

**IRONY, NARCISSISM, AND AFFECT:  
A STUDY OF DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S INFINITE JEST**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis contends with the critical paradigm in Wallace studies that posits affective interpersonal resolutions to a central ironic problem. I suggest that this ‘x over irony’ approach has reached something of a stalemate, especially in critical studies of *Infinite Jest*. I argue that a narcissistically operative irony isolates *Infinite Jest*’s characters from interpersonal affectivity, but, at the same time, protects them from an engulfment threat; that is, isolation and engulfment form an affective double-bind in the novel that characters mitigate in singular ways. In the first chapter, I deal with the critical literature on Wallace, showing how Wallace’s take on irony amounts to a criticism of its narcissistic uses. In the second chapter, I show how James Incandenza is the key figure of the isolating trajectory of the ironic-narcissistic defence. In the third chapter, I investigate Avril Incandenza in terms of the engulfment threat that relates to the horrific affects described in relation to psychotic depression. Lastly, I explore Hal and Orin in view of the isolation-engulfment double-bind in order to demonstrate the consequences of the narcissistic subjectivity in Wallace’s fiction. Ultimately, I suggest that characters are caught in a two-sided affective threat that they *mitigate*, rather than resolve.

## CONTENTS

<b>1</b>	<b><i>“GETS US UP ABOVE THEM”</i>: ON IRONY AND NARCISSISM</b>	<b>1</b>
	Affective Alternatives to Irony	
	The Affectivity of Irony	
	Irony and Secondary Narcissism	
<b>2</b>	<b><i>“EMPTY INSIDE, UTTERLY, A VACUUM”</i>: ON THE INSUFFICIENT PATRIARCH</b>	<b>25</b>
	The Ironic Artist	
	An Affective Root	
	Two Projections	
	Paternal Insufficiency	
<b>3</b>	<b><i>“MALIGNANT AND ANTAGONISTIC TO THE SELF”</i>: ON THE MATERNAL AND</b>	
	<b>ENGULFMENT</b>	<b>51</b>
	The Narcissistic Mother	
	A Psychotic, Maternal Threat	
	A Fear of Engulfment	
	The Object	
	The Ubiquity of the Threat	
<b>4</b>	<b><i>“BETWEEN TWO THINGS”</i>: ON THE DOUBLE-BIND IN HAL AND ORIN</b>	<b>85</b>
	The Problem of Affect	
	Hal’s Dissolution	
	Orin’s Control	
	Stuck Between Two Things	
<b>5</b>	<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>115</b>

## CHAPTER 1

### “GETS US UP ABOVE THEM”: ON IRONY AND NARCISSISM

If there is a common thread stringing together the characters of David Foster Wallace, it is a sense of anxiety that, at times, subtly comes through in the dialogue and, at other times, erupts in scenes of panic or authorial intrusion. There are wide-ranging examples of the anxious undercurrent in Wallace’s large body of work: the hideous men of the interviews, the majority of the Incandenza family, Lenore Beadsman, and the ‘depressed person’ to name a few—a list that excludes only a few characters, such as the physically and intellectually challenged Mario Incandenza. The primary concern of the vast majority of Wallace’s characters seems to centre on the predicament involved in a character’s particular condition, whether the anxiety seems part of an entrapping defence mechanism or rooted in an opaque pre-subjective threat. The former is found in his hyper-intellectual male characters such as some of the interviewees in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* and *Infinite Jest*’s Orin Incandenza; this character type appears bent on utilizing their distanced position for personal gain, whether that gain is merely to impress the other, as in the brief interview with E—and K—, who use their knowledge of critical discourse to appear ‘hip and witty,’<sup>1</sup> or to gain the confidence and affection of the opposite sex, as Orin does with the women of his short-term flings. The latter is found primarily in Wallace’s (often psychotically) depressed characters, such as Kate Gompert and Geoffrey Day in *Infinite Jest*, who suffer a horrific pain that is intensified by an inability to communicate or articulate it.<sup>2</sup>

It seems that many of Wallace’s characters fluctuate between these two positions that are both marked by anxiety: one that threatens an isolating distance and another that threatens an excess

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<sup>1</sup> “Brief Interview #72” in: David Foster Wallace, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1999), 172-191.

<sup>2</sup> David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, (New York: Back Bay, 2006). All subsequent citations involving this novel are bracketed with page numbers.

closeness. In *Infinite Jest*, Kate articulates this as the difference between anhedonia and psychotic depression, where the former is a motivation to empty the self of the possibility of pain and the latter is an embodiment of that pain (695). These two sides form the investigative aim of this paper, which seeks to account for a double-bind of subjectivity that most of Wallace's characters face. *Infinite Jest* constitutes Wallace's most in-depth investigation of this predicament, in both the sense that it is by far Wallace's longest and most critically acclaimed work, and that this novel more than any of Wallace's other works deals heavily with highly specific psychohistories of its characters.

The novel splits its time between the Enfield Tennis Academy (E.T.A.), which is the Incandenza family's boarding school cum tennis academy, and Ennet House, a nearby addiction recovery facility. Despite the prevalence of mental illness in the addiction house's tenants, the psychological issues explored in the text are perhaps nowhere better exemplified than in the Incandenza family, which includes the deceased father James Incandenza, the obsessive matriarch Avril, and three sons Orin, Hal, and Mario. James is an avant-garde filmmaker who represents the 'high-irony' of postmodernism, which Wallace critiques as a dead-end in some of his non-fiction works that were published in the early 1990s.<sup>3</sup> The novel is structured around the master copy of James' film 'Infinite Jest,' which he made to pull his son Hal out of an increasingly isolated selfhood by creating "something so bloody compelling it would reverse thrust on a young self's fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life" (839). However, the result is that the film goes too far and engrosses viewers to the point of catatonia and eventually death. The film's contents are psychoanalytically charged with something of an ironic take on a return to the mother, featuring a mother-death figure apologizing to the viewer via a specially designed infant-cam lens for an apparent infanticide. The mother-death is bookended by the novel's horrifying maternal presence

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<sup>3</sup> David Foster Wallace, "An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace," Interview by Larry McCaffrey, (in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*. Edited by Stephen J. Burn. Jackson: U of Mississippi, 2012), 21-52; David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," (*Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 13.2, 1993), 151-94.

Avril Incandenza—the obsessive, overbearingly available, and narcissistically driven mother of the family. The protagonist Hal and his brother Orin seem caught between the two extremes of the father and mother, experiencing the isolation that relates to the father’s ironic subjectivity and the threat of engulfment that is associated with Avril and the maternal theme throughout the novel. These two extremes tie back to the anxiety I have mentioned: the paternal end is one of distance and isolation, whereas the maternal side relates to the threat of psychosis and the breakdown of meaning.

Most of Wallace’s characters seem to occupy a position that involves a struggle between these very extremes. My aim is to investigate the novel, specifically the Incandenza family, with regards to this predicament, which I articulate using the psychoanalytic notion of narcissism: specifically, a (pathological) secondary narcissism that distances the ego from the other by means of the other and, further, the crux of this crucial need for this distance that, I suggest, points to a maternal threat that relates to the condition of primary narcissism.<sup>4</sup> Overall, the psychoanalytic framework does three important things: first, the notion of secondary narcissism helps to elucidate Wallace’s critique of irony; second, it provides three key concepts (maternal engulfment, the abject, ‘primary’ narcissism) to explicate the maternal theme and, therefore, the problem of closeness in *Infinite Jest*; and third, the junction of secondary and primary narcissism helps to conjoin the notions of anhedonia (that leads to isolation) and psychotic depression (the threat of engulfment), which constitute the two sides of the double-bind in *Infinite Jest*. In this way, at one end, I suggest that secondary narcissism, irony, and anhedonia lead to annihilation by isolation; similarly, at the other end, I argue that psychotic depression, which relates to the mother-infant indistinction of primary

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<sup>4</sup> Although I discuss this in detail in the third chapter, I will note here that my use of the antiquated notion of primary narcissism serves not to suggest that Wallace is illustrating the characters as necessarily stuck in stages of development, but rather to emphasize the ‘antagonism to the self’ aspect of the threat as one of a dissolution of selfhood. In my view, Wallace links the mother-infant theme with the dissolution of self in *Infinite Jest*, which works from a psychoanalytic perspective that sees subjectivity founded in the separation of infant from mother. Consequently, my reference to primary narcissism is channelled through Lacan and Kristeva—two analysts that view the threat of dissolution not exactly as a return to the mother-infant dyad, but as a continual process of disruption and mitigation that begins with the subject’s splitting in early development.

narcissism, brings about an annihilation by engulfment. These two poles form an impasse in *Infinite Jest*, between which character predicaments, mitigations, resolutions, and possibilities for transformation are played out. It is in this very sense that I pivot from a critical paradigm of ‘x over irony’—positive logical resolutions to the negative ironic culture—to the idea that Wallace’s characters are largely formulated within the narcissistic dilemma that requires both distance and closeness with regards to the other. Therefore, the ‘positive resolutions’ do not resolve the double-bind, but mitigate it.

With this in mind, my discussion is arranged in the same order in which I described the use of psychoanalysis: in this opening chapter, I discuss the conjunction between secondary narcissism and irony; in the following chapter, I demonstrate how James Incandenza operates as the quintessential insufficient ironic-narcissistic subject, who emblematically isolates himself to the point of oblivion; in the third chapter, I investigate Avril Incandenza and the maternal theme in order to elucidate the threat of engulfment that indicates the necessity of this ironic distancing in the first place; lastly, I explore the isolation and engulfment as a double-bind of desiring and fearing intersubjective affectivity in the Incandenza boys Hal and Orin, which leads to the conclusory idea that Wallace’s characters mitigate the bind.<sup>5</sup>

### **Affective Alternatives to Irony**

Most of the critical literature on the novel tends to surround the first part of the dilemma—specifically irony and the conterminous anhedonia as a state of unfeeling—and it understands affect in such a way that evades three important components: the affective-isolative consequences of the

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<sup>5</sup> I would like to acknowledge that I have opted for a kind of ‘down the rabbit hole’ approach to my claim, in the sense that I start with the inter-relational component of subjectivity (the ironic-narcissistic) and later move to the developmental aspects that haunt these subjects. I have chosen this organization for the simple reason that majority of the relevant critical literature on *Infinite Jest* and Wallace in general is built around the notion irony (with some on secondary narcissism), whereas research on affect in the novel has largely not involved the core psychoanalytic concepts to which I refer in this paper: engulfment, the abject, (primary) narcissism, and psychosis. In this way, I begin from the established criticism and later move into the more challenging formulation of affect that I am suggesting: isolative affect as a result of narcissistically operative irony, then affect as an engulfment threat.



distanced subject, the aggressivity involved in ironizing the other for narcissistic purposes, and the affect underpinning the need for distance that has real, psychotic, consequences. Although I do continually refer to the latter point, I leave its full explication for the third chapter, since it relates to the ‘engulfment’ pole of the double-bind that I have suggested, whereas the first two relate to the isolative consequences of ironic distancing and the interpersonal effects of secondary narcissism. To this end, I will first address the dominant critical trend in Wallace studies, which has largely focused on Wallace’s criticism of irony and alternatives that endeavor to approach affect. It seems to me that this trend has been exhausted, in the sense that many of the claims on irony in Wallace’s fiction are quite similar in the way they locate a logic of interpersonal access as a resolution to non-affective irony—one that lays out an approach to an increased access to affect, feeling, sentiment, empathy, and so on.<sup>6</sup> However, as I will later show with the aid of more recent academic works on Wallace’s fiction, irony and affect are not exactly antithetical, but irony operates as part of the anxiety of self-protective distancing. This means, as I pointed out above, that the (secondary) narcissistic use of irony isolates characters, which incites intensely anxious, aggressive, and fearful affects. With this in mind, on the topic of secondary narcissism, I first discuss the ironic-narcissistic function in Wallace’s fiction at large and then more specifically in the postmodern artistic figure James Incandenza in the following chapter. My focus in this chapter, then, centers on irony as a mechanism of the self-protective operation, or, as a component of the function of secondary narcissism. I suggest that

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<sup>6</sup> Not every article claiming that Wallace overturns irony argues that he does so in a directly affective way, but each suggested overturning of irony posits that irony is non-affective and, therefore, each one seems to aim toward an ‘affective’ resolution in some way. The primary example for the approach tends to involve the model of Alcoholics Anonymous from the novel, in which members identify with each other’s stories on an affective, experiential basis. For instance, some of A.A.’s most affective stories, such as that of the pregnant addict, are so powerful, “so good that even Tiny Ewell and Kate Gompert and the rest of the worst of them all sat still and listened without blinking, looking not just at the speaker’s face but into it” (376-9). Since I discuss ‘x over irony’ in more detail shortly, I will only note a few examples here: Marshall Boswell’s ‘single-entendre principles,’ Adam Kelly’s ‘sincerity,’ and Tore Rye Andersen’s ‘paying attention’; Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 2003); Adam Kelly, “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction,” in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. David Hering, (Austin, TX: Sideshow Media Group, 2010), 131-46; Tore Rye Andersen, “Pay Attention! David Foster Wallace and his Real Enemies,” (*English Studies* 95.1, 2014), 7-24.

Wallace's critique of irony is instead a critique of irony with narcissistic aims, which implies a defensive, affective ground, and brings about an equally affective consequence of isolation.

As I have mentioned, much of the critical analysis on *Infinite Jest* has revolved around Wallace's early 1990's comments in what Adam Kelly calls the "essay-interview nexus," which includes "E Unibus Pluram" and an interview with Larry McCaffrey.<sup>7</sup> Specifically, many of the critical investigations of the novel centre on Wallace's take on the way in which American culture had subsumed the function of irony to the extent that the distanced ironic position no longer operated as a force for change, but had itself become the entrapment. In "E Unibus Pluram," he argues that the entertainment culture had rendered irony sterile to the effect that the once rebellious mode of avant-garde fiction had "been absorbed, emptied, and redeployed by the very televisual establishment they had originally set themselves athwart."<sup>8</sup> For Wallace, one of the major consequences of irony having become commonplace is that it distanced people from genuine social causes or affective interpersonal encounters. To this end, he argues how a cynical brand of irony had permeated the media culture of his time: "flatness is a transcendence of melodrama, numbness transcends sentimentality, and cynicism announces that one knows the score."<sup>9</sup> The dominance of the distanced ironic position is not limited to popular media, but to the artistic culture of the time, including the avant-garde. Expanding on this in the corresponding interview with Larry McCaffrey, Wallace explores the concerns of his generation of writers. In probably the most cited passage in Wallace studies, he describes his contention with his predecessors:

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<sup>7</sup> Adam Kelly, "Development through Dialogue: David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas," (*Studies in the Novel* 44.3 2012), 268.

<sup>8</sup> Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," 184.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 181.

If I have a real enemy, a patriarch for my patricide, it's probably Barth and Coover and Burroughs, even Nabokov and Pynchon. Because, even though their self-consciousness and irony and anarchism served valuable purposes, were indispensable for their times, their aesthetic's absorption by the U.S. commercial culture has had appalling consequences for writers and everyone else.<sup>10</sup>

His contention with these authors centres on the fallout from their heavy use of irony as a tool to expose hypocrisy in culture. According to Wallace, the problem arose when the social and political objectives of irony dissipated, yet the ironic function persisted, becoming an empty style instead of a functional method of subversion.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the transgression of formal boundaries no longer served proper literary or cultural aims, but became transgression for its own sake. Therefore, the problem of the writers of his generation is as follows: on one hand, their forefathers had been enormously influential and politically valuable, but, on the other hand, their heavy use of the ironic approach had become ineffective on the grounds that corporate institutions and personalities had assimilated these characteristics.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, he describes his generation as orphans who are ashamed of a desire for the return of the clearer political conditions of their forefathers, but, at the same time, desire an objective to call their own.<sup>13</sup>

Largely, critics have attempted to sort out Wallace's critique of this social environment, which he describes variably as irony, cynicism, parody, sarcasm, narcissism, solipsism, and so on. The dominant critical position tends to take irony as the aim of Wallace's social critique, most often with heavy reference to these two non-fiction pieces that were published a few years before *Infinite Jest*. A great deal has been gained from this approach, but it seems that this position has reached

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<sup>10</sup> Wallace, "An Expanded Interview," in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, 48. Although many critics have taken this statement as the baseline of Wallace's approach to fiction, the 'if' in the statement does render it at least somewhat conditional—a more offhanded expression that depicts his own position within the history of the postmodernism in general.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* This argument is also found in another interview. See: David Foster Wallace, "Looking for a Garde of Which to Be Avant: An Interview with David Foster Wallace," Interviewed by Hugh Kennedy and Geoffrey Polk, in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*. Edited by Stephen J. Burn, (Jackson: U of Mississippi, 2012), esp. 17-18.

<sup>12</sup> Wallace, "An Expanded Interview," in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, 48.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

something of a stasis itself; namely, if irony constitutes the core of the problem, then the critic seems caught in the dualism of either expounding the way in which irony functions in Wallace's works or locating functional alternatives to ironic distancing.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, Wallace studies have become somewhat fastened to a groundwork of alternatives to a non-affective irony. In view of the variability of terms Wallace uses to describe the issue, this is not quite his take on the matter, even in the early "E Unibus Pluram" and the related interview with Larry McCaffrey. A brief discussion of some of these works will lead to my argument in the next section that the irony-based critical approach to *Infinite Jest* misses the fundamental operation of anxiety that underpins the distanced selfhood; later on, I come to an investigation of the function of distancing in view of the concept of secondary narcissism.

To some degree, many critics have followed from an idea of irony as a kind of dark cultural cloud that blockades the subjects of *Infinite Jest* from attaining the intersubjective affectivity that they desire. While this critical paradigm has produced a good deal of insight into the worlds of Wallace's fiction, it has somewhat blockaded other approaches, or contoured other approaches around the idea that irony is Wallace's ultimate critical target. When this is the case, critical analyses tend to revolve around this approach that positions affect over irony. For instance, one of the earliest full-length articles, "Panic of Influence" by A.O. Scott, follows Harold Bloom's well-known notion of the anxiety of influence, suggesting that Wallace's anxiety relates to his postmodern ancestors and leads to a "feedback loop" between ironic and sincere approaches to life.<sup>15</sup> This idea is later expanded upon by Adam Kelly in his influential article "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American

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<sup>14</sup> Tore Rye Andersen argues a related point that focusing on Wallace's antagonism to his literary predecessors has blockaded other approaches. Tore Rye Andersen, "Pay Attention!," 8-11. In much the same way, the focus on Wallace's antagonism to irony seems to blockade much of what is going on in *Infinite Jest*, specifically the relationship between affect and the maternal threat.

<sup>15</sup> A.O. Scott, "The Panic of Influence," (*New York Review of Books*, 10 Feb. 2000. Accessed on 25 June, 2016. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2000/02/10/the-panic-of-influence/>). Sincerity, for both Scott and Kelly, is an indirect appeal to affectivity, given the emotional content of a sincere statement; as I have said, the primary model for sincerity, Alcoholics Anonymous, is quite emotional in the novel.

Fiction,” in which he elucidates Wallace’s ‘sincerity’ in comparison to irony and motive—that is, true sincerity is achieved only through communicative transmission to another person, who, in certain cases such as veterans of Alcoholics Anonymous, can decipher whether or not the sincerity has an ulterior motive.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, in the first monograph on Wallace, Marshall Boswell explores the way in which Wallace uses meta-irony to both expose the limitations of the irony and to gesture toward un-ironic possibilities—an idea that seems counter-intuitive, given Wallace’s attraction to double-binds; nevertheless, Boswell argues that Wallace ironizes irony itself, opening a door to “single-entendre principles.”<sup>17</sup> A more recent example of the irony-based approach is Allard den Dulk’s article on irony in Wallace’s fiction, in which he locates correlates between Kierkegaard’s notion of irony as a force of negation and Wallace’s critique of irony in American culture.<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, he sees the infinity in *Infinite Jest* as “an ethical choice that is constantly taken up again”<sup>19</sup> between the more cynical ironic-aesthetic attitude and irony as a tool of proper critical engagement. However, even here, the cynical form of irony that Den Dulk describes seems more related to narcissism than any conventional definition of irony. In each of these articles, the irony-based approach culminates in locating a positive alternative to irony—a move that, I suggest, misses the core of Wallace’s critique of irony, which strongly relates to its narcissistic operations that heavily involve affect. In these approaches, critics tend to view the positive alternative as a resolution, but do not account for the affectively isolative result of the ironic characters or explore irony as part of a developmental phenomenon against the engulfment threat (or, as Kate Gompert says, psychotic depression).

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<sup>16</sup> Kelly, “New Sincerity in American Fiction.”

<sup>17</sup> Boswell, *Understanding*, 17, 207. This idea seems counter-intuitive considering Wallace’s heavy use of irony and complex interweaving of character histories. That is to say, it seems almost a rule in Wallace’s fiction that no direct approach to meaning can be achieved. For Wallace’s biographer’s take on his obsession with double-binds, see: D.T. Max, “A Conversation With D.T. Max About His New David Foster Wallace Biography,” Interviewed by Michelle Dean, (*The Awl*, 30 August, 2012. Accessed on 15 August, 2017. <https://www.theawl.com/2012/08/a-conversation-with-d-t-max-about-his-new-david-foster-wallace-biography/>).

<sup>18</sup> Allard den Dulk, “Beyond Endless’ Aesthetic’ Irony: A Comparison of the Irony Critique of Søren Kierkegaard and David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*,” (*Studies in the Novel* 44.3, 2012), 325-345.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 342.

## The Affectivity of Irony

As I have said, the dominant approach assumes that ironic subjectivity is a position of unfeeling (anhedonia), so it sets up a dualism of negative irony and positive affectivity; that is, irony is taken to be a purely distanced position that is contrary to affect. That said, certain critics have begun to unravel the paradigm of negative irony overcome by a positive affect-approaching alternative, suggesting that irony and affect are not necessarily in opposition. Iannis Goerlandt is perhaps the first Wallace scholar to directly challenge the coordinates of ‘affect over irony’ by disputing the idea of irony as a univocal function. Following Linda Hutcheon’s *Irony’s Edge*, Goerlandt criticizes the idea that irony can be expressed as a binary in this way; more specifically, he argues that instead of perceiving irony as the opposite of the literal, irony involves a plurality of connections between subjects and statements, which Hutcheon calls “discursive communities.”<sup>20</sup> Goerlandt argues that *Infinite Jest* exists as its own discursive community in the sense that it constructs its own communal archive of the ironic, which unfolds as the reader advances through the novel.<sup>21</sup> By conceptualizing irony as a relational and plural function, Goerlandt throws into question the earlier argument made by Boswell that Wallace wants to engender ‘single-entendre’ principles. Hutcheon’s relational model of irony—that is, relations between the given communities, contextual variations in meaning, and the assumed knowledge in the ‘unsaid’ of an ironic statement—“would involve an oscillating yet simultaneous perception of plural and different meanings.”<sup>22</sup> If irony depends on the given relations between ‘discursive communities,’ then the concept of single-entendres could not possibly hold. In fact, Hutcheon contends that irony is itself inseparable from affect, writing that “there is an affective

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<sup>20</sup> Iannis Goerlandt, “‘Put the Book Down and Slowly Walk Away’: Irony and David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*,” (*Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 47.3, 2006), 310-11, 319; Linda Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*, (London: Routledge, 1994), 85-110.

<sup>21</sup> Goerlandt, “Put that Book Down,” 319-20.

<sup>22</sup> Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge*, 64.

‘charge’ to irony that cannot be ignored and that cannot be separated from its politics of use if it is to account for the range of emotional response (from anger to delight) and the various degrees of motivation and proximity (from distanced detachment to passionate engagement).”<sup>23</sup> In this sense, irony is not quite the distanced mechanical function with which critics have engaged in their works on Wallace.

