about how we consume it. And so, the American world left to its own devices will not sort out this evil and stop it. What is needed is more than mere fascination or interest as an academic, and more than mere stimulation as a citizen of entertainment. What is needed is a renewed moralism in the twenty-first century, and so far the digital age and metamodernism are far from providing. Moralism is not a popular word, perhaps because its antiquated, cliché, and quaint, but also perhaps because misguided moralism has historically been the source of trauma. But we can't let our fear of the moral dampen our abilities to see true evil, pain, and suffering—we can't let a

114. Ibid., 319.

lack of moralism allow us to never do anything moral in our own lives; or we, the U.S., and the Western world, will be rapidly approaching a world like *Infinite Jest*, where we can no longer decent evil, pain, and suffering, even before our very eyes. This isn't about fighting terrorism or dictators, but a kind of evil that is represented by the lasting effects of the catatonic and apathetic. The American continent is being hollowed out from the inside by a scorching fire of meaningless eccentrics, most of which embody the troubles of this up and coming millennial generation. We must gather all of the forces of light in some radical new human and non-tyrannizing way, to fight this plague, this shadow, this post-postmodern capitalistic world that would see us as a new age human: flat and catatonic, without thought or purpose. Because if we do nothing, if we only exist to pursue our most unspiritual of desires, to without limits think of only our short-term happiness—we leave the world to those who would control us with a plethora of hedonistic fascinations and stimulations; and thus we become a people of like, a people who like things, without reason or purpose—a Facebook generation that falsely believes it is free and unique. Nothing could be more dangerous. And I, as an academic, feel I have a profound obligation to not just bore with you with idiosyncratic detail only I can see, but must ask this of you: something more. We, as human beings, as spiritual beings, are not designed to live in a world where irony means never having to believe in what you say. Nor should we be expected to be forced, or left with no choice but to believe, like in a totalitarian AA. Believing in a real way means doing more than just collecting ideas—the Western world is already far too good at simply collecting unused eclectic ideas. Real sincerity means knowing when to choose when you need to start believing. And while irony may have its place, it can't used in the place of our sincerity.

In *Life After God*, Douglas Coupland, one of the voices of generation X, invokes the same kind of problem and anhedonia that is a growing plague in the more millennial *Infinite Jest*.¹¹⁵ Coupland writes about a culture and personal life without God, something profound in comparison to nearly every other culture known to humankind: “I think there was a trade-off somewhere along the line. I think the price we paid for our golden life was an inability to fully believe in love; instead we gained an irony that scorched everything it touched. And I wonder if this irony is the price we paid for the loss of God.”¹¹⁶ God is a kind of handy metaphor for what is lost to our current post-postmodern anhedonic Western culture. It’s not so much a matter of believing in God, like how Wallace’s AA promotes it, but rather this ability to feel real deeply and passionately about something sincere to us. The world today is crippled by dehumanizing distractions and abstractions, and we can’t pretend that these distractions are deep enough to satisfy us. And it is a poor solution to be purely ironic for a perverse kind of freedom from it all, otherwise we’ll find ourselves at the edge of some ragged abyss, addicted, and perhaps unable to feel what needs to be felt. There must be some other solution, because in today’s world, with its atheistic millennial generation living in an *Infinite Jest* like culture, we are well on our way to forgetting what it really means to be human. And being human means believing in something. It’s now our job to choose what to believe in.

115. Douglas Coupland, *Life After God*, (London: Scribner, 1999).

116. *Ibid.*, 220-21.

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