David Rando furthers this line of argumentation, by exploring the link between irony and affect in Wallace’s fiction. He claims that the irony portrayed in *Infinite Jest* is not affectless, but is fundamentally an anxiety of disconnection from others.<sup>24</sup> Contrary to the critical paradigm of unfeeling irony, Rando shows that the ironic is entangled with the isolative feeling of being unable to experience love.<sup>25</sup> The narrator of “Good Old Neon” provides a succinct image of this anxiety: “inside you is this enormous room full of what seems like everything in the whole universe at one time or another and yet the only parts that get out have to somehow squeeze out through one of those tiny keyholes you see under the knob in older doors.”<sup>26</sup> In this image, a subject’s interior space is not empty as it might seem, but is a surplus that suggests intense emotion. The character sees his problem as an impossibility of sharing affective experiences with another person, hence the tiny keyhole suggests that only a minimum of affectation can be communicated with the world, leading not to a hollowed-out and uncaring subject, but to the horror of disconnection and isolation. Similarly, the connection between ironic distance and anxiety occurs abundantly in *Infinite Jest*. The narrator

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>24</sup> David P. Rando, “David Foster Wallace and Lovelessness,” (*Twentieth Century Literature* 59.4 2013), 576. The character’s predicament relates to the ego in the sense that, “the more time and effort you put into trying to appear impressive or attractive to other people, the less impressive or attractive you felt inside — you were a fraud. And the more of a fraud you felt like, the harder you tried to convey an impressive or likable image of yourself.” David Foster Wallace, “Good Old Neon,” in *Oblivion: Stories*, (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2004), 147. However, the character later realizes that “maybe the real root of my problem was not fraudulence but a basic inability to really love.” Ibid, 165. In this way, the character is isolated by a kind of double-bind of continual appeal to the other for reinforcement and elevation that has the counter-intentional effect of the anxiety of isolation.

<sup>25</sup> In fact, Rando takes to task Wallace scholars of the ‘affectivity over irony’ approach for engaging with the binary of distanced irony and affective sincerity “without in fact compounding irony so that it goes, as it were, all the way down.” Rando, “Lovelessness,” 576.

<sup>26</sup> Wallace, “Good Old Neon,” 178.

inform us both that “inside Hal there’s pretty much nothing at all, he knows” (694) and also that Hal suspects that cynicism and irony indicate a “fear of being really human” (694-95). This is a far cry from the empty-self model of an ironic subject, in the sense that it suggests that the interior was never empty, but that the characters only desired to be empty in order to avoid the anxiety of affective relationships. This problematizes the concept of irony as non-affective in Wallace’s fiction. In this view, irony is not simply a dark cultural cloud that regulates already empty TV-obsessed subjects, but is inseparable from the anxiety of fraudulence, the panic of being unable to love, and the despair of isolation.

Rando’s investigation of this story leads me to question the root of this predicament—why is the protagonist of “Good Old Neon” so unable to connect? The response may seem quite simple: the sole focus of his relationships with others aims back at his ego, in that he exclusively attempts to appear attractive and impressive to the people in his life. This never-ending cycle recalls Kelly’s idea of the radical anticipatory logic that becomes the structural ground of selfhood; Kelly argues that, for Wallace’s characters, “the anticipation of others’ reception of one’s outward behaviour begins to take priority for the acting self, so that inner states lose their originating causal status and instead become effects of that anticipatory logic.”<sup>27</sup> That is to say, the self is constructed in relation to the subject’s perceived reception by the other. This can be taken a step further, to suggest that if the subject’s relation to the other is exclusively based on ‘anticipating the other’s reception,’ then the subject is responding to a pre-constructed version of the other, rather than the other as a sovereign entity (a move that obliterates the other in the process). It seems to me that the entrapment of Wallace’s subjects within this anticipatory cycle amounts to the characters’ failure to address the question of

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<sup>27</sup> Kelly, “New Sincerity in American Fiction,” 136. Thomas Winningham explores the question of sincerity in the relationship between the reader and writer. He argues that Wallace’s fiction demonstrates that behind the veil of narrative performance is not truth, but another veil; in this way, any sincerity, truth, or reality must be communicated by means of the illusion itself. Thomas Winningham, “‘Author Here’: David Foster Wallace and the Post-metaphysical Paradox,” (*Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 56.5, 2015), 476.



why they desire so intensely to convey this particular image of themselves. Wallace himself gives a very simple answer in some interviews and repeats it again and again in his fiction: whether avant-garde writers, athletes, or drug addicts, people desire attention and affection.<sup>28</sup>

However, as Wallace demonstrates, especially in *Infinite Jest*, a desire for affectivity is offset by an intense fear of it. An important difference between the protagonist of “Good Old Neon” and Hal in *Infinite Jest* is that the former surmises his problem as an ‘inability to love’ and the latter feels it is a ‘fear of love.’ This is precisely the difference between ‘anhedonia and the Great White Shark of pain’—or isolation and engulfment—in that the former is the anxiety of distance and the latter is a fear of emotional closeness. I suggest that, in *Infinite Jest*, both predicaments are occurring at once: characters are trapped between an ‘inability to love’ (the anxiety-producing state of isolation) and the ‘fear of love’ (the anxiety-producing threat of engulfment). In other words, the novel explores both the ironic-narcissistic strategy that leads to extreme distance *and* the proximal threat of engulfment that relates to the mother-infant dyad. So, while Rando’s study does explore the problems of the anxiety of ironic distancing, the idea of an ‘inability to love,’ or, for that matter, the short story in question, does not ‘go all the way down’ with affect as an engulfing emotional closeness. Although “Good Old Neon” does not go this far, it suffices to explore the anxiety at the root of the distanced ironic position, in the sense that, for Rando, irony and affect are associated—an important factor for understanding the affectivity of isolation in Wallace’s fiction. With this in mind, I leave the discussion on psychotic depression, engulfment, and maternal theme to the third chapter for the reason that the critical paradigm centered on irony leads more directly to a discussion on the conjunction between irony and secondary narcissism, rather than the more opaque notion of primary narcissism.

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<sup>28</sup> Wallace, “An Expanded Interview,” in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, 24-5; David Foster Wallace, “Mischief: A Brief Interview with David Foster Wallace,” Interviewed by Chris Wright, (in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*. Edited by Stephen J. Burn. Jackson: U of Mississippi, 2012), 101-3.

## Irony and Secondary Narcissism

So, I have written about others' views thus far, namely the way in which scholars have tended to focus on irony as the core problem to be overturned by affective alternatives and, conversely, how more recent articles have demonstrated that irony and affect are not distinct entities and therefore part of a larger operation. As I have said, my claim in this chapter follows this latter idea, with the larger operation in question being that of secondary narcissism. Along the same lines as Kelly's idea that Wallace's subjects are grounded in 'anticipating the other's reception,' the latter's most overtly narcissistic characters tend to interact with a pre-constructed view of the other that becomes quite aggressive—a point that indicates the affective undercurrent of this operation. On this note, I aim to crystallize the conjunction of irony and narcissism that I have suggested; to this end, I will show how Wallace's critique of irony is a critique of the deployment of irony for the aim of ego reinforcement and demonstrate this narcissistically operative irony in some of Wallace's more overtly narcissistic characters from a variety of his works.

Although it is easier to spot the narcissistic function in Wallace's characters in the period following *Infinite Jest*, it is slightly more difficult to isolate this function prior to *Brief Interviews*. I suggest that this is due to Wallace's preoccupation with the ironic entertainment culture in his early 90s 'essay-interview' and *Infinite Jest*'s parallel concerns with irony as the kind of inter-relational doxa of Wallace's speculative future America. In fact, Mary K. Holland argues that Wallace omits an explicit investigation into narcissism in *Infinite Jest*, which for her is the "deadly undertow against which the novel struggles."<sup>29</sup> She questions whether or not Wallace fully accounts for the characters' narcissism in the novel, contending that it is not until "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do

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<sup>29</sup> Holland, "The Art's Heart's Purpose," 225.

Again,” first published in the same year as *Infinite Jest*,<sup>30</sup> in which Wallace describes his narcissism-inducing experience on a luxury cruise ship, does Wallace truly leap into the question of narcissistic desire, which he then follows through with more explicitly narcissistic characters in *Brief Interviews*. I take issue with this contention, since I find the narcissism depicted in *Infinite Jest* to be more complex and subtle than in that of his later work. For instance, Wallace’s shaping of terms like ‘irony,’ ‘cynicism,’ and ‘solipsism’ around the logic of anticipating the other’s reception speaks to the importance of egoic elevation in his work in the early-to-mid 90s. Contrary to Holland’s suggestion, I would argue that the novel is his most in-depth work on narcissism. In later works such as *Brief Interviews*, it is simply more immediately apparent that narcissism is the operation in question, since he explores a more impetuous secondary narcissism and its interpersonal consequences. Charles B. Harris notes a similar issue with the precise name of the secondary narcissism in *Infinite Jest*, which he eventually calls “emotional solipsism”; that is, Wallace’s characters in the novel and many of the stories in *Brief Interviews* and *Oblivion* share the inability to communicate on properly affective terms, since their experience of horror is distinctively self-oriented.<sup>31</sup>

Now I will explicate the psychoanalytic notion of narcissism in order to show how it is at the heart of Wallace’s critique of irony. In this section and in the following chapter, I explore irony as a function of ‘secondary’ narcissism proper to subjectivity, which, in Freudian terms, is the libido invested

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<sup>30</sup> This was originally published in *Harper’s* under a different title: David Foster Wallace, “Shipping out: On the (nearly lethal) comforts of a luxury cruise,” (*Harper’s Magazine*, New York, January, 1996: 33-57. Accessed on June 25, 2016, <https://harpers.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/09/HarpersMagazine-1996-01-0007859.pdf>). In the cruise ship article, Wallace writes about the tension of the infantilizing experience in the sense that the cruise liner’s mission is the fulfillment of desire—in fact, the premeditated fulfillment of any possible demand. However, it is unfulfillable since there is always a remainder that leads, at least on the cruise ship, to childish outbursts of rage over petty issues. Likewise, in *Infinite Jest*, there are many indications that the mother-infant theme (related to primary narcissism) constitutes an important part of *Infinite Jest*’s narcissistic predicament: the appearance of the ‘Inner Infant Group’ (a therapy session that involves members clutching teddy bears and demanding acknowledgement and love from other members, 795-808), the thematically infantile contents of ‘Infinite Jest’ the film, and Hal and Orin’s complex relationship with the mother.

<sup>31</sup> Charles B. Harris, “David Foster Wallace: ‘That Distinctive Singular Stamp of Himself,’” (*Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 55.2, 2010), 174. For Wallace’s discussion on solipsism being the worst possible philosophical conclusion, see: Wallace, “An Expanded Interview,” in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, 24-5. Further, for an excellent article detailing Wallace’s misreading of solipsism in Wittgenstein, see: Patrick Horn, “Does Language Fail Us? Wallace’s Struggle with Solipsism,” in *Gesturing Toward Reality*, edited by Robert K. Bolger and Scott Korb, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 246-270.

excessively into the ego, rather than into external objects.<sup>32</sup> However, the egoic reinforcement or elevation occurs through internalized relations to the other and the social order (superego); in fact, the ego depends on the other, via the superego, to sustain an image of the self. Thus, in secondary narcissism, the libido is directed through objects external to the self and is returned onto the ego by way of the other, elevating the subject's sense of worth.<sup>33</sup> In other words, in order to sustain the sense of self, the subject's libido circulates through the other to be directed back onto the image of the self. Again, Kelly's idea of the subject constructing a selfhood around 'anticipating the other's reception' is exemplary of this function, since a narcissistic subject derives reinforcement, in part, by predicting what the other will admire. Wallace's narcissistic characters are obsessively tied into others' reception of them to the extent that, no matter how inflated their sense of self might appear, they are utterly dependent on the other to prop up the ego. As I have mentioned, many of Wallace's characters immediately following *Infinite Jest* demonstrate the more pathological sides of the narcissistic function, "appearing unduly significant to oneself and craving undue admiration from others."<sup>34</sup> In these extreme cases—seen in many of Wallace's characters—the ego requires constant, almost permanent, admiration or attention, in such a way that makes characters dependent on other's reception of them. Wallace confirms this idea in some of his interviews, in which he reflects on his own desire for attention and affection—that any statement of intent could also be a call for attention as a reinforcement of the self-image.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> "The Ego and the Id" in: Sigmund Freud, *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay, (New York: Norton, 1989. Reprint, New York: Norton, 1995), 650.

<sup>33</sup> Freud writes on the continuity of secondary narcissism in the life of a subject and the entanglement of this subject in the world of objects: "All through the subject's life his ego remains the great reservoir of his libido, from which object cathexes are sent out and into which the libido can stream back again from the objects." "An Autobiographical Study" in: Sigmund Freud, *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: Norton, 1989. Reprint, New York: Norton, 1995), 35.

<sup>34</sup> Karen Horney, *New Ways in Psychoanalysis*, (London: Butler & Tanner, 1939. Reprint, London: Butler & Tanner, 1947), 90. Freud suggests the same extreme variant in secondary narcissism, comparing it with megalomania. "On Narcissism: An Introduction" in: Sigmund Freud, *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: Norton, 1989. Reprint, New York: Norton, 1995), 546-7.

<sup>35</sup> Wallace, "An Expanded Interview," in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, 24-5.

The way that secondary narcissism ties into irony is fairly straightforward. In order to crystallize this link, I will first note that Wallace uses the term irony in a very general way; that is, he does not discuss any particular form of irony, but rather discusses the consequences of its narcissistic uses. In fact, there is a good deal of ambiguity in Wallace's use of the term irony, since it does involve sarcasm and parody, but the emphasis is on the cynicism involved in these operations, especially the uncritical cynicism which tends to be a part of the self-image. So, it is not irony *per se* that constitutes Wallace's critique; rather he criticizes irony that is used for an ulterior motive in support of the ego to the point, in the most extreme cases, that the ego becomes the world. As I have said, for generations of writers previous to that of Wallace, irony had a political aim, thus it was coextended by its social and political targets, enabling this function to overturn standards of censorship, sexuality, cultural traditions, and so on. The operation of irony, as noted by Wallace, is that it "splits things apart, gets us up above them."<sup>36</sup> However, in view of the large-scale cultural co-opting of irony and its subsequent debasement, the 'elevation' involved becomes the user's sense of self, the ego. This is the reason that Wallace saves his harshest criticism for the adroit self-aware ironists who co-opt the function of irony for the purpose of boosting their self-image.

Wallace directly comments on the idea of narcissism and the ego in his 1997 article on John Updike's *Toward the End of Time*, which, despite a short-winded commendation of Updike's prose, ends up a tidal wave of disdain for Updike, Norman Mailer, and Philip Roth; He names this group the "Great Male Narcissists" (GMNs)—those writers who contributed to the once subversive atmosphere of individualism, but whose individualism failed to transform into anything beyond those narrowed aims of self-centeredness, egoism for its own sake, and transgression for the sake of transgression itself.<sup>37</sup> The review argues that Updike's novel is ultimately a kind of adolescent elegy on impotence,

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>37</sup> David Foster Wallace, "Certainly the End of Something or Other, One Would Sort of Have to Think," in *Consider the Lobster*, (New York: Little, Brown and Co. 2006), 51-59.

where the protagonist's primary concern is a conjunction between the end of his sexual prowess, the approach of the end of his life, and the end of America; to this end, Wallace quips that "[w]hen a solipsist dies, after all, everything goes with him."<sup>38</sup> Certainly, this criticism relates to his earlier statements on the sterility of irony, but it also reveals the conjunction of the postmodern artist and secondary narcissism, in the sense that it sees irony in both cases as a function of the ego.

Wallace's exploration of this narcissistically operative irony of the artist appears in *Infinite Jest* through James Incandenza; however, since I discuss this character at length in the coming chapter, it is useful to explore some of Wallace's other fiction in this regard. The most bluntly self-absorbed characters in Wallace's fiction tend to appear post-*Infinite Jest*, when many of his characters became, at least for a time, increasingly and overtly narcissistic. However, the important difference between the narcissists of Wallace's fiction and those of Updike is expressed by Wallace himself as "corresponding sign[s] that the author understood that they were repellent."<sup>39</sup> In fact, many of Wallace's most articulate narcissists share traits with those of Updike and, although possessing sensibilities of a different generation, "can quote Pascal and Kierkegaard on angst, discourse on the death of Schubert,"<sup>40</sup> and so on.

Many such examples are found in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. As I have mentioned, the characters E—and K—in "Brief Interview #72" are quite fluent in contemporaneous critical discourse, citing a wide range of popular academics such as Foucault and Lacan.<sup>41</sup> Likewise, the interviewee of "Brief Interview #20" expresses his interpersonal sensibility as a 'typology' and generally communicates in the tone of an academic blogger, who only at the very end of the interview demonstrates his misogyny in a violent outburst.<sup>42</sup> The difference between these and Updike's

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 54-5. Wallace refers to them as "the single most self-absorbed generation since Louis XIV." Ibid, 51.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 52.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>41</sup> "Brief Interview #72" in: Wallace, *Brief Interviews*, 172-191.

<sup>42</sup> "Brief Interview #20" in: David Foster Wallace, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1999), 238-265.

protagonists is Wallace's overt intensification of this narcissistic rage in sudden bursts, which draws attention to the affective discord of the character. Further demonstrating Wallace's unique portrayal of these issues is his use of clever set-pieces in which certain characters violate others despite the aggressors' conscious and often ingenious denial of any aggression (of course, there are numerous other cues as to their repugnancy, such as the title 'Hideous Men' informing us point-blank about the nature of the interviewees). Also, it is clear that this narcissistic function is at once aggressive and defensive (and therefore affective); the subject must, at all costs, 'get up above' the other.

In these cases, it is clear that irony reinforces the characters' image of themselves, to the extent that when the image is threatened, an affective undercurrent ruptures through the discourse and upsets what appears to be a delicate balance of narcissistic reinforcement of the ego. One such example is the subject of "Brief Interview #20," who offers a convincing account of falling in love with a woman who describes her survival of being raped by a killer; according to the interviewee, the only way she managed to avoid being killed was by sincerely empathizing with the killer.<sup>43</sup> Near the end of the interview, the logic of 'anticipating of the other' returns seemingly unprovoked and, despite the interviewee's insistence that his sudden weeping was not a source of embarrassment, he retorts to the interviewer, "I know how this sounds, trust me. I know your type"<sup>44</sup>—a phrase that exemplifies the idea of responding to a pre-constructed other. He proceeds to lash out at the (female) interviewer in a deeply misogynistic rage, overturning his claim to have broken through his confessed self-centeredness. Here, the interviewee, while attempting to appear 'up above' the contents of the interview (through his hyper-aware discourse), demonstrates the affective and egoic undercurrent to his distanced ironic position. In a further indication of the narcissism involved, the position of the interviewer, whose questions are marked simply by a 'Q.,' indicates that she is violently reduced to a

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 265.

phantasmatic construction of the men in question.<sup>45</sup>

Not only are Wallace's male characters plagued by this predicament, but many of his female characters are also caught within the (secondary) narcissistic problem as well. For instance, the woman's logic in "The Depressed Person" correlates in many ways to the interviewed men; the narrative on the protagonist demonstrates both the logic of the pre-constructed other and the isolation involved in the defence mechanism. Here, the protagonist suffers from an isolating depression that involves an intense anxiety of her Support System's reception of her. The narrator describes how she could "detect, in the friend's increasingly long silences and/or repetitions of encouraging clichés, the boredom" and "could well imagine each 'friend' wincing now when the telephone rang late at night."<sup>46</sup> Her defensive preoccupation with anticipating the thoughts and emotional responses of her friends pervades even her choice of vocabulary; for example, her therapist contends the depressed woman's use of the term "pathetic," pointing out that it is "manipulative, an attempt to protect oneself against the possibility of a negative judgement by making it clear that one was already judging oneself far more negatively than any listener could have the heart to."<sup>47</sup> In this way, the depressed woman's entire personality is centered on her attempt to thwart particular kinds of reception if simply by beating them to negative assessment. This is another instance of 'getting above' the situation not for the sake of gaining insight, but merely for the sake of protecting the self from a perceived threat. In the end, when the therapist dies, the 'depressed person' laments her sense of abandonment rather than grief, feeling "nothing . . . for anyone but herself."<sup>48</sup> This strategy, of course, indicates a kind of permanent anxiety related to the character's entrapment in this isolating logic.

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<sup>45</sup> Rando points out that when Wallace's female characters do speak, "it is with devastating power that . . . cuts through their own basic self-conceptions, forcing each to acknowledge with shock that he has been living a life of self-deception." Rando, "Lovelessness," 582. However, Rando does not back this up with any hard evidence and although there are some cases of female characters undercutting their male counterparts' narcissistic logic, many of Wallace's female characters do not escape the deadlock.

<sup>46</sup> "The Depressed Person" in: David Foster Wallace, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1999), 42.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 47.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 56.



These examples have demonstrated the affective undercurrent of a few narcissistic characters in Wallace's fiction outside of *Infinite Jest*, but there is something to be said on the ubiquity of narcissism in Wallace's fiction. In this sense, his construction of characters recalls Jacques Lacan's account of subjectivity as imaginary and non-reciprocal, but also absolutely dependent on the other. As I have said, it is not only the most extreme examples of secondary narcissism that illustrate this, but Wallace's concerns in general revolve around a framework that sees subjectivity as formulated around a pre-constructed relation to the other; for Wallace, people are caught in *imaginary* relationships with other people—a point he repeatedly makes throughout his career.<sup>49</sup> Likewise, for Lacan, the very becoming of a subject (the mirror stage) “situates the agency known as the ego, prior to its social determination, in a *fictional direction* that will forever remain irreducible for any single individual.”<sup>50</sup> In this sense, Wallace's construction of ironic-narcissistic characters corresponds in a fundamental way to the subject's narcissistic foundation in Lacanian theory.<sup>51</sup> Recalling the ‘anticipatory logic’ as the ground of selfhood, the subjective process for Lacan is “circular between the subject and the Other—from the subject called to the Other, to the subject of that which he has himself seen appear in the field of the Other, from the Other coming back. This process is circular, but, of its nature, without reciprocity.”<sup>52</sup> The Lacanian subject, then, circulates through a pre-constructed idea of the other, thereby involving no correspondence with the other at an actual level. In

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<sup>49</sup> Wallace, “An Expanded Interview,” in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, 22; David Foster Wallace, “David Foster Wallace on Life and Work,” (*Wall Street Journal*, 19 September 2008. Accessed on 25 August, 2017. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122178211966454607.html>), n.p.

<sup>50</sup> “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function” in: Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*, trans. Bruce Fink, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002), 76 (emph. mine).

<sup>51</sup> Lacan writes on the essentiality of the narcissistic logic: “one cannot overemphasize the irreducible character of narcissistic structure . . . This conception allows us to understand the aggressiveness involved in the effects of all the subject's regressions, aborted undertakings, and refusals of typical development, especially at the level of sexual realization—and more precisely within each of the great phases that the libidinal metamorphoses bring about in human life, whose major function analysis has demonstrated: weaning, the Oedipal stage, puberty, maturity, and motherhood...” “Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis” in: Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*, trans. Bruce Fink, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002), 97.

<sup>52</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI*, ed. Jacques Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan, (New York: W.W Norton, 1998), 207.

other words, relationships are stuck at the imaginary level.<sup>53</sup> In the sense that the ‘anticipation of the other’s reception’ implies the subject’s pre-construction of the other, one can see the way in which the subjects of both Lacan and Wallace seem to have no reciprocal communication with the other as an-other. In this way, the Lacanian model illuminates the foundational nature of this problematic in Wallace’s fiction in that the latter’s characters follow this idea of non-reciprocal development.

The conjunction between Wallace and Lacan highlights two points related to narcissism: first, as I have mentioned, it illuminates the affective anxiety of isolation that I have discussed, in the sense that Wallace’s characters are limited to imaginary relations to the other; second, it demonstrates the subject’s dependency on the other for support. To draw out this latter point, I will briefly discuss Lacan’s mirror stage in order to demonstrate this point. In the mirror stage, the child recognizes itself as a unified image, in contrast to the fragmented experience of its own body and the world; subsequently, the child begins to idealize and identify with the image, which is sustained by and conflated with influence by the parents (e.g., encouragement, discouragement).<sup>54</sup> While the image in the mirror appears unified, the subject cannot possibly fulfill this idealized self in the way that such a unified image suggests, or compared to the way the parents appear as wholes in the eyes of the young child. In this way, a contentious relationship with the other develops in which the self-image is idealized, but also depends on the other to reinforce that image. This leads to a conflicted relationship with the other, marked on one hand by a desire for adoration, attention, and affection, and on the other hand by anxiety, aggression, and manipulation—precisely Wallace’s construction of selfhood as utterly tied into the other’s reception. In the case of the more ‘hideous’ characters, this sometimes leads to aggression, but more importantly it leads to characters with a proximal dilemma with regards to the other. That is to say, the characters’ fear the other and protectively distance themselves as a

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<sup>53</sup> Speaking of Lacan’s ‘imaginary order,’ Bruce Fink writes a simple and informative line on interpersonal relationships (actually, in this case, between the analysand and analyst, but this model could be taken more generally): “it is dominated by the analysand’s self-image and the image he or she forms of [others].” Bruce Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard U Press, 1997), 32.

<sup>54</sup> Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1997), 36-7.

result, but also require some level of affectivity and engage in pathological behaviours in order to attain it (e.g., neediness, drug use). In short, they both desire affectation at some level and feel threatened by the prospect of getting too close, so, attempt to control their proximity to the other.<sup>55</sup>

In *Infinite Jest* especially, Wallace explores the developmental origins of narcissistically operative irony with special regard to the Incandenza family through the detailed psychohistories of the characters. These predicaments are formulated in ways that are specific to each character, but illustrate the narcissistic basis for the predicament. As I have said, irony is not simply a dark cloud that looms over the characters of *Infinite Jest*, but is a component of the narcissistic establishment of the subject. Wallace's idea of subjectivity, like that of Jacques Lacan, seems to be indivisible from the narcissistic extraction of a self from the world, which implies a distancing of which irony, in Wallace's characters, is an important constituent. In this sense, the establishment and reinforcement of a self are key to understanding the way in which the novel suggests possibilities for resolution, or, as I suggest, mitigation. James' difficulty with isolation, Avril's emotionally controlling behaviour, Hal's psychological breakdown, Orin's pathological relationships with women, and the countless other specific problematics in *Infinite Jest* and many of Wallace's works thereafter are testaments to the sense that characters do not finally resolve, but continually mitigate their predicaments.<sup>56</sup> This is the sense in which I argue that an ironic-narcissistic defence involves an attempted distancing from affect, but leads to the anxiety of isolation; in this way, irony and affect do not form problem and resolution, but that the two notions are entangled in the narcissistic subjectivity.

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<sup>55</sup> The characters I have mentioned in this section are each trapped in a dilemma well-articulated in "The Depressed Person": "self-hatred, toxic guilt, narcissism, self-pity, neediness, manipulation, and many of the other shame-based behaviors with which endogenously depressed adults typically presented were best understood as psychological defenses erected by a vestigial wounded Inner Child against the possibility of trauma and abandonment." In Wallace, *Brief Interviews*, 47.

<sup>56</sup> As Wallace puts it, fiction should "illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human." Wallace, "An Expanded Interview," in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, 26. Even on this point, Wallace emphasizes connection at an imaginary level between characters and readers; namely, he discusses the redemptive function of art at the level of the individual—his task, as he puts it, is to enable a reader "imaginatively to identify with characters' pain." *Ibid*, 22. For another interview that focuses on this topic at length, see: Wallace, "Looking for a Garde of Which to Be Avant," in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, 11-20.

To this end, through an investigation of the Incandenza family, I aim at deciphering Wallace's formulation of the developmental phenomenon of narcissism in a way that demonstrates irony as a strategy of secondary narcissism that results in affective isolation, but also defends against the affective threat of engulfment. For instance, the Incandenza boys Hal and Orin are, in different ways and at different points within the text, desperate to find some form of intimacy, but fear it at the same time; their strategy seems interwoven between the ineffectual and isolated paternal James Incandenza and the mysterious horror that surrounds the maternal figure Avril. Next, I examine the paternal side of the predicament in order to further develop the link between irony and secondary narcissism in the Incandenza family and point in the direction of the suggested maternal element. James' near total lack of communicative ability suggests an ironic-narcissistic entrapment, which, in light of some of James' films and a scene featuring the filmmaker as a boy with his father, appears to stem from a developmental trauma. In this way, James' position as an avant-garde artist of Wallace's criticism of the postmodern trajectory parallels his problematic relation to others and his insufficiency as a father. As I will show, the paternal deficiency that pervades *Infinite Jest* instigates the thematic maternal predominance in the text, rendering the Incandenza boys with an ironic subjectivity that, as Hal seems partly aware, leads to a totalizing isolation.

## CHAPTER 2

### “EMPTY INSIDE, UTTERLY, A VACUUM”: ON THE INSUFFICIENT PATRIARCH

The figure James Incandenza (a.k.a. Himself, The Mad Stork, The Sad Stork) functions as a model of isolation in the novel, not only in the sense that his ironic artistic project is disconnected from social-political aims in the same sense as that of Wallace’s Great Male Narcissists, but in the character’s deficiency as a literal paternal figure. Given James’ concern for Hal’s trajectory toward total isolation, it is not so much that the character is devoid of emotion, but, like the protagonist in “Good Old Neon,” it seems that his intersubjective experiences of feeling are limited, at least in a communicative sense. Also, his highly complex and wide-ranging films indicate that it is not an absence of sensibility on James’ part, but perhaps a narrowed range of strategies to deal with affect. Although Wallace does not directly speak to this in his interviews on the novel, he does provide a glimpse of his own family life, which elucidates the origins of his sense that something lacks and that this something is both desired and feared:

My family communicates almost entirely in terms of jokes. Basically all we do is tell jokes, which gets kind of weird. I think it’s a lot of fun when you’re growing up, but when you’re a grownup and you try to talk about something serious, you realize it’s a kind of slimy way to approach things. The stuff that I’m working on now [*Infinite Jest*] has a lot to do with the family, and . . . it’s hard, it’s hard to try to capture anything that’s real . . .<sup>1</sup>

The jokes to which Wallace refers—whether they are ironic, parodic, anecdotal, and idiosyncratic or colloquial—have the effect of evading something ‘real’ that Wallace attempts to account for in *Infinite Jest*.<sup>2</sup> Wallace illustrates this problem and its effects in James’ relationship with his children;

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<sup>1</sup> David Foster Wallace, “Looking for a Garde of Which to Be Avant: An Interview with David Foster Wallace,” in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, 13.

<sup>2</sup> Although Wallace is not using the term ‘real’ in the psychoanalytic sense here, the idea that something real is missing does have a partial connection with the Lacanian real, which is roughly an element that always resists symbolization or imaginary representation. The real is by definition a slippery notion that dissipates as soon as one attempts to articulate it. Nevertheless, on its psychoanalytic origin, Lacan writes that real “presented itself in the form of that which is unassimilable in it—in the form of the trauma, determining all that follows.” Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 55.

the notoriously silent James is described as “black hole,” and “autistic, almost catatonic” (737). Given the complex ironic content of James’ films, his demeanor, and his gruesome suicide, it is clear that what communicative methods he did have (through the cinematic medium) blockaded the character from a ‘real’ relationship with his children.

In this chapter, then, I follow the critical track that James operates as the insufficient paternal figure in both his position as the postmodern artistic forbearer and that of the absent patriarch of the Incandenza family. The insufficiency follows from the narcissistically operative irony that reinforces the self to the point of isolating the subject from capability for sentiment, emotional connectivity, and, therefore, their humanity; that is, despite the ironic aim to ‘get up above’ affectivity, this condition of isolation is itself affective in the sense of David Rando’s claim on the anxiety of self-protective distancing.<sup>3</sup> As I have said, Wallace claims that the aim of ironic postmodern fiction had generally narrowed to a transgression of formal boundaries for the sake of transgression itself, which limits the function of the art to the narcissistic aim of elevating the artist’s image—a kind of vacuum in that it contains no (or very little) positive content. To this end, I follow the track previously laid by critics to illustrate how James Incandenza functions as the exemplary avant-garde postmodern artist, in the sense that Wallace sees the ironic postmodern approach as a dead-end. Although the view of James as a ‘postmodern patriarch’ is not a new take on the character, it is necessary to examine how the character operates as the postmodern artist in order to unearth how this parallels the insufficiency of his paternal status in the Incandenza family with regards to the ironic-narcissistic predicament. In addition to this critical track, I explore the idea that this lack coextends James’ insufficiency as a paternal figure in the literal sense.

In the same way that postmodern texts serve as the vernacular ground for Wallace and his

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<sup>3</sup> As I showed, Rando essentially argues that the feeling of anxiousness and fraudulence are hallmarks of ironic distance. Rando, “Lovelessness,” 578-9.

contemporaries, the paternal figure of *Infinite Jest* serves as the root of important plot elements, constantly referenced with regards to his position as the founder of the tennis academy and boarding school, the author of an impressive variety of avant-garde films, an absent figure in the family, an optics expert, a developer of the novel's 'annular fusion,' and the root of the central plot device 'Infinite Jest.' In each of these endeavors, it is James' deficiencies that define him as a character. Despite James' physical absence from most of the scenes, his importance in the text should not be underestimated given his wide range of influences on the novel's characters and institutions. James' influence appears to follow his own term, "inbent" (838), which he used to describe his son Hal, but equally befits the filmmaker. The term refers to the cyclical entrapment of narcissism, solipsism, addiction, and depression portrayed in the novel. James' characterization extends to each of these points, respectively: according to the novel's film critic Molly Notkin, his films are "self-congratulatory" and project the image of a "cerebrally technical" artist (791); James' philosophy of life encircles the notion of selfhood, especially considering his idea that progress always involves transgressing the self (82-4); he is an alcoholic, but one who has never, according to the A.A. jargon deployed in the novel, "Come In" or "Surrendered" (838); lastly, his extreme isolation, as a result of the former difficulties, leads to suicide, which he committed in an especially gruesome manner—by exploding his head in a microwave oven (250-1). Unlike the more overtly narcissistic characters that I explored toward the end of the previous chapter, James' subtler narcissism is complicated by certain redeeming qualities, his troubled relationship with his father (and perhaps his mother), and an immensely productive intelligence. In short, the character is possibly the most complex of Wallace's narcissistic characters, which befits the author's admiration of postmodern writers despite his contention with pursuing that stylistic tradition.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Marshall Boswell is the first Wallace scholar to explore the connection between Wallace's desire to overcome the ironic irresolution of his predecessors and the figure of James Incandenza. Citing Wallace's allusions to *Hamlet*, Boswell surmises that James parallels King Hamlet, since the already dead father returns as a ghost for purposes relating to the son. Boswell, *Understanding*, 160, 169.

James occupies a major, figurative position in the novel and his function is best understood through the various ways that he lacks: artistically, parentally, and even physically.<sup>5</sup> My aim in this chapter, then, is to show that James' function as both postmodern artist and actual father demonstrates the ironic-narcissistic strategy as ultimately insufficient and isolative to the point of annihilation—one pole of the double-bind that his children face. In this way, I open with an investigation of James as a postmodern artist in order to demonstrate the ironic-narcissistic defence in his professional career. After a discussion on some of James' films that relate to his childhood, I explicate a psychoanalytic account of developmental trauma that operates in relation to his ironic-narcissistic function that mainly involves the father, but also partly the mother. Afterward, I compare James' father's projective relationship with him and James' relationship with his son, showing how the latter transmits his isolation onto Hal. Lastly, I discuss a Lacanian take on the insufficient father function in Hal's constitution, in order to transition into the issue of the maternal threat having such a predominant place in the text. Ultimately, this chapter shows the way in which James operates as the figure of the isolative end of the ironic-narcissistic trajectory that his sons, especially Hal, inherit as one side of the double-bind.

### **The Ironic Artist**

Conjunctions between the artistic and fatherly deficiencies are everywhere, but in the first of three sections of this chapter, I will discuss more specifically the ironic 'postmodern' insufficiencies to account for Wallace's critique of narcissistic aims of the avant-garde in this character. This leads to an analysis of aggressivity in his films—a point that further illustrates that narcissistically operative

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cont'd: Catherine Nichols notes a further literary resemblance, writing that James occupies the position of the jester Yorick, since it is James' skull that the protagonists dig up to find the master copy of 'Infinite Jest.' Catherine Nichols, "Dialogizing Postmodern Carnival: David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 43.1, 2001), 11. Furthermore, James' suicide occurred on April fool's day (790).

<sup>5</sup> James appearance is described as that of "an ecologically poisoned crane" (745), which indicates that the deficiency extends as far as the character's body. Further, the character's posture is likened to a flaccid penis; in a note on his height, it is said that James could tower over all of the Incandenzas if "he straightened and stood erect" (898).



irony is affective—then I move into a discussion of films that allude to James’ developmental trauma, which I detail in the next section. This trajectory further demonstrates my understanding of irony in Wallace’s fiction as entangled with affects that relate to narcissism—an idea that functions as a pivot from the conception of *Infinite Jest* as a novel that attempts to resolve an ironic cultural issue with approaches to intersubjective affect, to an understanding of the novel as the formulation of an impasse in which the characters mitigate two radically affective poles.

The novel’s documentation of James’ films provides ample content to explicate James’ position as the faltering avant-garde artist and therefore begins to address the sense of lack so crucial to the operation of this character. The content of James’ films resembles the kind of avant-garde art from which Wallace sought to distance himself in *Infinite Jest*. However, it is not necessarily immediately apparent that James emblemizes Wallace’s Great Male Narcissists, especially given the contrast between the care Wallace puts into his construction of James and his disdain toward certain ironic “crank turners.”<sup>6</sup> This relates to Wallace’s two-sided view on his postmodern predecessors; that is, he holds them in high regards aesthetically speaking, but chastises certain authors for their obviously narcissistic uses of irony.<sup>7</sup> James’ films have wide-ranging styles and their content appears quite ‘avant-garde,’ according to the way that Wallace uses the term to describe novelty of form, or stylistic transgression. A detailed archive of the films provides information as to their content, some of which seem to add up to viable artistic ideas and some of which appear at least somewhat crank-like.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Wallace, “An Expanded Interview,” in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, 30-31. Although Wallace’s patriarchs for patricide are thoroughly paternal—Barth, Coover, Burroughs, Nabokov, and Pynchon—his actual response in ‘the essay-interview nexus’ is rather fratricidal, aimed at the following generation of writers and cultural figures who use irony as a narcissistic strategy (crank-turners). Wallace’s actual kill-list, in the very same interview, is quite different: David Letterman, Gary Shandling, Rush Limbaugh, T.C. Boyle, Bill Vollman, Lorrie Moore, and Mark Leyner. Ibid, 48.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, despite the long tirade against Updike, Wallace does praise the writer’s prose, going so far as to call himself a fan of the author. Wallace, “Certainly the End,” 52.

<sup>8</sup> To give examples of the more arbitrary ideas: there is a soliloquy-parody of a shampoo advertisement, a film that consists of frames of reflected light from various sources that are supposed to disorient the viewer, and a film featuring a small hand turning pages of books from various fields on the topic of intolerance (986 n.24). The (in)complete archive can be found on pages 985-993.

Some of the more viable ideas are explored through spurious discussions of the films throughout the novel that support the archive: for instance, Hal's ruminations on the film 'Accomplice!',—a rape scene featuring a young male prostitute and an old man. Here, Hal's analysis of his father's work echoes Wallace's criticism of the avant-garde, providing an excellent critique of James' artistic project in general. While contemplating this film, Hal surmises that "even though the cartridge's end has both characters emoting out of every pore, *Accomplice's!* essential project remains abstract and self-reflective; we end up feeling and thinking not about the characters but about the cartridge itself" (946, *emph. in original*). As Martin Paul Eve notes, this passage doubles as a metatextual remark on 'Infinite Jest' the film, since the operation of the film as a plot device begs for a detached analysis, drawing attention away from what might be the positive content of the piece and redirecting it toward its metatextual function. Similarly, Hal's account of 'Accomplice!' draws attention to the way in which the film diverts the viewers from the affective power of the scene and into a contemplation about the film as a film. As I have suggested, following Wallace's critique of the GMNs, this has a cumulative effect on the artist's image, but it also parallels the narcissist's aim of self-protective distancing from affect. In short, it 'gets up above' the content insofar as it "announces that one knows the score."<sup>9</sup>

Not only is the self-protective function demonstrated in the critique of 'Accomplice!' but 'The Joke'—a film that wryly warns the audience in an advertisement not to watch it and then delivers on this warning—does the same thing; The film features a shot of the audience watching itself watch the screen, cleverly playing on the audience's thirst for irony, but still ultimately delivering very little, since the attendees end up the butt of a joke that has no positive content (397-8). So, some of James' films, including 'The Joke,' I would say, operate in much the same way as the work of Wallace's 'crank-turners,' in that they deliver redundant forms without a viable aim,

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<sup>9</sup> Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," 181.

therefore lacking substance. However, some are very much in line with Wallace's program, such as the connection between the way 'Accomplice!' and Wallace's novel both draw attention to structure. So, although James' films are a kind of epitome of the hyper-aware avant-gardism that Wallace sought to outmaneuver, the latter does not engage in outright negation of irony (or related stylistic innovations) in artistic works. The portrayal of James is subtle and two-sided, in the sense that while this critique most certainly takes place, James does not come off as repulsive in the same way as the 'hideous men.' This, I suggest, is part of the way that *Infinite Jest* is Wallace's most complex and satisfying investigation into the narcissistic function.

To begin to explore the subtleties of the ironic-narcissistic operation at work in this character, I look to the type of image his avant-garde films aim to establish. The films seem to constitute an image of a "cerebrally technical" artist—a notion that Molly Notkin uses to describe James' style as a sort of detached intellectualism (788-791).<sup>10</sup> Though I explore this in more depth shortly, I will note here that this cerebral quality is precisely the aspect of James' character that his father belittles in another scene (159). The 'other' that constitutes James' audience is, of course, required to have the same wide-ranging knowledge of film as the filmmaker himself, since he parodies an enormous variety of styles.<sup>11</sup> For an art-house filmmaker who would likely rely on a dedicated audience of connoisseurs and specialist critics, parodying these styles would certainly cast an image of a prodigious ability and high-minded technique and, here again, delivering little in the way of positive content.<sup>12</sup> In this sense,

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<sup>10</sup> Joelle likewise describes his work as "mordant, sophisticated, campy, hip, cynical, technically mind-bending; but cold, amateurish, hidden: no risk of empathy" (740).

<sup>11</sup> For instance, his film 'Death in Scarsdale' is described as a Mann/Allen parody, 'Fun with Teeth' is a Kosinski/Updike/Peckinpah parody, and 'Safe Boating Is No Accident' is listed as a possible Kierkegaard/Lynch parody; further, other instances of the filmmaker's wide range of styles are found in the description of his other films: parodies of neoconceptual structuralist films, poststructuralist antidocumentaries, pornography, and (possibly) Scandinavian psychodrama (985-93).

<sup>12</sup> In this sense, especially given Wallace's critical take on avant-garde art for its own sake, James' parodies resemble Fredric Jameson's notion of pastiche. For instance, Wallace's discussions on the aimlessness of postmodern approaches parallels Jameson's idea of the "amputated satiric impulse." Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (London: Verso, 1991), 17. In one of his long ruminations over his father's films, Hal accurately sums up this hypocrisy in James' career, saying he was "seduced by the very commercial formulae he was trying to invert" (703-4).

in Wallace's words, the irony 'splits things apart, gets us up above,' but leaves things at that, elevating little more than the ego. Redirecting the viewer's experience of the film from its affective force into a contemplation on style—or what Hal surmises takes the attention away from emotion and directs it toward the formula (946)—perpetuates the ironic structure by offering nothing other than irony as a function aimed at sustaining an image of the artist. Here, it seems that James at some level pushes the ironic formula onto his audience, forcing them to consider the film itself instead of the 'affective content' that is not necessarily absent from all of his films, but certainly undermined. The films appear to demonstrate a kind of narcissistic insistence that demands a knowledge of the audience and then reduces that knowledge to the image of artistry that it projects.

Why is this image-reinforcement necessary? As I have suggested, Wallace's narcissistic characters seem to employ irony as a defensive measure of narcissism. A further view on the link between irony and defensiveness is detailed in Linda Hutcheon's work on irony; While Hutcheon details nine core ironic functions from most to least affective, two interrelated functions in the middle of this list are the 'distancing' and 'self-protective.'<sup>13</sup> First, she writes that distancing irony is "the trope of the detached . . . and the witnessing"<sup>14</sup> which constitutes one level of James' predicament; for instance, the communicatively absent James clearly feels himself to be what he calls a 'figurant' in the life of his family.<sup>15</sup> Second, in the self-protective function, the ironic approach is "a kind of defense mechanism" at times involving the "indirect self-promotion, even arrogance."<sup>16</sup> To this end, the narrative demonstrates over and over the "pose of poselessness" (1048) with regards to the ironic function—that the ironic subjects do, in fact, self-promote, even if they promote the image of anti-promotion. This is in line with Hutcheon's contention of an aggressivity within the self-protective

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<sup>13</sup> Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 47-8.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 47.

<sup>15</sup> The wraith says that "he personally spent the vast bulk of his own former animate life as pretty much a figurant, furniture at the periphery of the very eyes closest to him" (835).

<sup>16</sup> Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 47.

component of the ironist, which highlights the narcissistic function involved in this use of irony.

As I have said, James narcissistic function does not reach the ‘hideousness’ of that in some of Wallace’s other fiction, but an arrogant sort of aggressivity does come across in the hostility that James shows toward his audience in certain films that I will discuss in a moment—an aggressivity that culminates in the way the film ‘Infinite Jest’ literally destroys its viewers. For Wallace, it seems that these two ‘distancing’ and ‘self-protective’ functions are part of the larger narcissistic strategy of the “hip cynical transcendence of sentiment [that] is really some kind of fear of being really human” (694-5). Wallace clearly conceives of the distancing and self-protective operations of irony as operations working at the behest of the ego, which attests to the claim that Wallace’s central critique is not exactly irony. The transcendence, then, is really an ironic protection of the ego from involvement in reciprocal relationships and affective (human) concerns. This is another way in which Wallace’s critique addresses irony as an egoic operation and, at the same time, addresses it as a problem of affect, which, of course, is heavily involved in self-protective distancing. Again, this entanglement of irony and affect problematizes the idea that logical approaches to affect resolves the predicament of irony. At least for James, there is no resolution whatever; even his appearance as a wraith demonstrates a continued isolation.<sup>17</sup>

The self-protective aim of the ironic-narcissistic strategy shows through in an aggressivity that is also demonstrated in James’ films; that is, in addition to the affectively isolating consequences of narcissistically operative irony, the operation involves an aggression directed toward some pre-constructed other for James as well. Isolation is perhaps James’ primary characteristic, especially given his absence from his son’s lives and his suicide, so I refer to this throughout the whole of this chapter; I will come to the idea of an affective or traumatic root to James’ ironic-narcissistic strategy shortly, since James’ hostility toward the audience begins to reveal the necessity of the distancing

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<sup>17</sup> Late in the novel, James appears as a wraith not to his son, but to the novel’s other protagonist Don Gately (827-45).

mechanism in the first place. On the aggressivity component of affective uses of irony, in James' films that are not purely "self-congratulatory" (791), the contents indicate a hostility toward the viewer, which is another quality of the narcissistic function that I outlined in the previous chapter.

Of course, 'Infinite Jest' literally destroys the viewer, but this is not the only film that treats the audience with disdain or involves a fantasy of harming the audience. For instance, in his film 'Cage III- Free Show,' the viewers at a carnival turn into gigantic eyeballs; likewise, in 'The Medusa v. The Odalisque' the viewers are turned to stone. His treatment of the audience in these films shows an antagonism that indicates a level of hostility toward the other, particularly toward a pre-constructed version of the other in whom he has a stake. Molly Notkin critically approaches James' films in this very way, saying that "the only feeling for the audience was one of contempt" (740). In this sense, James seems to be playing out a distrustful and aggressive melodrama with his intended audience—an-other who judges his films and, therefore, holds the power to sanctify or denounce his artistic vision. Perhaps the best example of this is a film that I have already mentioned 'The Joke,' in which he does not simply illustrate an attack performed on the audience, but, as Iannis Goerlandt argues, accomplishes it at an actual level in the sense that he ironizes those who understood the film's advertisement as ironic (397).<sup>18</sup> Despite the success of this clever operation of irony on the audience, the film is yet another example of the filmmaker elevating himself by 'getting one' on his audience, placing the author above the expected level judgement, rendering any criticism of the film reactive. It is only after being undercut by the director that a criticism can take place, therefore undermining that critique. So, the archive of James' films helps to demonstrate not only the artist's image that the films produce, but the aggressive underpinning of James' self-protective maneuvering here.

The filmmaker's strategy of elevating, distancing, and self-protective irony also indicates another level to the self-protection—that the ironic-narcissistic protective measure is not only geared to the

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<sup>18</sup> Goerlandt, "Put the Book Down," 315-16.

specific artistic image, but toward the foundation of James' self-image in his childhood. I will explore two of James' films that involve an ironic approach to the character's childhood, which will serve as my entry point into a discussion of the affective root of the ironic-narcissistic strategy that I detail in the next section. In fact, James' artistic image antagonizes his father's criticism of him—that is, James Sr. belittles the very intellectual aspect that his mother praises (159). This tension is the basis for some of James' films, several of which explicitly refer to his relationship with his parents. This connection indicates that James' use of irony as a defensive strategy even in the films relates to an unenviable childhood.<sup>19</sup>

Firstly, the film 'Widower'—a sitcom parody about a father who has his son kill poisonous black widows around the home—refers to a kind of death of the mother, given the title of the film and the injunction of the father; The situation in the film refers to his own father's fear of spiders (particularly black widows) to the extent that he (James Incandenza Sr.) sends James Jr. to kill the spiders around the house (159-60). Being bitten by the poisonous spider could kill the father, which would, of course, render the mother a widow. I would suggest here that the father's phobia relates to the fear of this consequence, since *Infinite Jest* repeatedly warns against an excess maternal presence. In other words, between the 'widow' and the child, there is no paternal influence, which indicates a proximal threat of the maternal. The film's title 'Widower,' then, reads like a pre-emptive strike against the maternal threat, rendering the father a widower instead. Purportedly, the filmmaker James was very close to his mother and this passage hints at his father's attempt to separate the two.

In addition to 'Widower,' James' major film 'Infinite Jest' is, of course, a monument to James' aggressivity, whether the destruction of the viewer was intentional or not. James' wraith says that his intent with the film was "[t]o bring him [Hal] 'out of himself,' as they say," (839)—that is, to

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<sup>19</sup> In addition to 'Widower' and 'Infinite Jest,' which I explore in these paragraphs, 'As of Yore' deals with a scene between James Incandenza and his father; 'Valuable Coupon Has Been Removed' also deals with James, the father, the mother, and rodents in their bed (see 491-503, 990-1).

pull him out of his anhedonic subjectivity, which James sees as “blank, inert, silent, frightening, mute” (838). However, as I have said, the film features a mother-figure that seems to be a reference to Hal’s mother Avril, apologizing to the infant-lens for infanticide. Of course, the contents of the film have a seductive appeal, which I will describe later on, but the dark subject matter particularly stands out; the mother as a figure of death and the threat that undercuts the emotional seduction implied in the scene seems at odds with the stated goal of the film. In line with the “mother-death-cosmology” (320), the mother possibly holds a knife and the actress, Joelle Van Dyne, might be unveiled, which would reveal a disfigurement that Joelle received in an altercation between her own mother and father.<sup>20</sup> Not only is aggressivity apparent in the content of the film, but, perhaps most importantly, the film renders its viewers catatonic, from which they eventually die. In this sense, it seems that James’ use of irony coextends the narcissistic aggression that I described in the first chapter, at least with regards to his audience—an audience that, in the case of the novel’s plot device, involves his son on some level.

In this section, by means of an analysis of James’ directorial style and the content of some of his films, one can see how James’ narcissistically operative irony—at least, in the artistic postmodern sense—is quite affective: his isolation is demonstrated in the way his films remain cerebral and aloof to the potentially emotional content; his aggressivity toward his audience is clear in the way that he both figuratively and literally destroys viewers; and, as I have begun to show, this distancing appears intimately connected to James’ childhood—a point that begins to demonstrate the affective root of the self-protective distancing. In this sense, I have thus far contended that James’ creative endeavors as a filmmaker parallel the dead-end of postmodern irony that Wallace critiques in his non-fiction. On this same point, as an extension of the previous chapter, James’ isolated ironic strategy functions as an

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<sup>20</sup> Many of the details of ‘Infinite Jest’ the film are, of course, questionable, since anyone who has seen the film has suffered unrecoverable breakdown. In fact, many of the details in the novel at large have some degree of uncertainty, such as Joelle’s disfigurement; for instance, she tells Don Gately, “I am so beautiful I am deformed” (538). However, in this particular case, there is evidence to assume that Joelle’s facial disfigurement likely exists (791-5, 940).



operation of secondary narcissism. Elevation of the artistic image attempts to distance James from some affective threat, but is part of the strategy that leads to the anxiety of isolation.

### **An Affective Root**

In view of the self-protective distancing component of James' ironic-narcissistic strategy, I will discuss James' childhood with a focus on a key scene in which a young James is lectured by his father to the point, it might be argued, of abuse. I suggest that the catalyst for James' need for the ironic distance is indicated in this scene (the only scene that involves James as a child), in which the narrative hints that James' ironic-narcissistic distancing relates to his father's emotional projection. After a discussion on the implications of this, I lead into the next section on James' position in the lives of his sons by contrasting James' father's emotionally projective narcissism with the filmmaker James' ironic narcissism. However, prior to exploring James' relationship with his father, I will briefly discuss the narrative's hints of the maternal element in James' experience of the trauma. This is an important point, since the novel constantly suggests a maternal element to characters' issues that I take up in the following chapter—an element that does not appear reducible to the isolative consequence of irony, but that seems to operate as a distinct affective problem.

Again, I will not yet proceed into a detailed discussion of the maternal theme, but I will briefly outline and discuss the connection between James' traumatic experiences and his mother. An interesting point to which I have already referred is the father's criticism of the mother's praise of James' intellect (159); additionally, the film 'Widower' correlates to the father's actual orders, in that he instructs his son to kill a spider in the father-son scene (159-60); further, the young James is said to have been very close to his mother (789). In addition to the sparse but nonetheless suggestive points, the most instructive detail on James' relationship with his mother is that the contents of his film 'Infinite Jest' centers on the 'return to the mother' fantasy. Although the film perhaps contributed to driving the filmmaker mad, James is the only character who has ostensibly seen the completed film

and not been cataleptically triggered by it. He did commit suicide, but not as a direct result of the film, which is described as “the thinly veiled cries of a man at the very terminus of his existential tether” (789). This attests to James’ utter ironic isolation from even the most universally compelling object. Boswell also notes that the film is indeed ironic; despite the power that its contents have over the viewer, it seems to have been yet another parody (of the psychoanalytic return to the mother) for the filmmaker.<sup>21</sup> Further, as Goerlandt argues, in light of the film’s title, ‘Infinite Jest’ aggressively ironizes viewers who watch it inadvertently, since the ‘jest’ is a “mocking jest, one that hurts.”<sup>22</sup> So, even in the prolific filmmaker’s grandest attempt to accomplish something emotional, affective, and compelling, he cannot escape his ironic isolation in order to access an affect he clearly imagines to be the ultimate. Although this point on James’ trauma lacks any finality in *Infinite Jest*, I suggest that the connection between the filmmaker (incl. his films) and the maternal theme does seem to reinforce the idea that the ironic-narcissistic strategy leads to a desperate need for something affective and maternal (for James, perhaps it is a kind of clichéd mother-infant ‘paradise lost’). So, it seems that the filmmaker’s isolating ironic-narcissistic strategy distances him from some affect that is desired at a certain level; however, the self-protective aim involved seems to point in the direction of the wedge his father drove between the son and his mother and to the emotional obliteration that the paternal strategy had.

Contrary to the few aforementioned points on James and his mother, the narrative gives us much more on James’ relationship with his father. A scene that provides insight into the origin of James’ ironic-narcissistic struggle consists of the filmmaker as a boy in the garage with his drunk father lecturing him on tennis, Marlon Brando, and the nature of objects. Intending to craft a tennis star out

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<sup>21</sup> Boswell, *Understanding*, 130-2. Although Boswell suggests that the film parodies the psychoanalytic idea of a return to the mother, it seems to me, as I have previously mentioned, that this is closer to pastiche, since, as Boswell himself suggests, “Lacanian concepts permeate the entire novel.” Ibid, 128. Later on, I explore specifically the conjunction between psychoanalytic ideas on the mother and Wallace’s treatment of the maternal theme in the text.

<sup>22</sup> Goerlandt, “Put the Book Down,” 319.

of the young James Jr., James Sr. reveals a highly narcissistic conception of relationships between people. He contends that at least two generations of viewers had misunderstood what he deemed to be Marlon Brando's sublime innate understanding of objects—that they have mistaken the way Brando leans on everything in sight and tosses things around as a rebellious disrespect for objects (he finds his wife, James' Jr.'s mother, especially guilty of this) (157-8). There is a glaring hypocrisy in the scene; that is, during the father's tirade against manhandling objects, he manhandles his young son, who begins to weep.

Further, James Sr. seems to project his own desire onto his son, whom he sees as more of an object than a boy. The connection between the object and son becomes clear later on in the passage, in which the father declares, “you're a machine a body an object, Jim, no less than this rutilant Montclair, this coil of hose or that rake there for the front yard's gravel” (159). In addition, he also attempts to drain the boy of the competing identity that stems from the mother; he belittles his son's “quick little scientific-prodigy's mind she's [the mother] so proud of” in order to impose his own desire to be a tennis star (159). In this way, James Sr. demonstrates that his so-called ‘respect’ for objects has little to do with the object as a sovereign entity, but relates to something the subject imposes onto the object. So, a projective operation occurs in the father's relation to his son, in the sense that James Jr. appears to be little more than an object that James Sr. imagines to coextend his own self. One reason for this move is James Sr.'s obsession with making his son the tennis player the father himself never was; in addition, it appears that the father is also attempting to separate the son from the mother's influence—her approval of him on the basis of his intellect—by reducing him to an empty object. So, the developmental trauma involves a projectively narcissistic father and a subtle indication that the father has oedipally interjected the boy's relationship with his mother.

It is important to note the quality particular to James Sr.'s projective behaviour in order to later differentiate it from that of James Jr. onto Hal. Namely, there is an intense emotional investment

involved in Sr.'s relationship to his son. In the intense monologue in the garage, the narrator illustrates the extent of the affective transmission from the father to the son-object:

I feel it, Jim, even here, standing on hot gravel and looking: in your eyes I see the appreciation of angle, a precise re spin, the way you already adjust your overlarge and apparently clumsy child's body in the chair so it's at the line of best force against the dish, spoon, lens grinding appliance, a big book's stiff bend. You do it unconsciously. You have no idea. But I watch, very closely (158).

Here, his father appears to be shaping his view of the young James according to his own desire. This idea is further articulated in James Sr.'s theory on the game of tennis: he tells his son that the emptiness within a tennis ball is pure potential into which a player projects himself (160); in the same way, James Sr. sees his son as the very same void onto which he (the father) projects his desire. This recalls the Žižekian idea that a subject projects a part of himself into the other, so that this projective fantasy coordinates the subject's relation to that other, but, at the same time, is part of a "radical intersubjectivity of fantasy" in which the origin of desire is always deferred to an-other;<sup>23</sup> that is to say, if the strategy were to succeed and James Jr. were to become the star player of his father's dreams, the latter would have accomplished a success that would overwrite his own failure that occurred in the presence of his father (James Jr.'s grandfather).<sup>24</sup> So, in James' Sr.'s narcissistic projection, he emotionally invests in an expectation that he places in his son, which seems to mitigate his own impossible desire.

As I have mentioned, it is clear that James Sr.'s narcissism differs from that of the filmmaker.

Whereas the former projects onto his son in order to actualize a fantasy, the latter ironizes—'splits

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<sup>23</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, (London: Verso, 2009), 10.

<sup>24</sup> James Sr.'s father—that is, the filmmaker James' grandfather—had been utterly disinterested in his son's tennis success; in the same scene, James Sr. describes that after years of his father having never attended a single tennis game, the day he finally attended a match, James' Sr. blew out his knee—an injury that would end his career (163-6). It seems that, with respect to James' Sr.'s projection onto his son, he desires to replace his father's gaze (a lack of interest) with his own (intensive interest) in order to actualise the fantasy of performing successfully for the father; the catch is that this requires James Sr. to (violently, it seems) craft a tennis star out of his son in order to remain in control of the outcome. His son would be a kind of limb that replaces the father's "knotted and ragged" limb that, according to Sr., prevented him from achieving his own dreams (166-7).

things apart' in order to 'get up above.'<sup>25</sup> The two operations of narcissism do conjoin, however, in two senses: first, they both consecrate an image of self (the father as a sports star, the son as an avant-garde artist); second, they both obliterate an-other (the father negates his son's agency, James Jr. annihilates his audience). Ultimately, both operations of narcissism reinforce an image by means of the other, which obliterates the other in some way. However, in accounting for the specificities of different eras of American culture, Wallace shows, in some sense, that narcissistic particularities differ from generation to generation.<sup>26</sup> Although I am certainly not suggesting that this constitutes a claim to the cause of irony in culture, it is the case, I think, that Wallace is speculating on irony's self-protective root in much the same way that the novel provides a speculative account of the ironic trajectory of American culture. That said, since the narrative provides little more than this one scene of James and his father, Wallace's speculation about the root of the ironic-narcissistic function goes no further than this with regards to James Incandenza. Still, that James' irony protects against an emotional injunction by the father attests to the idea that affect does lie at the root of irony's operation. On the grounds of this juncture of affect and irony, the isolative lack that lies at the end of this trajectory is key to understanding the double-bind that the Incandenza boys face.

## **Two Projections**

The question of James' approach to his sons and the effect of this approach remains to be accounted for, in order to properly posit isolation as one side of the double-bind. As I discussed in the opening paragraph of this chapter, it is not quite that the Incandenza family communicates by means of jokes, but the utter lack of communication between, for instance, James and Hal, equally misses out on the something that Wallace attempts to 'capture' within *Infinite Jest*. As I have said, the filmmaker's

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<sup>25</sup> Wallace, "An Expanded Interview," in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, 48.

<sup>26</sup> This demonstrates Wallace's keen awareness of his historical position. The previous generation's narcissistic impetus perhaps involved this more emotionally projective operation (in the sense of the more traditionally imposing father), whereas the narcissism of America in the 1980s and 90s more heavily involved the ironic operation. Of course, Wallace elsewhere demonstrates this awareness, seen, for instance, in the 'patriarchs for patricide' quote. *Ibid.*

relationship to others is defined by silence and absence; he feels that if he speaks to his children directly, he would corrupt them: “he simply didn’t know how to speak with either of his undamaged sons without their mother’s presence and mediation” (743). In this way, to communicate directly to his children would be to obliterate them as his father had done to him—that is, to objectify and project onto them. That said, in this section I discuss the way in which James still engages in a projection onto Hal, but projects an emptiness that becomes part of Hal’s idea of himself. This builds toward the following section, in which I compare this emptiness to the consequences of an insufficient paternal function in Lacanian subjectivity. The account of the absent father in Hal’s psychological economy leads into the notion of maternal influence, which I discuss in the following chapter.

In the sense that James’ relationship with his sons is one of silence, it might appear that he does mitigate the emotionally narcissistic father-son dynamic that he experienced as a boy. However, two related points problematize this assessment. The first, as I have mentioned, is that James does play out an aggressivity in some cases, going so far as to obliterate viewers both figuratively (‘Cage III-Free Show,’ ‘The Medusa v. The Odalisque’) and literally (‘Infinite Jest’), recalling the father’s narcissistic obliteration of him. The second point relates to a passage in which the Hal describes James’ odd communicative negation of him; he says, “for two years before his death, had had this delusion of silence when I spoke: I believed I was speaking and he believed I was not speaking” (899). Confirming this tendency, a scene toward the beginning of the novel outlines James’ attempt to disguise himself as a conversational therapist in order to speak with his son. In the scene, James appears engaged in a delusion that Hal is not responding to him, whereas the narrative shows that he most likely is (27-31). This demonstrates not only James’ isolation from his son and his communicative surroundings, but also shows that he has not quite mitigated his own father’s relationship to him, in the sense that he projects onto his son his own qualities of being “blank,

inbent, silent, [and] mute” (838). Considering this delusion, it seems that the very distancing of the self-protective ironic-narcissistic operation isolates James from the other to the extent that he cannot engage reciprocally, despite his intense desire to communicate with his son. This seemingly insurmountable dilemma is quite affective in the sense of the anxiety that underpins James’ attempt to prevent his son from becoming isolated to the point of oblivion. However, as I am suggesting, James does transmit this isolation to Hal.

In order to be clear on the point of isolation, I will reiterate the logic that I have followed: James’ father narcissistically projects his own desires onto him, negating his son’s ‘quick little’ mind and, therefore, the mother’s influence; James Jr.’s irony functions under a narcissistic framework, which utilizes the other to reinforce an image and distance the self from the affective trauma; however, this narcissistically operative irony distances James to the point of anhedonia and isolation, which precludes reciprocal relationships, since the isolated subject “is incapable of empathy with any other living thing” (696). Therefore, James’ access to the other would tend to be projective, which manifests in both his relationship to his audience and to Hal. In this way, James still seems to project onto Hal, not in the sense of the imperative of desire seen in his father’s relationship with him, but in the sense that James Jr. transmits his own emptiness onto Hal, who says of himself “inside . . . there’s pretty much nothing at all” (694). So, for James Incandenza, not only does the narcissistically operative irony have an affective root (the father’s emotional projection, the suggested closeness of James to his mother), but the resultant isolation is permeated by anxiety; both Rando’s concept of anxious ‘lovelessness’ and James’ suicide attest to the idea of this condition as “a hell for one” (696). In this sense, James’ isolation is the radically affective conclusion of the ironic-narcissistic operation that was originally intended to distance the subject from affectivity, resulting in the isolative side of the double-bind that I have suggested. As for Hal, it seems that irony’s isolative tendency has been transmitted from father to son, so he must deal with this sense of emptiness and his disconnection from the other.

As I have said, this has important consequences for the Incandenza boys, which I will explicate by comparing the projection from James Sr. to son with James Jr. to Hal. This obliteration of the other is of a different type than that of his father, in the sense that the filmmaker's projection operates like a vacuum; whereas James Sr. projected a kind of emotional imperative, James Jr. projects only his sense of isolation onto his Hal. So, prior to describing the effect this has on Hal in terms of the psychoanalytic model of the paternal function, I will draw this point out a little more in order to compare the ironic-narcissistic function in James and Hal. This will demonstrate the way in which the insufficiency of the paternal function leads to the predicament of isolation, which begins to address the maternal function having such significance in their lives.

To reiterate the filmmaker's position, in the relation between James Sr. and James Jr., an emotional projection forms a wedge between the boy and his mother. That said, the father's injunction is also a directive (to become a tennis player), so therefore it has positive content, which entails that James Jr. can actively transgress it, or 'get up above' it (which he does by means of a narcissistically operative irony). In other words, there is something to ironize—irony has its aim. So, James' narcissistically operative irony 'gets up above' the father's emotional projection, or, at least, the irony aims to support an image as a defence against the traumatic relationship. In the same way, the irony of the pioneering postmodern writers, in Wallace's view, had a positive aim in the sense that it exposed institutional hypocrisies of Western society by critically elevating the artist; however, as Wallace argues, a narcissistic operation of egoic elevation marks the ultimate trajectory of this strategy.

For Hal, another highly ironic subject, this ultimate trajectory is quite immediate in the sense that there never was any positive content in the first place: "Hal himself hasn't had a bona fide intensity-of-interior-life-type emotion since he was tiny" (694). So, in James Jr.'s transmission to Hal, only a projection of isolation occurs; that is, the father imagines Hal to be literally 'blank, inebent, silent, and mute,' which means that the projection has no positive content to be effectively ironized.



To put this another way, since James' effect on Hal is defined by distance and emptiness and Hal has absorbed a subjective strategy that follows, then he can only ironically distance himself from isolation, which implies only further isolation. It is the same logic as the generation of ironists who can only transgress for the sake of transgression, for there is no longer any positive content to transgress; this recalls Wallace's quote that "[a]rt's reflection on itself is terminal."<sup>27</sup> The same could be said for Hal and his generation: 'ironic distancing from itself is terminal.' In the sense that irony serves to split things apart through the use of elevation or distance, one cannot effectively ironize irony, since the result is only more distance from distance.<sup>28</sup> It is also similar to the plight in both "The Depressed Person" and "Good Old Neon," in the sense that both protagonists are caught in a spiralling self-reflective logic that ultimately annihilates any possibility for connection to the other. In the ironic-narcissistic predicament in *Infinite Jest*, then, the self-protective distancing splits the subject from the other repeatedly by using these relationships to reinforce an image of "hip cynical transcendence of sentiment" (694-5). This strategy distances the self from the other, but actually intensifies the affect of isolation that results from this maneuver. In the same way, Hal's distance from his father's isolation is terminal, since it can only lead to a finally annihilating isolation. So, Hal engages in the same narcissistically operative irony as his father, but—what seems to be artistically true of James Incandenza—he has no object of irony whatever, short of irony itself. Ultimately, in the same way that irony as a function of narcissism had become an artistic dead-end, the speculative generation that Wallace explores in the novel faces a similar dead-end—one that is frightening on the grounds that it is trapped between isolation and some not-quite-articulable 'fear of being really human,' as Hal puts it.

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<sup>27</sup> Wallace, "An Expanded Interview," in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, 30.

<sup>28</sup> Contrarily, Boswell argues that this is precisely what Wallace is doing in *Infinite Jest* and, further, that this is part of a resolution. Boswell, *Understanding*, 17. However, given the isolative result of these ironic-narcissistic characters and Wallace's comments on the trap of metafiction, I think Wallace would contend this view. See, for instance: Wallace, "An Expanded Interview," in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, 30-1, 40-1.

## Paternal Insufficiency

The discussion on an insufficient subjective strategy that is passed down from James to Hal brings me to the final point of this chapter, which refers to the psychoanalytic idea on paternal insufficiency—an idea that leads into the following chapter’s discussion on the maternal side of the double-bind. The lacking ironic-narcissistic strategy fails Hal in much the same way that an insufficient phallic function fails psychotic subjects in Lacanian theory, in the sense that both result in affects and bodies that disrupt the process of intersubjective discourse. Subjectivity, for Lacan, depends on a sufficient phallic function, which operates like a fixed point for the subject, contrary to what Goerlandt accurately describes as Hal’s “lack of ‘final vocabulary.’”<sup>29</sup> The instatement of the paternal signifier protects the child from the indistinct early relationship with the mother and guides the child’s entry into the social world.<sup>30</sup> If the mother’s desire is inadequately signified due to, for instance, an absent or negligible paternal influence, then the desire of the mother constitutes a threat.<sup>31</sup> So, the failure of the paternal signifier, for Lacan, causes a failure of separation from the indistinction of the mother-infant dyad. This is precisely the case with the insufficient anchor in Hal’s psychological economy. Hal seems to lack an effective recourse from the mother’s desire and the affective threat that he articulates as a fear of the infantile.<sup>32</sup> In view of Hal’s bodily dissociation in the opening pages of the novel and his suspicions that anhedonia protects against the fear of being human—which, in his view,

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<sup>29</sup> Goerlandt, “Put the Book Down,” 313.

<sup>30</sup> Derek Hook articulates the phallic function in the psychological economy of a neurotic subject as such: “the phallus is the Imaginary object of the mother’s desire which remains outside of the child’s reach.” Derek Hook, “Lacan, the meaning of the phallus and the ‘sexed’ subject,” (*LSE Research Online*. London: LSE Research Online. 2007, Accessed January 10, 2017. <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/960/>), 70. In this sense, the phallus is the answer to the mother’s desire, enabling the male subject to identify with the paternal position of possessing the phallus insofar as it is a metaphor—that is, as it confirms the transition into a symbolic (metaphoric) world.

<sup>31</sup> For instance, in the famous Freudian case study of little Hans, the boy understood his father’s inability to help a fallen horse (undoubtedly a traumatic experience for a young child) as an insufficiency to blockade the mother’s earlier threat of castration that occurred when she found him touching his genitals. For more, see: Nicolas Midgley, “Re-reading ‘Little Hans’: Freud’s case study and the question of competing paradigms in psychoanalysis,” (*Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 54.2, 2006), 537-559, esp. 552.

<sup>32</sup> I explore this later in detail (for examples of Hal’s dependency, see 522-5, 744-7, 1038-44). There are also numerous references to the ‘feral’ infant in view of the psychedelic drug DMZ, which may have been a catalyst in Hal’s psychotic breakdown (211-19)—another association between the infantile and psychosis.

equates to being incontinent and infantile (694-5)—the lacking ironic-narcissistic strategy for Hal creates the conditions for similar consequences as an inoperative phallic function for a Lacanian subject.

In order to support the idea of an inoperative father in Hal's constitution, I will discuss the specific sense in which the narrative refers to this with Hal. I have already mentioned the physical sense of James' flaccid, dysfunctional body (220, 745, 898), but the novel also alludes to the lacking phallic function quite directly in a telling monologue, in which Hal describes a conspicuously phallic moment with his father: "My most intimate memory of Himself was the scratchiness of his jaw and the smell of his neck when I fell asleep at supper and he carried me upstairs to bed. His neck was thin but had a good meaty warm smell; I now for some reason associate it with the odor of Coach Schtitt's pipe" (956).<sup>33</sup> The conjunction between the meatiness of James' neck and the pipe seems to indicate a phallic presence, which suggests that Coach Schtitt, given his well-anchored demeanor based on "Old World patriarchal stuff like honor and discipline and fidelity to some larger unit" (83) serves as the closest thing that Hal has to a paternal figure and, thus, it acts as his only access—a kind of substitute—to the phallic function. The fact that Hal describes this otherwise insignificant moment as his most intimate memory is telling of the radical nature of his lacking relationship with James and the latter's failure to drive a wedge between Hal and Avril.

In addition to this scene, I will briefly describe two more points on the absence of the father in Hal's psychological economy. A crucial mould scene at the opening of the novel, in which Avril Incandenza breaks down upon the realization that Hal had eaten mould, is given conflicting accounts by Hal and Orin (10-11, 1041-4). Hal has negated, in his account, all traces of the paternal elements of the story: James' presence in the scene, another paternal figure who resolves the issue, and the

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<sup>33</sup> Coach Schtitt was selected by James as the head coach at the Enfield Tennis Academy on the grounds of a shared philosophy on tennis, which roughly avows the boundary lines of the tennis court as the contingency for infinite possibilities limited only by the body and imagination of the player. In a similar way, James sees the Self as the site of transgression, opposing the limited and paradoxical notion of individual happiness that is espoused in the culture of the time (82-4).

*hose* involved in the scene's resolution.<sup>34</sup> In this sense, not only is the father in Hal's own memories fragile (as in the scene with Schtitt's pipe), but given that Hal reports on Orin's recollection of the event, it seems that the father is absent also from Hal's memory of others' memories—a revealing point given Hal's encyclopedic memory. The second indication of the absence of the paternal with regards to Hal occurs in James' film 'Infinite Jest,' which is suffused with the message of the maternal threat and, likewise, has no paternal figure whatever. Reminiscent of a father's Oedipal castration threat in the mother-son relationship, the film (possibly) involves a knife, but, given the paternal absence from the film, it is the mother who "may or may not have been holding [it]" (788). There are two consequences here: first, the father does not conceptually separate the mother-son pair in the film; second, the appearance of the knife, and therefore the separation of infant from mother, is questionable: there may not have been a knife in the scene. This uncertainty indicates an insufficiency of the phallic function, which, again, suggests the incomplete separation of the mother-infant dyad. In this way, the incertitude of the phallic function pervades James' message to Hal, indicating that a paternal lack lies at the root of Hal's lack of fixity as a subject. This reinforces my suggestion that the phallus is unfixated in Hal's mental faculties—that he has no anchoring point to stabilize his position in the world.

In the end, through James' isolative projection and the insufficiency that follows the figure's dead-ended position, the condition of Hal and, as I discuss in the fourth chapter, Orin as well, follows suit. The isolative lack, in this sense, is the lack of an affective tie-in with the other; that is, like his father, Hal has no affective connection with other people and faces this dead-end as part of his

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<sup>34</sup> I discuss this scene in more detail in the next chapter. Hal's account of this scene notes that the participants were Hal, Orin, and Avril, but Orin recalls James' presence behind the screen door, which is missing from Hal's account of Orin's memory of the event. Furthermore, despite Hal's insistence that Orin's recollection ends with Avril racing around the yard, Orin does, in fact, give details beyond Avril's meltdown. He recalls that their neighbour, Mr. Reehagen, finally walked over and took charge of the mould problem—he "had to hook up the hose" (1044 n.234). Not only are the two male-paternal presences negated by Hal, but there seems to be a phallic metaphor at work with the *hose* as well; this is coupled with the masculinized straight-forward wording of the scene in Orin's account. The phrasing that he *had to* hook up the hose suggests a kind of paternal, solution-oriented or practical approach to an impractical formulation of the problem.

subjectivity. As I have argued, this parallels Lacan's account of an inoperative phallic function, in the sense that both fail to provide a fixed point from which a stable self can relate to the other. In that sense, Hal is caught in the same predicament as Wallace's generation of writers: lamenting the absence of the parental figure, but needing to forge ahead.<sup>35</sup> The isolation, then, is the very dead-end of the ironic-narcissistic defense, since it is on the trajectory that obliterates possibilities for affective interpersonal connection, but is intensely affective itself as a condition. In this sense, James Sr. was predictive in his comment that his son, like a tennis ball, is "empty inside, utterly, a vacuum" (160).

To sum up this chapter, I will emphasize the affective component the ironic-narcissistic defence that I have elucidated through James and his effect on Hal. As I have explored, James' narcissistically operative irony that shows in his artistic works is part of a much larger operation of the dead-ended subjectivity that stems from the developmental trauma that I have explored. The filmmaker's father had employed a rather violent projective narcissism with him—a situation that would certainly make irony an apt support for the narcissistic reinforcement of the ego, in the sense of the protective distancing that it provides. James employs extensive use of irony in his films, which coextends Wallace's criticism of the Great Male Narcissists such as John Updike and Philip Roth in the sense that these authors' irony had become more gratuitous than useful. Since this ironic distance is not simply an artistic strategy, but deeply embedded in the subject's narcissism, James suffers from the anxiety of isolation that the strategy produces, therefore resulting in an unbearable solipsistic condition that culminates in his suicide—an affective end that the strategy originally aimed to evade. Furthermore, despite James' attempt to avoid the projective narcissism of his father, he still projects onto his sons his own sense of distance and isolation. Ultimately, the postmodern patriarch and actual father are insufficient—a condition that is realized in Hal, in the sense that he seems to crave some

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<sup>35</sup> For instance, Hal laments that his father's measured response to Orin's pornography-watching "was the most open I'd ever heard of Himself being with anybody, and it seemed terribly sad to me, somehow, that he'd wasted it on Orin" (956).

affective engagement (being human), but fears it (as incontinence and infantilism) at the same time.

As a consequence, the absent father leaves the Incandenza boys on a disconcerting isolative trajectory of narcissistically operative irony, which is one half of the double-bind that I have suggested. Also, the insufficient paternal function (seen in the isolative result), leaves the boys with an inadequacy against a maternal threat that forms the other half of the bind. For instance, in Hal's case, his father's absence from his life makes the boy dependent on his mother for narcissistic support (in fact, for his entire sense of selfhood). In this sense, it is telling that she is, in a way, the centerpiece of James' failed masterpiece, in that Avril is described as the actual embodiment of the character in the film (790). Since James' silence fails to provide his son with a proper separation from the mother, Hal appears stuck within these early relations, demonstrated in his disintegration and slide toward a violent and infantile incontinence at the chronological end of the story. This idea also works when considering James as a postmodern patriarch, since in this case, too, the failed paternal function leads to a crisis that Wallace describes as wishing the parents would return to restore authority.<sup>36</sup> The end of the political era for which irony served a social function means that the trajectory of highly ironic avant-garde fiction is, for Wallace, self-centered and terminal, having reached the limit of its efficacy; In other words, the preceding strategy of irony had reached its limit, so the following writers are left facing a void. Likewise, in the filial sense, the crisis of the Incandenza boys involves the paternal insufficiency that leads to a void of subjectivity. As I intend to show in the following chapter, this void ties into the maternal threat that is found throughout the text.

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<sup>36</sup> Wallace, "An Expanded Interview," in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, 52.

### CHAPTER 3

#### “MALIGNANT AND ANTAGONISTIC TO THE SELF”:

#### ON THE MATERNAL AND ENGULFMENT

It is through James Incandenza’s insufficiency that his widow Avril takes on a prominent role in the lives of the Incandenza boys. In fact, it is rather something ‘in her more than her’<sup>1</sup>—a horrific maternal element that pervades the entire novel—that threatens to rupture the characters’ ironic sensibilities and their very subjectivity. Affect is everywhere in *Infinite Jest*, threatening characters as much as it is desired or craved. As I have argued, the ironic-narcissistic defence not only leads to an affective isolation and has affective aggressive components, but has an affective root insofar as the unconscious ironic strategy is defensive. On this last point, which is the entry point for this chapter, I ask the question: against what does the ironic-narcissistic function defend?

As I have begun to argue, the function seems to reinforce the ego against a trauma. In James’ Incandenza’s case, the ironic response seems to ‘get him up above’ the father’s emotional projection. Again, the narrative does indicate a peculiarity with James and his mother, but the limited evidence here means that we must look to other characters—specifically arch-mother Avril Incandenza and the Incandenza boys’ relationship with her—for more on the question of the maternal function in the text. As I have suggested, the ironic-narcissistic strategy attempts to defend, at least partially, against an emotional threat that pervades the novel. At some level, it appears to be inadequate to such a threat—a visceral charge that ruptures the stability of some of the characters, such as Kate Gompert and Hal Incandenza. Since the ironic-narcissistic subjectivity endlessly distances the subject, it seems to lack a fixed point that would ground the subject against the chaos that “seethed out there just beyond

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<sup>1</sup> Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 263-76. This phrase suggests that the subject is not invested in the actual other, but in the object of desire (or fear) she locates in the other; this chapter focuses on the horrific nature of such an object.

tidiness” (1043 n.234).<sup>2</sup> In fact, many of the characters’ fears connect to something un-articulate and amorphous that the novel, which tend to surface on passages that involve Avril; that said, the threat has strong maternal ties for characters even outside the Incandenza family.

Avril not only functions as the narcissistic mother, but as a source of the threat that I have begun to discuss here; she carries a mystique both within the family and outside of it—an enigma that characters experience as distressing, which has the effect of aggrandizing her. Part of this relates to the narrative’s othering of the character; Avril remains absolutely outside the narrator’s immediate voice in that no passage reflects her thoughts on a given matter.<sup>3</sup> In this way, her position remains at the edge of the narrative, so any insight into her occurs *exclusively* through other characters, which accentuates her curious function in the text.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, this avoidance of Avril’s thoughts would be insignificant if not for both her gravity in the family and the weight of the maternal theme in the novel. She is perhaps figuratively elevated over even James; the latter is more humanized in the sense that, for all of his improbable professional lives, his faults are well articulated by Hal and other characters outside of the family, whereas these same characters have difficulty putting their finger on Avril’s peculiarity.<sup>5</sup> The language used to describe Avril aggrandizes her position as well; for

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<sup>2</sup> I referenced this idea in Goerlandt’s work on *Infinite Jest* in the previous chapter as a ‘final vocabulary.’ Goerlandt, “Put the Book Down,” 313. In view of the psychotically themed threat on this side of the double-bind, Lacan calls this the ‘quilting point,’ which is the point at which the signifier and signified are sutured in a given subject. Jacques Lacan, *The Psychoses: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book III*, ed. Jacques Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg, (New York: W.W Norton, 1993), esp. 243-5.

<sup>3</sup> This is contrary to the way in which James’ wraith demonstrates characteristics of the narrator in his ability to enter the ‘brain voice’ of Don Gately in order to communicate with him. For more on the brain-voice narrative of *Infinite Jest*, see: Toon Staes, “Rewriting the Author: A Narrative Approach to Empathy in *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*.” (*Studies in the Novel* 44.4, 2012), 420-1; Nicoline Timmer, *Do You Feel It Too? The Post-postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), 170.

<sup>4</sup> While it is true that many of the most telling details about characters are often revealed through other characters, this operation is more extreme in Avril’s case, in the sense that the narrator does not once describe Avril’s thoughts, beliefs, or opinions, except through other characters’ largely antagonistic perceptions of her. In this way, it seems that the narrative reduces Avril to a phantasmatic construction, like an aggregate of multiple characters’ fears. The reduction of female characters is a problem that Wallace addresses somewhat more directly in *Brief Interviews* by omitting the dialogue of the female interviewer, writing the letter ‘Q’ in place of her questions. This has the effect, at least in my reading, of pushing the reader to fill in the blanks, which, to some extent, puts the reader in the position of the reduced interviewer. I do think, however, that there is more work to be done on the topic of Wallace’s treatment of female characters (and mothers), especially given the narrative’s aversion to Avril.

<sup>5</sup> The narrative provides grandiose depictions of both characters: James as “an expressionless stare from a great height” and Avril as “a ray of light incarnate” (737).



instance, Orin describes her as both “the emotional sun” (738) and “The Black Hole of human attention” (521). Of course, this hyperbolic language to describe parental figures might be partly explained by the idea that children struggle to understand their parents as people, particularly with someone as traumatised as Orin, but this kind of language spills over into other characters’ descriptions of her. The extreme depiction of her, along with her importance in the text, makes the character difficult to sufficiently examine without a theoretical approach for the maternal function—one of the reasons that I look to psychoanalytic accounts of subjectivity.

To this end, I take a psychoanalytic approach to the maternal threat, in order to suggest that the maternal theme that operates throughout *Infinite Jest* exhibits the other side of the double-bind that I have contended from my opening discussion of Kate Gompert’s statement on anhedonia and psychotic depression; on one hand, anhedonia is part of the ironic-narcissistic condition that leads to isolation and, on the other hand, psychotic depression relates to an amorphous and un-articulate element that has a connection to the mother-infant dyad. So, in addition to the secondary narcissistic operations of both Incandenza parents, another, more sinister, operation occurs through Avril that connects to a larger, maternally themed threat that many of the novel’s characters, even those outside the family, experience in some form. The trajectory of this chapter, then, supports my contention with the paradigm of ‘approaches to affect’ as a resolution to a central ironic problem. That is to say, just as irony is not exactly the heart of the problem in *Infinite Jest*, various approaches to affect are not quite the resolution, in the sense that a threat resonates from the very affectivity that characters crave. In other words, although there is clearly a desire for attention, affection, feeling, sentiment, or empathy, it is countered by a fear of something maternal, engulfing, and psychotic; the latter half of this predicament is the basis of this chapter.

With this in mind, I first discuss Avril’s narcissistic operation in view of the enigmatic effect that she has on characters both inside and outside the family; this proceeds to a discussion on the

affects that are not reducible to Avril's narcissistic performance, which I call the 'un-articulate'; then, I discuss the affective threat of engulfment in Lacanian theory and Kristeva's notion of the abject in view of the mother-infant dyad; lastly, I circle back to a discussion of this affective threat in Avril's psychological economy, in order to demonstrate the ubiquity of this predicament in the novel. As for the final point, I suggest that the engulfment side of the double-bind is not reducible to Hal, Orin, or even to their generation, but appears quite ubiquitous in that it extends to Avril herself.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, this chapter explicates the engulfment end of the double-bind, which further demonstrates the way in which affect is not simply part of a positive resolution to an ironic problem—even if it is taken as an ironic-narcissistic problem—but that affect functions on both sides of the double-bind: not only isolation as an affective consequence of narcissistically operative irony, but engulfment as the affective threat that ironic-narcissistic distance aims to thwart.

### **The Narcissistic Mother**

The family nickname for Avril Incandenza is 'the Moms,' an ominously ubiquitous name that indicates her multivalent presence, "[a]s if there were more than one of her" (737). She appears to be nearly as prolific as her late husband in the sense that she juggles multiple roles at once: centerpiece of the family, Militant Grammarian, Dean of Academic Affairs and Females at Enfield Tennis Academy, possible position in to the novel's Quebecois terrorist group A.F.R., and real-life mother-figure in James' 'Infinite Jest.' Her physical height, "197 cm. tall in flats" (898), indicates the way her towering figure coextends her commanding presence and dominant position within the family.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Further, given the novel's reference to the fictional 'Coatluc Complex' (516) and the association between the mother and death explored in 'Infinite Jest' the film, it would be reductive to suggest that the engulfment threat is limited to the young generations (in the 80s and 90s) of Wallace's focus.

<sup>7</sup> Hal takes notice of her even when deeply focused during a competitive tennis match, as he glimpses "stage-left the white sun-umbrella of the Moms; her height raises the white umbrella above her neighbours; she sits in her small circle of shadow" (68). Kiki Benzon notes that the umbrella is Avril's signifier of ubiquity, that she "is submerged beneath its shade, as if in the unconscious itself. Kiki Benzon, *A Poetics of Chaos: Schizoanalysis and Post Modern American Fiction*, (Dissertation: University College London: London. UCL Discovery, 2007. Accessed on 3 February, 2016. <http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/1444024/1/U591303>), 155. Additionally, the 'stage' here suggests the performative aspect of Avril's character and, further, stage-left indicates her function as a director of the performance of the family.

Hal comments on Avril's gravitational pull by noticing that "The Moms always had this way of establishing herself in the *exact center* of any room she was in, so that from any angle she was somehow in line of all sight" (521, *emph. in original*). Similarly, Joelle (Orin's ex-girlfriend, a.k.a. Madame Psychosis) supports this idea, noticing at an Incandenza family dinner that "[t]he whole Thanksgiving table inclined very subtly toward Avril, very slightly and subtly, like heliotropes. Joelle found herself doing it too, the inclining" (745). In addition, she has an assortment of phobias ranging from "enclosure, communicational imprecision, and untidiness" (1043 n.234) to "hiding and secrecy" (51); elsewhere, she is described as an "*agoraphobic workaholic and obsessive-compulsive*" (42, *emph. in original*). These idiosyncratic characteristics indicate the arch-mother's manipulative strategy of interaction, whether intentional or not, and it also suggests the severity of the affect she has on characters who find their attention drawn to her.

Avril's enigmatic presence does not necessarily immediately suggest some archaic maternal threat; at least, the connection between her and the mother-death figure in James' film is not necessarily unequivocal until Molly Notkin's comment about this on page 790. Prior to exploring the maternal threat, which is the primary focus of this chapter, I will explore the way in which Avril's behaviour is partly explained as a consequence of her range of psychological afflictions and narcissistic strategy. It is important to note that while Avril displays many of the secondary narcissistic traits of James, there are some differences as to the specific strategies that supply her with a particular image.<sup>8</sup> As Nicoline Timmer points out, Avril idealizes her own position as a mother, obsessively organizing her children's lives and thereby eroding their agency.<sup>9</sup> In this way, Avril's narcissism consists of an obsessive dedication to the ideal-parent image. She is described by Orin's childhood friend Marlon Bain as exemplary of the pathological kind of parent who is "patient and

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<sup>8</sup> As I argued in the previous chapter, in his relationship with Hal and Orin, James desperately attempts to avoid his father's strategy of desirous projections by cutting himself out of his children's lives. Nonetheless, the isolating result of perpetual self-protective distancing obliterates the subject, as James' suicide figuratively demonstrates. By Contrast, Avril attains support for her image in an inverse way, by means of a highly controlled relationship with them.

<sup>9</sup> Timmer, *Do You Feel It Too?* 138-9.

loving and supportive and concerned and involved in their children's lives, profligate with compliments and diplomatic and constructive criticism, loquaciousness in their pronouncements of unconditional love for an approval of their children, conforming to every last jot/tittle in any conceivable definition of a good parent" (1050). This is achieved by means of a dedication to the image to the point of obliterating the other—a pathological formulation that recalls both the filmmaker James' aggressivity toward his audience and his father's emotional projections onto him.

Descriptions of Avril's narcissistic defence mechanisms largely involve conversations or recollections of the Incandenza boys and, further, there is a long account of the Moms' defensive strategies in the endnotes through Marlon (1047-52 n.269). While Orin suspects that Avril might be conscious of her strategies, there is reason to doubt him on this, given his antagonistic estrangement from his mother and the fact that Hal and Marlon do not support this view.<sup>10</sup> The narrative's most succinct account of the emotional 'games' that Avril plays is named "Politeness Roulette" (523), in which Avril pre-emptively rejects any request or problem on the basis of a self-victimization. Hal describes that this eccentricity "makes you hate yourself for telling her the truth about any kind of problem because of what the consequences will be for her. It's like to report any sort of need or problem is to mug her" (523). In this sense, to approach the Moms with a problem is to reveal an untidiness in Avril's own strategic approach, which would have the effect of prodding the wound, so to speak, and perhaps lead to a tightening of the defensive mechanism.

This is precisely what Orin's friend Marlon Bain suggests in a long footnote in which he recalls Avril's increased pronouncements of love when Orin had done something wrong. Marlon graphically recounts a time that he and Orin got high and decided to go for a drive, forgetting that the dog was tied by leash to the back of the car and thereby killing the dog in an especially gruesome

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<sup>10</sup> Hal seems to grasp the complexity of Avril's defences better than his brother, reporting that "Orin believed she did it on purpose, which was way too easy" (523). Likewise, Marlon seems unable to decide whether or not Avril's parenting was abusive in some way (1049, n269). As I later discuss, Orin's anxiety regarding the question of Avril's motive plays to my claim that Wallace's characters are caught between both craving and fearing closeness and, therefore needing to sustain a measure of distance.

way; he emphasizes the ludicrousness of Orin's cover-up story to the Moms, which were often so ridiculous that when he boxed himself in, he simply declared "I have no response to that" (1049 n.269). Marlon reports that "Mrs. Incandenza *never punished* and refused to act as if she believed lying was even a possibility as far as her children were concerned, and treated an exploded lie as an insoluble cosmic mystery instead of an exploded lie" (1049 n269, *emph. in original*). This account indicates the lengths to which Avril goes to protect the image, in the sense that her denial operates to the point of negating any sign that contradicts it—even an outright refusal to acknowledge an obvious inconsistency. In this way, Avril engages in the (secondary) narcissistic function as well, in the sense that this defensive strategy serves to buttress her image as an open caring mother; that is, her protection of her children operates to protect her image as a faultless mother.

On this note, how might these characters decipher whether or not, as Marlon puts it, Avril does aim to safeguard Orin's self-esteem or exclusively her own image (1051 n269)? In other words, how can one discern whether or not the function exclusively aims back toward the mother's self-image or if it is at least partly sincere or altruistic? Using a notion that Marlon mentions in reference to Avril, Adam Kelly discusses the idea that sincerity cannot be finally deciphered at the level of representation, since one can always uncover a potential motive at another level; this motive, as Kelly mentions, can be deciphered by certain others, such as the Alcoholics Anonymous veterans, but seemingly on the grounds of a personal experience of uprooting motive in themselves; however, the question of sincerity always remains open, since it depends on something at once communicative and beyond language itself.<sup>11</sup> My response to this predicament, as I discussed in the introductory section on secondary narcissism, does not concern the subject's ability to decipher whether or not a given statement involves a motive, but focuses on building an account of the motive—namely, its aim and root.

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<sup>11</sup> Kelly, "New Sincerity in American Fiction," 140-1.

While I leave the root of the motive to one side for now, the aim of Wallace's characters' motivation—a point that I suggested in the introductory discussion on secondary narcissism—relates to absorbing attention in support of a pre-constructed self-image, which implies that the character has also pre-constructed the other.<sup>12</sup> So, rather than responding more directly to the needs of her children, Avril deals with this imaginary relation instead; for instance, with regards to Hal, “Avril hears her own echoes inside him and thinks what she hears is him” (694). In this case, Avril negates the reality of a given situation (her sons' needs) in favour of a highly idealized and impossible image of a flawless relationship with her children. This, of course, recalls James Sr.'s projective relationship with his son, but differs in the sense that Avril seems to actually believe her relationship with Hal is a relation with him as an-other, whereas James Sr. more or less consciously seeks to negate his son's sovereignty and shape him in his own image. Nicoline Timmer gives a similar account of Avril, noting that she “tries her best to give the outward impression of unconditionally loving her children but somehow still manages to have her children incorporate her own too-high and at times bizarre standards of what is appropriate.”<sup>13</sup> So, at one level, Avril demonstrates sincere commitment to the ideal, but this commitment precludes the actual needs of her children. In this way, the answer to Marlon's question—ultimately, is she selfish or altruistic?—is relatively straightforward: at a conscious level, Avril's effort is quite sincere in the way she attempts to fulfill her ideal of the flawless mother, but at the unconscious level there is the narcissistic dedication to elevating a self-image by means of the children. Consequently, Avril's enigma is partly explained in the context of her narcissistic reinforcement of a self-image; while this does not mirror James Incandenza's (lacking) relationship with his children, it does parallel the narcissistic function of elevating an image

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<sup>12</sup> Although the strategy of Avril's egoic reinforcement differs from characters' use of irony as a narcissistic defence, they share the same narcissistic principle of mitigating some affective dilemma. Irony has the aim of reinforcing an image of intelligence to 'get up above' some affect; likewise, Avril's strategy, as I will show in the last section of this chapter, also elevates her over an affective discord at the root of her obsessiveness and phobias.

<sup>13</sup> Timmer, *Do You Feel It Too?*, 139.

by way of the other: James achieves this, to an extent, through his work as a filmmaker, whereas Avril achieves it through her children.

Why is it, though, that Avril's function cannot be left as such? One point that appears to work against my claim of 'something more horrific' in the maternal threat is that James' film actually kills viewers, whereas Avril only *seems* dangerous to certain characters; for instance, Brian Douglas Jansen notes that James' "self-reflexivity prevents him from truly granting objects the respect they deserve or of understanding the danger of something [the film] so radically entertaining."<sup>14</sup> In the same way, considering that Avril's narcissism is not particularly ironic or self-reflexive, it would seem that her threatening qualities are, in terms of threat-value, beneath that of the ironic-narcissistic subjectivity of James. However, let us not forget that the contents of James' 'Infinite Jest' features a mythical incarnation of Avril as the mother-death figure engaging in a seductive and violent display with the infant-eye lens; the fact that the viewers are almost universally engulfed in this fantasy attests to the power of the maternal beyond, I suggest, the function of irony.<sup>15</sup> Another reason that I suggest 'something more' in the maternal threat follows my opening remarks on Kate Gompert's division of anhedonia and psychotic depression. The nature of the threat that characters describe—of which I have already mentioned some formulations, such as 'emotional sun' and 'black hole'—seems more intensely affective than the ironic anhedonia in Wallace's fiction. Among the massive variety of terms that characters use to describe the maternal threat of engulfment, psychotic depression stands out as a particularly serious one—"authoritative" as Kate puts it (695). As I demonstrate in the next section, the engulfment side of the double-bind is characterized by something un-articulate that

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<sup>14</sup> Brian Douglas Jansen, "'On the Porousness of Certain Borders': Attending to Objects in David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest," (*ESC: English Studies in Canada*, 40.4, 2014), 67-8.

<sup>15</sup> Perhaps, as I suggested in the previous chapter, James can handle the deadly rendition of the 'return to the mother' fantasy on the grounds of his isolation, whereas other characters, who are not quite to this level of ironic-narcissistic distance, are engulfed by this film on the basis of what affective interaction is still possible for them.

strings together the various terms used to describe characters' affective fears that are not reducible to isolation.

### **A Psychotic, Maternal Threat**

Along with the narcissistic portrait of Avril as someone whose energy is unconsciously dedicated to maintaining an image, something else is going on with the affects she induces in other characters. It is not simply that Avril operates as a model of secondary narcissism, but the weight of her enigma and a sense of violence around characters' perceptions of her indicates another, intensely affective problem in addition to the novel's ironic-narcissistic isolation. It is in this sense that I suggest the ironic-narcissistic distancing that operates as a defence does so as a response to the violent maternally themed sensations that many of the characters face. Importantly, this means the maternal affect is not fully encapsulated in the general notion of irony, nor in the ironic-narcissistic reinforcement of the self-image. In other words, Avril's presence evokes a sense of anxiety that pervades the ironic-narcissistic characters in the novel, but is not reducible to the isolating affective consequence of this defence mechanism. The maternal threat, then, encroaches upon the ironic distancing upon which the characters depend.

Both Orin Incandenza and his ex-girlfriend Joelle Van Dyne provide an account of the threat specifically in relation to Avril. Referring to Avril's 'politeness roulette,' Orin metaphorizes her position, saying "she went around with her feelings out in front of her with an arm around the feelings' windpipe and a Glock 9mm. to the feelings' temple like a terrorist with a hostage, daring you to shoot" (523); Again, this extreme imagery could perhaps be explained as the hyperbole of an antagonistic son, but it nonetheless demonstrates the emotional impact that the Moms has on her children. In addition to Orin's imaginative account, the longest and perhaps most dramatic account of Avril's effect occurs through Joelle's memory of the details regarding Orin's upbringing, along with



the first dinner she had with the Incandenza family.<sup>16</sup> Using similarly violent imagery, Joelle comments that she “felt sure in her guts’ pit that the woman could have sat there and cut out Joelle’s pancreas and thymus and minced them and prepared sweetbreads and eaten them chilled and patted her mouth without batting an eye” (747).<sup>17</sup> For both characters, the sense of danger seems to stem from something never quite articulated; Joelle cannot quite come to grips with Avril’s demeanor, saying that “something about the woman made every follicle on Joelle’s body pucker and distend” (744). This concurs with Marlon’s analysis that “[s]omething just was not *right*. Is the only way to put it. Something *creepy*, even” (1051 n269, *emph. in original*). In essence, the nature of the threat involves something that escapes explanation and indicates a deadly violence.

What is the reader to make of these opaque, conflicted, and violent descriptions of Avril’s character? Despite the persistently vague depictions of an un-articulable violent *thing* surrounding Avril’s presence, there are indications that the very ungraspable nature of the problem constitutes the affect. In the same scene with Joelle at the Incandenza home, the narrator’s descriptions of the characters at the dinner table jumps between the five members of the family, Joelle, and two of Hal’s friends. Joelle notices that “Avril directed every fourth comment to Joelle, to include her” (744); further down the page, she notices that “Avril also directed every fourth comment to Orin, Hal, Mario, like a cycle of even inclusion” (744). However, in the same passage, the narrator dedicates approximately every

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<sup>16</sup> In addition, given that Joelle’s father was excessively close to her, her account of Avril’s demeanor also hints at an unresolved trauma. In the way the narrator dances around Joelle’s sense of the woman, it seems that she fails to mentally articulate the provoked feelings, which makes sense given the little indication that Joelle truly grasps the transgressive nature of her father’s obsessiveness toward her (the best account of Joelle’s relationship with her father is found circa 792-5, which I discuss in more detail later on in this chapter).

<sup>17</sup> Despite Joelle’s sensing something violent about Avril, she says that the woman “had been gracious and warm and attentive without obtruding, and worked unobtrusively hard to put everyone at ease and to facilitate communication” (744); further Joelle, “could detect nothing fake about the lady’s grace and cheer toward her” (747). In a way, Joelle’s sense of Avril confirms the idea that the latter’s sincerity is genuine despite there being a motive that relates to the self-image (the secondary narcissism). However, it seems that the sense of violence is not fully accounted for by the notion of secondary narcissism); for instance, Orin’s ironic-narcissistic strategy of womanizing does not elicit the same visceral affects.

two or three comments to Joelle's perceptions of Avril. In an especially intense passage within the list-like narration of the dinner, we are told:

Avril drank champagne out of a little fluted glass whose level somehow never went down. Dr. Incandenza . . . drank at a tri-faceted tumbler of something that made the air above it shimmer slightly. Avril put everyone at ease. Orin did credible impressions of famous figures. He and little Hal made dry fun of Avril's Canadian pronunciation of certain diphthongs. Avril and Dr. Incandenza took turns cutting up Mario's salmon. Joelle had a weird half-vision of Avril hiking her knife up hilt-first and plunging it into Joelle's breast. Hal Incandenza and two other lopsidedly muscular boys, from the tennis school ate like refugees and were regarded with gentle amusement. Avril dabbed her mouth in a patrician way after every bite (744).

These repetitions affect a qualitative and rhythmic imbalance in Avril's polished alternation of comments at the table. The most obvious is the juxtaposition between Avril's good-naturedness with her children and Joelle's fantasy with the knife. More subtle is the way the numbers here fail to add up, particularly in the rhythmic unevenness of the narrator's invocations of Joelle's perceptions of Avril (every fourth comment by Avril, but every second or third comment about her). This imbalance indicates a feeling that something is out-of-sorts, since the narrator does not follow Avril's precise alternation of comments in fours, but focuses on Avril unevenly and more frequently, demonstrating how the Moms' magnetism works. In this way, the attention returned outweighs the remarks delivered, which suggests that Avril does, in fact, get more out of her relationships than she gives.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, as I have argued, the notion of secondary narcissism does not sufficiently explain the severity of affects involved; even considering the precision of Avril's narcissistic strategy, a sense of 'unfitting' or imbalance comes through in this passage—one that Joelle and, for that matter, the narrator, is unable to articulate.

The numerical imbalance also brings to mind Wallace's discussion of 'the click' as the basis

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<sup>18</sup> Mary K. Holland, for instance, suggests that Avril's strategy is thoroughly narcissistic and describes her as "a woman who extends her emotional energy to her children only so that they could reflect it back to her." Holland, "The Art's Heart's Purpose," 226. In this way, even though Avril dedicates herself absolutely to being the carer-provider, she still gets more out of the relationship than she gives. From within the novel, Molly Notkin backs this view of Avril, reporting that the woman is uninterested "in any agendas larger than her own individually neurotic agendas" (790).

for his early interest in mathematics and avant-garde literature: “a mathematical experience was aesthetic in nature, an epiphany in Joyce’s original sense. These moments appeared in proof-completions, or maybe algorithms.”<sup>19</sup> His notion ties together a sense of fittingness and feeling, indicating an affective reaction to things coming together and making sense. The dinner passage demonstrates a kind of antagonism to sense-making, particularly in the way no one is quite able to make sense of their feelings about Avril; in other words, since characters cannot articulate the affects that she elicits from them, something about this maternal power fails to add up. In the same way, as I have noted, characters have difficulty articulating their perceptions of Avril; for instance, “[i]t took a long time for Joelle even to start to put a finger on what gave her the howling fantods about Orin’s mother” (744); in spite of this statement, the narrator never, in fact, articulates the nature of the *thing*.<sup>20</sup> In this way, the narrative in the dinner scene indicates that the threat lies beyond direct articulation—an idea that extends beyond Avril’s effect on characters and into the way in which other characters in the novel experience psychotic depression.

To remain clear, I will restate the position of psychotic depression in the impasse of narcissism in which characters of *Infinite Jest* find themselves. As I have said, there are two poles that threaten characters with annihilation: the ironic-narcissistic consequence of anhedonic isolation and the maternally themed threat of engulfment. Similarly, the psychotically depressed characters are convincingly adamant that anhedonia differs from their depression; the former is described as a melancholic emptying of affectivity, whereas their *psychotic* depression is a total pain from which they seek an escape (692-8). As Kate says, “dead-eyed anhedonia is but a remora on the ventral flank of the true predator, the Great White Shark of pain” (695). Despite this downplaying of the

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<sup>19</sup> Wallace, “An Expanded Interview,” in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, 34-5.

<sup>20</sup> This out-of-sorts effect brings to mind Avril’s own obsessive-compulsiveness and her fear of things being imbalanced, disorderly, or unsystematic. Wallace seems to be demonstrating the uneasiness within an obsessive’s sensation that something is out of place. In this sense, it is the sensation of an unarticulated disturbing element that seems to constitute the affect Avril has on others. This appears to suggest something of a connection between that and the *thing* the agoraphobia and OCD defend her against. I explore this connection in the last section of this chapter.

seriousness of anhedonia, the fate of James Incandenza illustrates that the radical result of irony, anhedonia, and secondary narcissism is an annihilating isolation, which, following from David Rando, I suggest is thoroughly affective. Nevertheless, on the other side of the double-bind (the Great White Shark), the psychotic threat is described as an intense affect that is characterized by an inability to properly define or articulate it. The pain proves so difficult to expound that Kate simply gives it the amorphous name ‘*It*’ and elsewhere describes it as ‘A thing,’ (695, *emph. in original*; 649);<sup>21</sup> fellow Ennet House resident Geoffrey Day concurs that it is “[s]hapeless. Shapelessness was one of the horrible things about it.” (649).<sup>22</sup> This is the same sort of un-articulable element that both Joelle and Marlon sense in their encounters with Avril. Since they are both unable to ‘put a finger on’ the horrific element in question, they can only attempt to outline the affect they experience from their sense of this character. Similarly, Kate and Geoffrey struggle to define the sense of dread that they experience, unable to locate a precise cause in spite of—or, perhaps due to—the intensity of the affect. In this sense, the notion of psychotic depression refers to the psychological state of this second pole of the double-bind.

A couple of passages from *Infinite Jest* in which the narrator uses mother-infant themed terminology to discuss psychotically depressed characters further evinces the connection between psychotic depression and the maternal theme. The narrator alludes to this mother-child dynamic

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<sup>21</sup> In some sense, this recalls the Freudian *thing* as described by Lacan as “strange and even hostile on occasion, or in any case the first outside . . . the absolute Other of the subject.” Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VII*, ed. Jacques Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter, (New York: W.W Norton, 1992), 52. This only works in the sense that, for Lacan, ‘das Ding,’ which is absolutely outside articulation, leaves a trace in the mental economy of the subject (usually referred to as object a).

<sup>22</sup> Kate asks Geoffrey whether the horror was triangular (649-50); this seems related to an interview in which Wallace said that he modelled the novel from the Sierpinski triangle, which is roughly a fractal pattern of equilateral triangles infinitely dividing into smaller triangles. David Foster Wallace, “David Foster Wallace: Infinite Jest,” Interviewed by Michael Silverblatt, (*KCRW Online*, 11 April, 1996. Accessed on 14 February, 2017. <https://www.kcrw.com/news-culture/shows/bookworm/david-foster-wallace-infinite-jest>). The theme of recursion comes to mind here, since the novel continually loops characters through one another in a manner which ultimately conflates the plot to the extent that one can only speculate about much of the novel. Also, the reader, at the end of the novel, must return to the beginning; perhaps this reaffirms that the horrors and desires that belong to the mother-infant dyad are a kind of infinitely engulfing, recurring process, in the sense that one is always doomed to return. The notion of recursion in *Infinite Jest* can be found in: Katherine Hayles, “The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity: Virtual ecologies, Entertainment, and Infinite Jest,” (*New Literary History* 30.3, 1999), 684; Benzon, *Poetics of Chaos*, 138-94.

within the effects of psychotic depression in the first passage featuring Kate when she enters an institution after attempting suicide. The narrator describes Kate's appearance as "fetal" (70); also, Kate recalls her mother's description of her when she discovered that her daughter had intentionally overdosed on medication, saying that "she thought at first she hallucinated me as a newborn again. On my side all red and wet" (70). Another instance of the maternal nature of the psychotic affect is found in a conversation between her and Geoffrey, in which the latter describes a childhood scene in which he was practicing violin and a sonorous combination between the notes from the instrument, an exhaust fan, and a vibrating window produced a sense of dread that followed him throughout the rest of his life. He tells Kate that "a large dark billowing shape came billowing out of some corner in my mind. I can be no more precise than to say *large, dark, shape and billowing*" (649, *emph. in original*). His experience of the affect attests to the amorphousness of the horror involved; that is, it has no definable shape, but only a vague billowing wave-like pattern of movement that he cannot fully articulate.<sup>23</sup> Further, Geoffrey remembers that after his first experience of the sonorous horror, "[i]n just the way any child will probe a wound or pick at a scab I returned shortly to the room . . . And produced the resonance again immediately" (649-50). This back and forth play seems to indicate the repetitious function of this mother-child dynamic in the character's recollection of the event, bringing to mind the well-known Freudian fort-da games played by a young child in relation to the mother's alternating presence and absence.<sup>24</sup> So, these cases demonstrate the idea that the un-articulable affect

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<sup>23</sup> Of course, billowing commonly refers to smoke, but it also denotes a "swell on the ocean produced by a wind." Oxford English Dictionary, 'Billow,' (*Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford University Press, 2016. <http://www.oed.com.ezproxyd.bham.ac.uk/view/Entry/19032?rskey=QsEFOU&result=1#eid>). I suggest, especially given that Geoffrey went back and forth from the sound, that the wave-like movement of billowing is yet another reference to the infant's relationship to the mother, in the sense that the mother's wave-like leaving and returning to her infant forms a crucial component of the child's development (see note 24). For more on the idea of waves, the id, and death in *Infinite Jest*, see: Casey Michael Henry, "'Sudden Awakening to the Fact That the Mischief Is Irretrievably Done': Epiphanic Structure in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*," (*Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 56.5 2015), 492-4.

<sup>24</sup> 'Fort-da' was game played by Freud's grandson, who would throw a wooden reel with string over the crib so that it disappeared, then pull it back up again. Freud theorized that this was the child's internalization of the process of separation from the parents. "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" in: Sigmund Freud, *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: Norton, 1989. Reprint, New York: Norton, 1995), 599-601.

relates to something maternal and psychotic that seems to threaten the ironic-narcissistic subjectivity of the characters.

In this section, I have argued that the maternal threat involves an inability to articulate it and relates to characters' psychotic experiences. Each of these points is crucial to the other side of the double-bind, which, as I have suggested, threatens Wallace's ironic-narcissistic subjects with engulfment. In essence, it threatens a distanced selfhood with a radical closeness. To tie this back into the psychoanalytic trajectory of this analysis, I will point out that in Lacanian theory, the psychotic structure involves precisely these elements: a failure of a fixed signifying function that recalls the characters' inability to articulate the threat and, a point that I explore in the following section, a fear of engulfment that specifically relates to the mother. This psychotically infused language occurs in the narrative on both Hal and Orin's depictions of the threat; in reference to Avril's meltdown scene in the opening pages of the novel (which I later describe), Orin refers to it as "what seethed out there just beyond tidiness" (1043 n.234) and explains Hal's take on the matter as "boiling clouds of elemental gas" (1042). In this sense, the idea of engulfment contrasts with the ironic-narcissistic threat of separation of the self from the other to the extent of radical isolation. At this level, the narcissistically operative irony of, for instance, Hal and Orin, is not at all resolved by an approach to affect, as suggested in the 'x over irony' formulation of the problem: crucially, something within the affect in question is horrific and, by its very nature, cannot be articulated ('split apart, gotten up above') in order to be approached.

### **A Fear of Engulfment**

Before explicating the psychoanalytic concepts that illuminate the pole of the double-bind to which I am referring in this chapter, I will discuss the crucial connection between the two sides, in order to account for the tension in the isolation-engulfment predicament. The two poles are split by definition, in the sense that the latter defies the operation of the former. Isolation has, in the ironic-narcissistic

sense, ‘split things apart’ and, therefore, the subject has ‘gotten above’ or been distanced from the object; on the contrary, the maternally themed threat is un-articulable for precisely the reason that the mother-infant dyad lacks separation: the relation is un-split and therefore impossible to ‘get up above.’ In other words, this maternally themed affect is the very horror of indistinction that self-protective distancing seeks to thwart. On this note, Mary K. Holland points out the causal link between the infantile and irony’s distance, noting “the insidious way in which infantile, narcissistic need catalyzes the constant production of disaffected irony.”<sup>25</sup> Although Holland’s point here refers to characters’ fears of *appearing* infantile, my point takes the threat of the mother-infant dyad seriously, given its link to the psychotic. In essence, I am suggesting that the un-articulable affect that threatens the subject antagonizes the very ironic-narcissistic aim of splitting apart and getting above—a point that emphasizes my central claim that approaches to affect do not resolve irony; rather affect catalyzes the defence on the basis of its horrific nature. It is in this sense that the intersubjective affect that characters desire in *Infinite Jest* can be as deadly as the ironic strategy that aims to avoid it. With that in mind, I focus in this section on the theoretical specificities of the affective engulfment, primarily using the Lacanian ideas on maternal engulfment and, later on, Kristeva’s abject, which both reinterpret the Freudian notion of primary narcissism.

In order to enter a discussion of engulfment, I will place my analysis in the context of the work that has been done on Lacanian themes in *Infinite Jest*. The problematic conception of affect as a positivity (at least, as something exclusively desired) is evident in Marshal Boswell’s long work on Wallace, in which he claims that the author critiques a Lacanian idea of a return to the mother by

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<sup>25</sup> Holland, “Art’s Heart’s Purpose,” 230. In Holland’s view, it is the ironic aversion to affect that thwarts characters’ attempts to access it; For Holland, irony operates to distance the characters from the image of the infantile, so that the cause of irony is the negative image of being “naïve and goo-prone and generally pathetic” (695)—a fear that Hal discusses a few times in the novel. However, in this way, Holland does not account for the maternal threat, so she misses, as it were, half the anxiety that permeates Wallace’s characters and psychoanalytic subjects.

ironizing the consequences of this return.<sup>26</sup> He supports this by discussing the Inner Infant scene; when Hal's subjective disintegration begins, he decides to visit an addiction support meeting, but wrongly stumbles into the Inner Infant support group, in which weeping adults clutch teddy bears and work through their sour memories of childhood. Boswell states that "Wallace's point here couldn't be any clearer: nearly everyone in the significantly designated Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment (Y.D.A.U.) is a grown up baby in diapers, crawling on all fours in search of something to fill that need for maternal plenitude."<sup>27</sup> To this end, he writes that Wallace "sees Lacan's model as a trap";<sup>28</sup> that is, if one returns to the domain of the mother, the result is a parodic carnival of the Inner Infant. While Boswell's fine reading of the Inner Infant counselling does demonstrate Wallace's ironic approach to certain therapeutic resolutions, his misreading of Lacan overlooks the nightmarish quality of such a return in Lacanian theory.

Lacan more than accounts for this problematic idea of the desire to return to an infantile state. In the nearly proverbial quote "*man's desire is the desire of the Other*,"<sup>29</sup> it is not that the subject desires this 'Other' as in the Freudian Oedipal child's desire for the mother to return to a state of oneness, but that the subject is caught within the desire of the Other as a social order. In this way, one could say precisely the inverse to Boswell's take on Lacan—that desire prevents slippage into infantile relations, to prevent any sort of satisfaction or end to its trajectory. Lacan makes precisely this point when he writes that "desire is a defence, a defence against going beyond a limit in *jouissance*."<sup>30</sup> This latter term informs my use of 'affect' in the sense that it implies a kind of threshold between pleasure and pain, most often being referred to in a negative light or, rather, the point at which an excitation becomes too intense; *Jouissance* is a threat of horror for Slavoj Žižek,

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<sup>26</sup> Boswell writes that "Wallace is at once sympathetic to and contemptuous of this desire for a return to maternal plenitude." Boswell, *Understanding*, 130.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 131.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 130.

<sup>29</sup> Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 38, (emph. in original).

<sup>30</sup> "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire" in: Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002), 699.



anguish for Colette Soler, and in both cases necessary for a subject to attain at some reduced level.<sup>31</sup> Hal provides a like-minded insight in the Inner Infant scene: “At a certain point hysterical grief becomes facially indistinguishable from hysterical mirth, it appears” (807). This is precisely the sense in which affect cannot simply constitute a positive resolution to irony: its excess is a psychotic danger for both Lacan and, as I argue, for Wallace as well. In this sense, it is worth exploring in more detail.

The notion of *jouissance* is often referenced using maternal imagery, since the desire of the mother is its catalyst on the grounds of the original mother-infant dyad in the development of a subject. To exemplify this horrific affect, Lacan uses an oft-cited parable of being in front of a female praying mantis and wearing, unbeknownst to the subject, either a male or female mantis mask; here, the *jouissance* lies in the anxiety of uncertainty whether or not one’s fate is to be devoured, not knowing the desire of the female mantis.<sup>32</sup> This image is especially important when it comes to understanding the maternal threat, since the anxiety of Wallace’s characters (in addition to the anxiety of isolation, or, Rando’s lovelessness) relates to the threat as one of affective engulfment, or the fear of the mother as a ‘black hole.’ In another description that dramatizes the horrific affect in terms of the maternal, Lacan references the gaping mouth of a crocodile: “[t]he mother’s desire is not something that is bearable just like that, that you are indifferent to. It will always wreak havoc. A huge crocodile whose jaws you are—that’s the mother. One never knows what might suddenly come over her and make her shut her trap. That’s what the mother’s desire is.”<sup>33</sup> The idea, then, is that the enigmatic desire of the mother constitutes *jouissance*, which threatens to annihilate the stability of the self. In this sense, a return to the mother is not only impossible, but undesirable, since the ego

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<sup>31</sup> Zizek speaks about the “horror of the Real” and “unbearable excess of *jouissance*” more or less interchangeably. Zizek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, 6, 11. Colette Soler provides two useful formulations of *jouissance*, one of which is from Lacan; the first is “summoning the presence of the ungraspable guest” and the other “a certain bulge in the phenomenal veil.” Colette Soler, *Lacanian Affect: The Function of Affect in Lacan’s Work*, trans. Bruce Fink, (New York: Routledge, 2016), 24. For Soler’s description of anguish as a *jouissance*-based affect, see: *Ibid*, 15.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 24-7; Bruce Fink, *Clinical Introduction*, 60-1.

<sup>33</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XVII*, ed. Jacques Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg, (New York: W.W Norton, 2007), 112.

develops on the grounds of separation from the mother; this means that the self develops as a kind of defence from falling into the amorphous primordial relations. This is precisely the predicament in *Infinite Jest*, in the sense that the ironic-narcissistic distance is continually threatened with its inverse—an excess closeness.

In a way that recalls Lacan's crocodile jaws, the same characters that I have explored in relation to the maternal affect discuss the sense of engulfment that adjoins it. Molly Notkin reports Joelle's description of Avril's smile as "the rictal smile of some kind of thanatoptic figure" (790); the word 'rictal' refers to a bird's open mouth and more generally to a gaping mouth.<sup>34</sup> This seems to adjoin with Kate's sense of psychotic depression as a shark, considering a typical image of a shark with its wide predatory jaws. In two passages, she discusses the idea of being consumed or swallowed and surmises that this is one of the reasons it is so difficult to adequately describe her depression, reasoning that "I can't get enough outside it to call it anything" (73) and that "*It billows on and coagulates around and wraps Its black folds and absorbs into itself*" (695, *emph. in original*). Geoffrey concurs that for him the shapeless affect "rose and grew larger and became engulfing" (649); for both characters, the affect subsumes and thereby inhibits their ability to properly 'get up above' and articulate the condition.

In addition to the psychotically depressed characters, Orin's relationship with his mother appears to have issues with proximity.<sup>35</sup> It is suggested that Avril and Orin could have been engaged in an incestuous relationship, indicating that Orin's anxiety regarding his mother is, in fact, a question of excess closeness (552-3, 791). Further, given Avril's magnetism and centrality in the family, the theme of being swallowed or engulfed within her strategies is especially apparent. Although Orin's estrangement from Avril is not entirely known, it seems clear that Orin's distance from her supports

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<sup>34</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, 'Rictal,' (*Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford University Press, 2016. <http://www.oed.com.ezproxyd.bham.ac.uk/view/Entry/165615?redirectedFrom=rictal#eid>).

<sup>35</sup> Marlon refers to Avril's "smothering proximity" while discussing Orin's impression of his mother, in which Orin smiles warmly, but slowly approaches, getting nearer and nearer to the point of being face-on-face (1051-2).

this idea of the mother as an engulfing figure. On the same topic, in line with the gaping mouth theme, Hal tells Orin that the Mom's jaw would need to be unhinged from the surprise of a sudden phone call from Orin, indicating Orin's estrangement as a level of protection against the wide, predatory, maternal threat (1014). So, the idea of being entrapped, swallowed, and engulfed and the convergent images of gaping mouths attest to the seriousness of an affective threat that is formulated in relation to irony, but is not contained within it. As I have suggested, the maternally themed, proximal affect threatens to dissolve the ironic subjects' distance that holds them just above the shark's jaws, so to speak.

Toon Staes writes on the maternal power in his short article exploring the myth of the deadly mother in *Infinite Jest*. 'The Coatlicue Complex' is a fictional psychological complex from the novel, used in reference to Hal during a chapter that focuses on his relation to his mother (516). Staes investigates Wallace's allusion to the Aztec goddess Coatlicue, who symbolizes absolute maternal power. He highlights a paradox in the myth, in which the son is pathologically dependent on the mother to such an extreme that he cannot separate from her, but must do so in order to live; that is to say, separating from the mother is one order of death, but failing to separate from the mother "is to die as an individual."<sup>36</sup> Likewise, the Lacanian subject faces a death of a certain kind of intimacy in separation from the mother, but another, much worse death if separation is not achieved—the death of the self through annihilation by the enigma of the mother.<sup>37</sup> An insufficient paternal function, such as I have suggested in the case of James' near-total ironic-narcissistic isolation with regards to Hal and Orin, leaves the subject without recourse from being swallowed by the mother, since the father does

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<sup>36</sup> Toon Staes, "The Coatlicue Complex in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*," (*The Explicator* 72.1, 2014), 69; Julia Sherman, "The Coatlicue Complex: A Source of Irrational Reactions Against Women," (*Transactional Analysis Journal* 5.2, 1974: 188-92. Sage Journals. Accessed on 23 May, 2017. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/036215377500500226>).

<sup>37</sup> This parallels psychotic and perverse subjects in psychoanalytic theory, for whom there is no separation from the mother's desire because it has not been named. In these cases, the mother's desire remains enigmatic, mystical, and engulfing. Fink, "*Clinical Introduction*" 197-202. To contrast that with the more typical neurotic structure, which Lacan considers to be a more completed subjectivity, the neurotic is caught up in the Other's ideals of law, language, and culture, all of which separate the subject from the mother-infant dyad. *Ibid*, 194-5.

not, in this case, provide a resolution to the enigma of the mother's desire.<sup>38</sup> Short of a paternal resolution, a proper defence is not attainable and the subject is faced with excess jouissance—in the mouth of the crocodile, as it were.

So, to restate the larger idea, in the world of *Infinite Jest*, separation from the mother is attained by means of the ironic-narcissistic anhedonia that ends with utter isolation, whereas failing to separate, or, in Staes words, 'to die as an individual,' means to be threatened with engulfment by the maternal—a threat that constitutes the *It or thing* of Kate Gompert, the shapelessness or billowing of Geoffrey Day, and the Black Hole for Orin. So, for Wallace, like Lacan, an un-articulate affect that relates to the mother constitutes a threat in the very sense that it is un-articulate and therefore evokes the fear of engulfment. As I have suggested, the very separation of the self from the world—intensified to the point of isolation by narcissism and the coextensive ironic function in the novel—is at stake in the face of this engulfment threat. The proximal dilemma that characters face relates to the infant's separation from the mother, which explains the centrality of the mother-infant theme in the text.

### **The Abject**

In support of my use of the phrase 'mother-infant dyad,' I will briefly discuss the Freudian primary narcissism, from which I derive the idea. This leads into a discussion of Kristeva's notion of the abject in the self's initial extraction and separation from its environment, which helps to gain a better sense of the function of affect in Wallace's formulation of characters; that is, the distance of the self is threatened by the closeness that relates to the world of the infant. First, I will note the proper place of Freud's antiquated notion of primary narcissism in this paper. In Freudian theory, primary

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<sup>38</sup> The Oedipal response to the mother's desire would be *the father*, which institutes the father's *no* to the intimate mother-infant relationship and poses the resolution of paternal identification, at least, in the case of a male subject. However, as I have argued, given James' insufficiency, the paternal function is lacking, so Orin's and Hal's sense of the engulfment threat does not seem to be resolved in this way.

narcissism has been described as an “‘objectless’—or at any rate ‘undifferentiated’—mother-infant state, implying no split between subject and external world.”<sup>39</sup> Freud himself describes the relationship between infant and mother as ‘oceanic.’<sup>40</sup> Although this ‘objectless’ view on primary narcissism has long been contended in psychoanalysis, the idea persists that subjects fear something archaic and maternal. It is not ‘un-differentiation’ as a state of affairs that is contended, but the idea of it as a contained phase of development has been rejected; the primary-to-secondary narcissism is seen as a continuum—a point that concurs with my use of the term, since I am suggesting that the fear of the in-separate, the amorphous, and the un-articulate threaten Wallace’s characters at various life-stages. To put this another way, although primary narcissism has for a long time not been seen as a ‘primary stage’ in the life of an infant, it is still a component of the larger process of narcissism that persists throughout the life of a subject. Again, Wallace’s formulation of affects as amorphous and un-articulate are exemplary of this idea of narcissism, since many of his characters experience these so-called engulfing ‘primary narcissistic’ threats throughout their teenage and adult years.

To this end, Julia Kristeva provides a useful account of the mother-infant relationship, detailing her notion of the abject as an “immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be.”<sup>41</sup> For Kristeva, the mother-infant relation breaks down in the process of separation, in which the child begins to repudiate the blurred boundaries between the emerging self and the mother’s body; in this way, the abject is a horror that threatens to dissolve the established separation or distinction from the mother, therefore it can only ever be quasi-signified

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<sup>39</sup> Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, (London: Karnac, 1967. Reprint, London: Karnac, 1988. Proquest. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bham/detail.action?docID=709548>), 338. Laplanche and Pontalis actually contend with this view in psychoanalytic theory, arguing that, in the sense of the primacy of object-relations, there is no completely objectless (primary) state.

<sup>40</sup> “Civilization and Its Discontents” in: Sigmund Freud, *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: Norton, 1989. Reprint, New York: Norton, 1995), 727. On primary narcissism specifically, Freud writes that there is “an original libidinal cathexis of the ego, from which some is later given off to objects, but which fundamentally persists and is related to the object-cathexes.” Freud, “On Narcissism,” 547. A further note: cathexis is a wide-ranging term that largely refers to the investment of mental energy (libido) into an object. See: Edward Erwin, ed. *The Freud Encyclopedia: Theory, Therapy, and Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 69-71.

<sup>41</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia UP, 1982), 10.

through encounters with corpses, excrement, diseases, decay, and anything that might antagonize distinction that is the self.<sup>42</sup> A good example of the function of abjection in *Infinite Jest* is in both Joelle and Avril's phobic aversion to dirt and disorder. In view of the novel's connection between the abject and the maternal theme, Joelle gets the "fantods" when faced with the tooth decay of some of the Ennet House residents (723); it is the same term that Joelle uses to describe her first encounter with the matriarch of the Incandenza family: she could not "put a finger on what gave her the howling fantods about Orin's mother" (744). Here, the sign of decaying teeth relates to the maternal threat of engulfment and dissolution of the subject and is yet another reference to the threat of open mouths.

It seems that Wallace thematically handles the idea of maternal engulfment better than the inverse (an excess fatherly closeness), but there is a suggested paternal equivalent in *Infinite Jest* that is mildly accounted for through Joelle's story. The references to her 'Personal Daddy' hints at a fatherly correlate to the problematic closeness faced by the Incandenza boys (explicitly related to the mother) and by the two Ennet House residents that I have discussed, Kate and Geoffrey (more subtle mother-infant references). Short of James Sr.'s emotional projection onto his son, which I would argue is exemplary of secondary narcissism, Joelle's father is the only hint of such an engulfing equivalence. Nevertheless, in Joelle's case, the mother is still crucially involved in the function of separation, but of the daughter from the father. In this way, the story surrounding Joelle's facial scarring demonstrates the function of the abject quite well; likewise, the notion of the abject provides a good account of the significance of the latter side of the isolation-engulfment double-bind in *Infinite Jest*.

Joelle has her own experiences with excessive closeness to her Personal Daddy, who began defensively infantilizing Joelle during puberty for the reason, he admits, that he was in love with her

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<sup>42</sup> Megan Becker-Leckrone provides a succinct account of Kristeva's abject, writing that "we come to understand abjection as much more than a mere developmental account of infantile separation. That is, abjection refers at once (1) to an infantile, originary moment in the subject's individual history, (2) to something the subject might experience throughout its existence at moments of extreme crisis, and (3) to a collective condition of our humanity." Megan Becker-Leckrone, *Julia Kristeva and Literary Theory*, (England: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 151.

(793-4). Her father rarely left her alone and “interdicted everything from brassieres to Pap smears, addressing the nubile Madame Psychosis in progressively puerile baby-talk” (792). During a family dinner with Orin at the Van Dyne household, the fact of a competing male presence brought the situation to a head for the father, who confessed his romantic obsession with his daughter. In response, Joelle’s mother ran into the basement for the father’s collection of corrosive acids, intending to burn him with it, but missed her mark, grotesquely disfiguring Joelle instead (793-5). In this scene, the mother violently dissolves the union between father and daughter, leaving a visible trace of the separation on Joelle’s face—a trace, I would suggest, of the process of abject as a separation of a child from parent. The facial scarring would make Joelle undesirable, or ‘hideous,’ to use the term of the organization to which she belongs (Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed), and therefore separate the parent-child pair.<sup>43</sup>

The way in which Joelle’s mother responds to the revelation of her father’s desire for his daughter recalls the violence of the abject that separates the child from the primordial relationship. The subject-enabling separation that would have occurred throughout her childhood was interjected by a reintegration with the father. In order to dissolve this union, as her mother seems to have intuitively understood, a violence must occur with the force of intensity in the separation between mother and child. As a result, the mother splashes acid on Avril’s face—a kind of metaphor for the violence involved in separation from the primary caregiver. Further, in the very same way that the infant’s separation from the mother is unintentionally traumatic, this violence was at least consciously

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<sup>43</sup> To be clear, I am not suggesting that all disfigurement in *Infinite Jest* is treated as abject; Mario’s varied deformities, for one, are described by multiple characters with a considered honesty. Joelle, however, is particularly cruel when considering Mario’s deformities, saying “he looked like a cross between a puppet and one of the big-headed carnivores from Spielberg’s old special-effects orgies about reptiles” (746). Given her aggressive thoughts toward Mario, her own P.G.O.A.T. status (prettiest girl of all time), her subsequent use of a veil to cover the acid burn and parallel membership in the Union for the Hideously and Improbably Deformed, it seems that, at least for Joelle, the facial disfigurement functions as an abject.

unintentional, since it is clear in the passage that the mother was aiming for the father.<sup>44</sup> So, the abject always involves an amorphous element that threatens the stability of selfhood; shapelessness, physical decay, or even disfigurement can challenge the stability of the self. As I have mentioned, the acid incident occurred as a direct result of issues of excessive closeness to the parent and, subsequently, Joelle excludes the mark by means of the veil; it renders the visible trace of the abject hidden, attesting to the un-inscribable and un-articulate nature of the affect. So, by covering her face, she negates the indication of the abject, maintaining a sense of self in radically excluding the affective threat of dissolution by means of covering it.

This is precisely the sense in which Kristeva remarks that the horrific affect is “radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses.”<sup>45</sup> The threat lies outside the realm of articulation, signification, and therefore the self; in this way, it is rejected as a sign of the dissolution of the distinctive properties of separation of self from object and world. This is precisely the sense in which the psychotically depressed characters of *Infinite Jest* experience a sort of frontier of meaning when faced with the horrific affects—a point that explains their limited ability to articulate the threat (*It*ness, thingness, shapelessness). In essence, on the grounds that the process of separation (abjection) occurs before the social self is initiated, the abject disturbs the very space that the self inhabits. The collapse of meaning, then, involves the dissolution of the subject, which connects the idea to the maternal affect that threatens to engulf the psychotically depressed characters. In *Infinite Jest*, it is not simply that the affect in question excludes the self, but it disrupts the very idea of selfhood; Kate describes *It* as “wholly incompatible with human life . . . poisoning that pervades the self at the self’s most elementary levels . . . and malignant and antagonistic to the

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<sup>44</sup> This predicament is further alluded to in the film ‘Infinite Jest,’ where the mother-death figure apologizes repeatedly to the infant despite the fact that the infanticide, apparently, will proceed unmitigated. This indicates that despite the mother’s best intentions, the violent affect is inescapable.

<sup>45</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 2.



self" (695). In this sense, the affect in question antagonizes the subject who confronts its operation as a radical alterity that threatens engulfment and, ultimately, annihilation of the subject's being.

To sum up this section, I emphasize that this conception of affect captures the predicament of many of Wallace's characters in *Infinite Jest*. I have aimed to demonstrate that affect is more than a desirable intersubjective aim of Wallace's characters; it is a horrific psychotic danger on the grounds, I argue, of the maternal theme in the novel. In this section, I have built a case for the un-articulable attributes of the '*It*-like,' 'shapeless,' 'billowing' affects that characters experience and have suggested a connection between this and the maternal theme; *It* is a threat that dissolves the self, or, for Staes, marks the 'death of the individual.' This point also forms part of the reason that irony (even the ironic-narcissistic strategy) is not the central problem, but is part of the double-bind. That is to say, the distancing that this strategy provides seems to be the primary defence against the psychotic threat. Kate Gompert perhaps exemplifies this best, in the sense that she would prefer the emptied-out anhedonic subjectivity of Wallace's critique to the un-articulable and malignant affect that threatens her. As I demonstrate in the next chapter, the Incandenza boys are also exemplary in the sense of being caught in the double-bind that involves the maternal threat at one end; they both fear, as I have mentioned, the psychotic threat of 'the chaos that seethes' and 'the boiling clouds of elemental gas' on the maternal, psychotic pole of the bind. That said, the extent of the predicament of the engulfment threat is not simply reducible to the younger generation in Wallace's texts. As I will show in the final section of this chapter, Avril herself experiences a fear of the chaotic and amorphous, which form the catalyst of her tightly-wound behaviour.

### **The Ubiquity of the Threat**

In concordance with the implication that the engulfment threat antagonizes the ironic-narcissistic distancing, I will explore the sense that the threat is ubiquitous in the novel, by which I mean that it is not simply reducible to a few characters or to the younger generation, but functions throughout the

text. This is an important point, since my claim posits that the mother-infant threat is thematically linked to affect in general; there is a connection between emotion, sentiment, empathy, naivety, the infantile, engulfment, and psychosis in the sense that the terms, while distinct at some level, are blurred into what I claim as half of the double-bind in *Infinite Jest*. Insofar as the threat consists of an un-articulate affect, then basic emotion would indeed disturb a highly ironic subject such as Hal, who has repudiated signs of affect from his psychological economy. For the Incandenza family and many of the other characters, some un-articulate *thing* threatens to disrupt their sense of selfhood—a major component of the novel that is, in my opinion, inadequately accounted for in the ‘x over irony’ formulation, which puts too high a value in affect as a resolution. With this in mind, I aim to buttress, in this section, the idea that the engulfment pole of the double-bind operates ubiquitously in the novel, even concerning Avril’s highly (secondary) narcissistic psychological makeup.<sup>46</sup>

With this in mind, it is not only Orin, Hal, Kate, Geoffrey, and Joelle that face the mother-infant themed abject as a problem, but the arch-mother herself faces a parallel threat; even Avril—the figure of many of the characters’ fears that threaten the psychotic engulfment—is caught in a relation between her obsessive narcissistic behaviour and the same phobic fear of the un-articulate and amorphous. Although it is not the same ironic-narcissistic sense of self-protective distancing that reinforces Avril against the fear, the protective strategy relates to her tight emotional grip on her children and the the ideal-image I discussed in the opening section of this chapter. So, in an effort to demonstrate the ubiquity of the engulfment pole of the double-bind, I turn to an analysis of this function in Avril: first, in Wallace’s very construction of the character—that is, with reference to her

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<sup>46</sup> On the point of the ubiquity of the un-articulate threat, Frank Cioffi suggests something similar about the very act of reading the novel when he writes that “[s]omething about the text causes mental distress, but the distress seems unrelated to genre, mode, or specifiable textual features.”<sup>46</sup> Frank Louis Cioffi, “‘An Anguish Become Thing’: Narrative as Performance in David Foster Wallace’s ‘Infinite Jest,’” (*Narrative* 8.2, 2000), 163. Although I do not get into the specifics of the structure of affects in the process of reading the novel, Cioffi’s idea of the reader’s distress relates to the idea that the affect evades proper articulation.

place in the political landscape of *Infinite Jest*'s Organization of North American Nations—then, second, in the mould scene in the opening pages of the novel.

As I have mentioned, Avril's phobia of dirt and disorder and her intense need to control her environment already begins to suggest a sense of affective aversion. In addition, Avril's literal origin in the story faces a very similar structure of the sign of dissolution and repudiation of that affect, indicated in Avril's Quebecois roots and the political struggles of the Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents (A.F.R., wheelchair assassins), which is a Quebecois terrorist group that seeks to damage O.N.A.N. on the grounds of its policy to ex-patriate waste. The group desires to separate from both Canada and North America and seeks 'Infinite Jest' the film to use as a political weapon to this end. In the historical subplot of the novel, America forced a patch of toxic land onto Canada in the Quebec region—a plan that originates from U.S. President Gentle's 'the Clean US Party,' whose policies are grounded in the theme of cleanliness (382). This notion of cleanliness operates in much the same way as that of Joelle and Avril's obsessive organizational and cleaning habits by denying the waste instead of managing it in a more integrated way. Moreover, in much the same way that O.N.A.N. pushes its waste onto Canada, Avril (albeit unwittingly) pushes her pathologies onto her children.

This idea indicates a similar process to that of abjection, in the sense of rejecting a sign of decay or dissolution as part of identity. Wallace wrote the novel at a time when America had lost a Soviet antagonist that for decades enabled a process of identity based on opposition; in response to the new era, the 'Clean US Party' identifies the threat as internal and proceeds to expel that threat, platforming a policy of *experialism*, a witty speculative post-imperial model of identifying an internal danger and literally expelling it. To this end, as Bradley Fest points out, "the ideological other of *Infinite Jest* is the detritus and waste expelled from the self, the abject."<sup>47</sup> Being Quebecois, Avril has

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<sup>47</sup> Bradley J. Fest, "The Inverted Nuke in the Garden: Archival Emergence and Anti-Eschatology in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*," (*Boundary 2* 39.3, 2012), 131.

an emotional stake in the political backstory of the novel; Hal, perhaps jokingly, refers to Avril as a subject of the “the Canadian radical mind” and suggests that any mentioning of Quebec’s historical struggles “and the Mom’s lips disappear” (1013 n.110).<sup>48</sup> In fact, the character originates from the precise region of the expelled waste, which threatens the stability and identity of the North American region O.N.A.N.. As Katherine Hayles points out, ‘Infinite Jest’ the film “was buried in the microwave-exploded skull of James Inc, interred by his wife Avril in her family’s farm in L’Islet Province of Nouveau Québec, which is to say, in the very Concavity/Convexity that the U.S. wanted to deny was part of itself.”<sup>49</sup> So, Avril’s very geographical origin faces the same problem as the abject that haunts her and many of the characters, which persists in spite of both parties’ attempt to disavow it: the Quebecois side names the patch the Great Convexity and the US side calls it the Great Concavity, referring to their separate desires to expel it and inscribe it to the side of the other.

In addition to the excluded toxic patch in Avril’s geographical origin, she directly confronts a kind of abject in the crucial mould scene near the beginning of the novel, in which Hal recounts Orin’s recollection of a day in early spring when Avril was gardening and the boys were spending their time around the home (10-11).<sup>50</sup> A visibly upset Hal suddenly ran into the vicinity of Orin and Avril holding out a patch of mould that was “horrific: darkly green, glossy, vaguely hirsute, speckled with parasitic fungal points of yellow, orange, red. Worse, they could see that the patch looked oddly incomplete, gnawed-on” (10-11). The description of the patch, of course, recalls the basic aesthetic quality of the abject: amorphous, incomplete, and toxic; also, it is vague and unidentifiable, which recalls both Geoffrey and Kate’s description of their depressive psychotic breaks, as well as multiple characters’ reception of Avril, both inside and outside the family. Further, Hal was initially unable to

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<sup>48</sup> This doubles as yet another indication of the borderless quality of Avril’s rictal girth.

<sup>49</sup> Hayles “Illusion of Autonomy,” 689. Orin confirms that Avril’s hometown is the “Heart of the Concavity. The Moms’ home town’s wiped off the map” (1041 n.234).

<sup>50</sup> Here, gardening is another indication of Avril’s obsession with organization and orderliness, especially in the sense that the rototiller “seemed to propel the Moms rather than vice versa” (10), suggesting that Avril was not, in fact, in complete control of her habits.

articulate the event as he held the mould out to show his brother, who noticed that it looked ‘incomplete,’ implying the amorphous nature of the object.

When Avril identified the patch and understood that Hal had eaten it, she broke into a frenzy—the only scene wherein the reader gets a glimpse of Avril outside her maternal and professional roles. The narrative illustrates the intensely dramatic quality of the event:

'Help! My son ate this!' she yells in Orin's second and more fleshed-out recollection, yelling it over and over, holding the speckled patch aloft in a pincer of fingers, running around and around the garden's rectangle while O. gaped at his first real sight of adult hysteria. Suburban neighbors' heads appeared in windows and over the fences, looking. O. remembers me tripping over the garden's laid-out twine, getting up dirty, crying, trying to follow. 'God! Help! My son ate this! Help!' she kept yelling, running a tight pattern just inside the square of string; and my brother Orin remembers noting how even in hysterical trauma her flight-lines were plumb, her footprints Native-American-straight, her turns, inside the ideogram of string, crisp and martial, crying 'My son ate this! Help!' and lapping me twice before the memory recedes (11).

As I have mentioned, multiple characters refer to Avril's OCD and agoraphobia, so the appearance of the mould seems to condense these fears into a kind of amalgamation; its amorphous, toxic, and obscene appearance tests Avril's aversion to disarray. In other words, the mould is a kind of antithesis of the organizational and directorial nature of this obsessive agoraphobic mother, who abandons her caregiver role in the situation, frantically crying out for help; Orin points this out as well: “you can't get much untidier than basement-mold” (1043.n234). The fact that she was unable to protect her youngest son from the mould further exacerbates the symptom, since the aberration also demonstrates a lack of control and a crack in the ideal-image around which the character seems to gravitate. Avril's response is so intense that Orin's memory of what followed, according to Hal, is eroded into a generalized feeling of anxiety (11). This display of complete breakdown would most certainly be a traumatic way to encounter deficiency in the parental system, especially in the case of Avril's highly organized approach to her family. It seems, then, that this event is the closest thing we see to the core of Avril's fear—the un-articulable, amorphous, and filthy quality of the mould and her son having

eaten it, which disrupts the systematic organization that her defences aim to avoid. In this sense, Avril faces the same sort of horrific affect that other characters face; the *thing* shares the unassignable amorphous quality of Kate's *It*, Geoffrey's billowing shapelessness, Joelle's abject scarring, and so on. The quality of mould and the subsequent rupture of Avril's system of control reveal the unapproachable and unaccounted for affect at the ground of her composition.

In the sense that Avril's condition parallels that of other characters and, more so, given the centrality of the maternal theme, the exploration of narcissism in *Infinite Jest* suggests that it is rooted not simply in a condition prior to selfhood, in the sense of the role of the abject in the child's separation from the mother, but in something that continuously breaches the subject, threatening its engulfment by means of the amorphous quality of the affect in question. In Avril's case, this *thing* threatens the obsessive narcissistic defence mechanisms, whereas for the younger generation, it threatens their ironic-narcissistic distance that attempts to 'get up above' affect. The un-articulable threat to the establishment of the self takes on various forms according to the characters, but the narrative strings the threat together by means of the maternal theme. As I have argued, the narrative on Kate's condition hints at a return to the infantile that connects to her difficulty in articulating the qualities of the psychotic threat; Joelle faces a sudden break from a sort of reintegration with the father, at the hands of her mother; as for Avril, the intense desire to control her relationship with her children buttresses a self-image, which protects her from the abject that emerges in the mould scene and in the backstory of the concavity/convexity. This occurs in addition to the extreme nature of Avril's (secondary) narcissistic strategy that provokes anxiety in characters even outside the family, on the grounds that it too elicits a sense of un-articulable anxiety, since characters struggle to 'put a finger on' both Avril's frightening qualities and the horrifying affects that threaten to dissolve the self. That said, the affect's non-contingency on Avril, in that it does not live and die exclusively with this character, goes a long way toward demonstrating the ubiquity and importance of Wallace's formulation of this pole of the double-bind, at least in the world of the novel.

To sum up this chapter, I emphasize the importance of the engulfment threat in the double-bind of my claim. The un-articulate affect designates the unknown space of the amorphous and a-signified remainder of the infant's split from the mother—an idea that accounts for the link between the maternal theme and the horrific affects in the novel that do not fall under the 'irony, anhedonia, and isolation' side of the problematic. As I have suggested, there are two poles in *Infinite Jest* that induce anxiety: the first relates to the isolating condition that Kate calls anhedonia, but that the reader can see, given its consequences for James Incandenza, is deadlier than she suggests; the second relates to the pole that she more accurately describes as 'psychotic depression' as the threat of engulfment on the grounds of its connection to 'the un-articulate' of the mother-infant split (the remainder that resists signification and intrudes on the subject). As I have noted, Wallace does not see a 'return to the mother' as any kind of solution or possibility, not simply because of an ironic aversion to naivety, but due to the horrific quality of such a return; nonetheless, at the other end of the spectrum lies the withdrawn strategy of the paternal figure, whose intense experiments with ironic film and complete isolation render him completely unable to connect with others.

As I have argued throughout, the field of Wallace studies has largely seen irony to be the central problem and logical approaches to intersubjective affect as the solution; it sometimes seems that this is perhaps to save Wallace from a certain criticisms of his work that argue for a more depressive take on Wallace's philosophy as one of resignation, though I leave this discussion until late in the next chapter.<sup>51</sup> My contention is that, at least in *Infinite Jest*, the search for logical models that approach intersubjective affect is countered by the distressing affects that I have explored: the un-articulate, engulfing, and psychotic. This helps to explain the reason that Wallace's characters struggle to truly communicate, are often unable to love, and pathologically avoid emotional engagement with others.

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<sup>51</sup> For instance, Mary K. Holland states that Wallace is ultimately "an author who cannot overcome his own ironic ambivalence" since he fails to solve the quagmire he has arranged. Holland, "The Art's Heart's Purpose," 220. A.O. Scott quips that "if he can't quite capture the grand dialectic of contemporary culture, such as it is, he at least has a feel for its mood swings." Scott, "The Panic of Influence," n.p.

In this way, instead of viewing irony as a cultural atmosphere that influences subjects through exposure—an idea that largely underlies the critical approach with which I am contending—the novel illustrates that, in a given subject, the narcissistic aim of irony defends against the remnants of the unarticulable threat that relates to the mother-infant dyad. So, just as irony is not the central problem in the world of *Infinite Jest*, multiple ‘approaches to affect’ are not quite the resolution. Rather, the problem, I argue, consists of this double-bind of isolation and engulfment, between which characters must carve out a formulation of functional subjectivity.

In this very sense, it seems that the Incandenza children live in a hollowed-out ironic bubble that threatens isolation and barely holds them above the engulfment threat; in other words, that which Hal calls the “hip cynical transcendence of sentiment” attempts to prevent what Orin describes as “the apocalypse, a corner of the universe suddenly peeled back to reveal what seethed out there” (694, 1043 n.234). So, at this level, it is not that the characters are caught in a cloud of irony that logical approaches to intersubjective affect might resolve, but that they are caught between the distance and closeness of this proximal double-bind of isolation and engulfment. In this way, the Incandenza boys are caught between the mother, or, rather, the maternal desire, with an insufficient ironic-narcissistic function of the father that attempts to protect them against it. An investigation into the Incandenza boys will help to flesh out the predicament in two prominent individual characters in order to decipher the consequences of the bind in the novel.



## CHAPTER 4

### “BETWEEN TWO THINGS”:

#### ON THE DOUBLE-BIND IN HAL AND ORIN

As some critics have suggested, the force of *Infinite Jest* is the depth and specificity of characters' predicaments, since Wallace's novel focuses more on characters and their specific dilemmas rather than on plot details or action.<sup>1</sup> It is the specificity of the character dilemmas within the double-bind I have suggested that provides a sufficient explication of the entanglement of irony and affect in *Infinite Jest*: particularly, the affective isolating result of narcissistically operative irony and the horrific, intensely affective, engulfing root of this defence. This formulation uproots the idea of a non-affective irony, since, in this framework, the latter is clearly surrounded by affect on all fronts. With the exclusion of Mario, the Incandenza boys seem to fit, in highly specific ways, between the two sides (isolation and engulfment) that I have examined. To this end, the current chapter explores the specific predicaments of Hal and Orin in view of this double-bind.

First, I will recap the framework of the predicament in order to be clear on the trajectory of my argument. Thus far, I have discussed both the paternal and the maternal components of Wallace's exploration of narcissism, arguing that the ironic-narcissistic defence Wallace explores is grounded in a threat of engulfment that relates to the mother-infant dyad: the extraction of self from world persistently threatened by an affective re-integration. In the chapter on the paternal, I argued that James' radical isolation—a condition that reflects the dead-end of irony that Wallace describes in “E. Unibus Pluram” and the McCaffrey interview in the early 90s—attempts to resolve the projective narcissistic obliteration he suffered at the hands of his father, evident in his antagonism toward his audience, especially ‘Infinite Jest’s’ viewers. In this way, the paternal postmodern order of irony

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<sup>1</sup> As Tom LeClair puts it, “[w]hat distinguishes *Infinite Jest* is Wallace's passion for the particularities and histories of characters.” LeClair, “Prodigious Fiction,” 32. Similarly, Casey Michael Henry argues for the importance of “a character-oriented point of view” when it comes to *Infinite Jest*, since the problems and resolutions that Wallace explores are best expressed at this level. Henry, “Sudden Awakening,” 483.

essentially amounts to a critique of secondary narcissism, especially given Wallace's remarks about irony in the aforementioned essay-interview and his criticism of the Great Male Narcissists. James is exemplary on this point, living in this hollowed-out ironic-narcissistic bubble; also, the Incandenza boys have, to a high degree, followed this ironic path, as both are quite disconnected from "anything that's real."<sup>2</sup> They suffer from a sense that they lack an anchoring principle: Orin's life is glaringly devoid of principle, commitment, and feeling and Hal directly hypothesizes, about himself, that "inside . . . there's pretty much nothing at all" (694). In addition, both characters display a desperation for some kind of connection to the other—an important issue for Wallace in the early 90s and, in fact, one that he continued to take up even late in his career.<sup>3</sup>

From there, the isolation, silence, and absence of the paternal function pave the way for the predominance of the mother in the boys' lives. Subsequently, in the chapter on the maternal, I argued that Avril, on top of her performance of a pathological image of the maternal role, evokes a psychotic threat for the characters, paralleling the conjunction between the maternal, psychotic, and death themes found throughout the text. Getting too close to this affective core proves incapacitating and engulfing in the cases of Hal's breakdown at the opening (chronological ending) of the novel and for the victims of 'Infinite Jest' the film. Largely, these characters seem to require a source of affectivity—Wallace has named it attention, affection, feeling, and sentiment—but, as I argued in the previous chapter, they suffer from the threat of its excess at the same time. This second pole of the double-bind involves the horror of indistinction in the mother-infant dyad, which threatens the subject's stability. As for the consequences of this predicament, the Incandenza boys face the problem of an insufficient resolution to the threat of engulfment, in the sense that their father was virtually absent from their lives.

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<sup>2</sup> Wallace, "Looking for a Garde of Which to Be Avant," in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, 13.

<sup>3</sup> In the 2005 commencement speech, for instance, Wallace proposes that people ought to fantasize another's pain in order to feel connected, or, at least, to feel less disconnected. Wallace, "David Foster Wallace on Life and Work," n.p.

With this in mind, this chapter puts together these two poles, in reference to the distinction I laid out in the opening paragraphs of this paper, between isolative distancing and psychotic depression—or, in Kate Gompert’s words, anhedonia and the Great White Shark; these two poles, in my view, are the result of characters’ attempts at managing the two-sided enigma of affect (isolation and engulfment). This formula of affect is the pivot point from which I turn from what I have described as the exhausted idea of an opposition between positive affect and negative irony—an idea that does not account for the affectivity surrounding irony. Particularly, the critical paradigm neither accounts for the isolative consequences of the ironic-narcissistic distancing seen in James’ suicide, nor the catalyst for such distancing in Wallace’s figurative use of the mother-infant as the site of the psychotic threat.

The ironic-narcissistic strategy, then, does appear to distance characters from the threat, but, in the same movement, keeps them from accessing the intersubjective feeling they seem to crave. The double-bind, here, operates as follows: subjects gain distance by means of differentiating and separating (splitting apart and getting above), but the isolating result leaves subjects craving some form of intersubjective experience of affect; however, any desire for affect is constantly threatened by the prospect of its excess, which threatens the safe distance of the ironic selfhood. In this sense, each component of the double-bind is both necessary and inimical, especially when up against the inverse side of the bind: that is, emotional intimacy is desirable but engulfing, and distance is protective but isolative. To put this another way, the characters seem to both crave and fear intersubjective emotion, which leads to either engulfment in the affective force or isolation from such engagement, respectively; in the same manner, Wallace’s subjects both need the distance as a protective measure of stability, but some (Hal, for instance) realize the dead-end of such isolation—a predicament which leads, once again, to isolation or engulfment. In this way, irony and affect are part of an impasse, not a problem and resolution.

I have already discussed the threat of both sides of the double-bind I have proposed, which demonstrates the way characters are repelled by the isolative and engulfing poles. This leaves me to

discuss the active ways in which Wallace's characters regulate the bind: the paradoxical driving toward and pulling away from affectivity. With this in mind, I suggest that *Infinite Jest* sees its characters aim at two conflicting things; first, they derive attention or affection (attaining closeness) and, second, they constantly distance themselves from the threat of its excess. Therefore, every attempt at deriving intersubjective affect comes at the cost of either coming too close to the source (engulfment), or pulling away and reinforcing the self-image to the point of emotional withdrawal (isolation). So, Wallace's subjects, it seems, are caught in the process of craving and fearing intersubjective affectivity—a predicament that threatens either isolation or engulfment and, ultimately, leads to pathological strategies for attaining the desired affection while maintaining a safe distance. The characters Hal and Orin demonstrate this dilemma very well, so, on the grounds of their immediate relation to the primary paternal and maternal figures in the text, I will elucidate the double-bind through these characters. First, I discuss the example of 'Infinite Jest' the film as an encapsulation of this predicament and provide a brief psychoanalytic explication that sets up my analysis of the Incandenza boys. In the next two sections, I investigate Hal and Orin, respectively, in order to demonstrate the ways in which the bind is coordinated in singular ways for different characters. Finally, I suggest that the characters are in a perpetual struggle to mitigate this bind in view of their subject-positions, in contrast to the idea that approaches to affect resolve an ironic problem.

### **The Problem of Affect**

Prior to exploring these characters in depth, it is relevant to discuss how 'Infinite Jest' the film illustrates the way in which characters both crave and fear sources of affectivity. This leads into a psychoanalytic account of the desire and fear of closeness, which helps to explicate the way that this

operates in Wallace's characters. Although 'Infinite Jest' the film has been called a McGuffin,<sup>4</sup> it does appear to operate on more levels than this label might suggest; for one, it condenses the paternal-maternal dilemma rather succinctly. Further, the film does have a direct link to Hal, given that his father made the film to pull his son out of anhedonia (839); the effect, however, turns out to be rather across-the-board, obliterating every viewer. So, although I will not go into too much detail on the film, it is useful to mention its encapsulation of the dilemma in the sense that this plot device goes a long way toward demonstrating the stakes of the predicament in a condensed way.

In a conversation about the effects of the film, one character surmises that the catatonic victims of 'Infinite Jest' appear "trapped in some sort of middle. Between two things" (647). Although the character does not elaborate, it seems, based on the content of the film, that the suggested entrapment correlates to the desire for attention-affection and aversion to engulfment that I have discussed; specifically, the film's contrast between the mother-figure's seductive qualities and the threat of death demonstrates the two-sidedness of desiring and fearing closeness. As I have mentioned, the film's main scene consists of Joelle Van Dyne as the mother-figure apologizing to the infant-eye camera for a cycle of apparently inevitable infanticides; it seems, in fact, that the entire script consists of the mother-figure apologizing to the camera in different ways.<sup>5</sup> This eternal cycle of infanticides supersedes the mother-figure's excessive performance of apology, recalling the way in which Avril's effect on her children supersedes her pathological dedication to her performance of the maternal role. In other words, Avril's real-life performance of the maternal image parallels the

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<sup>4</sup> David Foster Wallace, "David Foster Wallace: The Fresh Air Interview," Interviewed by Terry Gross, (*National Public Radio*, 5 March 1997. Accessed on 27 August 2016. <https://www.npr.org/2015/08/14/432161732/david-foster-wallace-the-fresh-air-interview>). Philip Sayers further discusses the film as a MacGuffin: Philip Sayers, "Representing Entertainment (s) in *Infinite Jest*," (*Studies in the Novel* 44.3, 2012), 346.

<sup>5</sup> However, these apologies are redundant since, according to the mythology surrounding the film, the murder is inevitable: "the woman who kills you is always your next life's mother" (788). In this way, if the woman who kills you becomes the mother in your next life, then she has not so much released you from one life as engulfed you into another. The theme at play here is that of cyclicity, or, what Katherine Hayles and Kiki Benzon call recursion, which supports the idea of absolute engulfment—that is, the viewers are entrapped in the repeated murder-rebirth at the hands of the mother-figure. Hayles "Illusion of Autonomy," 684; Benzon, *Poetics of Chaos*, 138-94.

apologetic performance of the figure in the film in the sense that both ‘loving’ apologetic performances contrast the simultaneous threat of harm. On this point, the Incandenza boys seem stuck between the two-sided enigma of the Moms as loving parent and horrific enigma.

Further, the narrative on the film’s mother-figure displays the same radical two-sidedness of closeness; she is likely nude and possibly pregnant, but also possibly holding a knife and addressing the infanticide. In this way, the image of the mother also seems ‘between two things,’ in the sense that it involves both a level of seductive affection (apologies, nudity, pregnancy), and deathly engulfment (knife, infanticide, death-rebirth cycle). As for the effect of the film, the viewers clearly desire to watch it unto the point of death; this total fixation upon watching the film—if it is taken away, they plead for more, “wobbling around like some drug-addicted newborn” (507)—also poses a kind of engulfment that suggests they have regressed past the point of connection to the social world and to other people; as Marshall Boswell notes, the viewers are “done with desire.”<sup>6</sup> The contrast, then, between these two sides, captures the viewers in the impossible proximal immediacy with the mother.

The notion that characters both crave and fear closeness also recalls the two-sidedness that is found in psychoanalytic ideas on a child’s relation to the mother’s desire, in the sense that, at one end, there is a desire to be the object of the mother’s desire, but at the other end, a fear of engulfment that stems from the amorphous quality of the early mother-infant relationship. I have already discussed at length the fear of engulfment and the coextensive concept of the abject: the threat that stems from the

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<sup>6</sup> Boswell, *Understanding*, 131. This can also be found in the way the addicts of the novel experience their drug of choice; in essence, they enjoy the blurred distinctions and sense of oneness that the drug provides, but are left facing the horrors of psychotic excess in withdrawal. Stefano Ercolino also notes this connection, writing that the drug addicts of *Infinite Jest* seek “the rejoining with their lost (m)other by dint of drug consumption upon which they project their endless desire for maternal platitude.” Stefano Ercolino, “The Killing Vision: David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*,” in *Imaginary Films in Literature*, (Edited by Stefano Ercolino, Massimo Fusillo, Mirko Lino, Luca Zenobi. Leiden: Brill, 2016) 22. Nonetheless, equally important is the inverse effect of shame and horror that the addicts face as a result of their exploits. Kate Gompert and Ken Erdedy’s marijuana addiction testifies to the psychotically charged experiences they suffer (e.g., 17-26). These characters appear stuck in the same way that the film’s victims face the horror of indistinction and amorphousness, yet continue, at some level, to crave it.

subject's anxiety over the question of the mother's desire, which disrupts the separated self with the "death of the individual."<sup>7</sup> Again, Kristeva's model helps to illuminate this two-sided problematic in *Infinite Jest*. Although the infant gradually separates from the mother's body, she continues to experience objects of indistinction that both attract and repel the child; the child's partly separated and partly bound existence with regards to the mother poses a two-sided enigma of "desire and hatred, fascination and disgust."<sup>8</sup> It is in this very way that Wallace's characters both crave and fear intersubjective affectivity: addicts both desire the drug and experience it as horrific; victims of James' 'Infinite Jest' are unable to look away despite the film killing them; and even Hal and Orin desire a certain kind of attention or affection from the other and are repulsed by it at the same time.

In the sense that the subject is caught between these contradictory sensations, the resolution (or, as I will suggest for *Infinite Jest*, mitigation) is an attempt to evade the threat while maintaining a certain intimacy. Lacan's formulation of this predicament provides a commensurate model for the way in which Wallace's characters are positioned in relation to affect. For Lacan, the subject unconsciously poses the question of the mother's desire as a subject position—namely, "*Che vuoi?*" or, what does the other want from me?<sup>9</sup> On this matter, Lacan writes that "the child wants to be the phallus in order to satisfy her [the mother's] desire."<sup>10</sup> In this way, the child addresses the potentially threatening un-articulate remnants of the mother-child dyad (answering to what she desires), while seeking intimacy through becoming this object of desire. In this way, the child manages a certain relation of distance and closeness with regards to the mother: distance in the very articulation of the

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<sup>7</sup> Staes, "Coatlicue Complex," 69.

<sup>8</sup> Julia Kristeva, "Extraterrestrials Suffering for a Want of Love" in *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia UP, 1987), 374.

<sup>9</sup> Lacan, "The Subversion of the Subject," 690 (emph. in original).

<sup>10</sup> "The Signification of the Phallus" in: Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*, trans. Bruce Fink, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002), 582. This idea involves a reference to the concept of the phallus, which is the primary element of lack that anchors a child's entry into the social world; desire for the phallus, then, is a desire for agency in the world of the other: "the phallus—that is, the signifier of the Other's desire." Ibid, 583. In the same way, the phallus is Freud's metaphorical object of a subject's castration that separates him from the mother and enables identification with the father, so, it marks the shift from the amorphous mother-infant dyad to the differential, social world.

enigma of desire and closeness in the positioning of the *self* as answer to the question. Despite this effort, for Lacan, the child eventually discovers that the mother desires the father (equivalent to Freudian father's castration threat that severs the child from the mother and enables the child's entry into the social world); or, on the contrary, the paternal function fails and the desire remains something of an enigma. For both Incandenza boys, to different extents, the latter appears to be the case, since the paternal insufficiency gives ground to these characters' experiences of a maternal excess. This point seems essential to an understanding of both Hal and Orin, since the characters are caught within a certain enigmatic relation to the mother. Mary K. Holland suggests that Hal is caught in something like the mirror stage, though does not analyze Orin's position in this regard; her ideas on this accord with my claim that the characters' difficulties (including the victims of the film) involve the issue of separation from the mother and the subsequent entry into the social world.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, Catherine Nichols has noticed that the victims of 'Infinite Jest' the film seem stuck at a certain level of development, using the term 'liminality,' which is a state of indetermination in the midst of a life transition.<sup>12</sup> I take both these points further, exploring the specific conditions of the dilemma.

As I have suggested, Hal and Orin, at some level, desire the affection garnered from the mother-infant dyad, but, at the same time, fear this on the basis of the threat of engulfment. Subsequently, their sense of selfhood must protectively distance them from the annihilating maternal threat of excess affect while, at the same time, attaining some affective access. Hal, I will argue, is caught in a recognition of the need for affective relations, but has an intense fear of it that relates strongly to the mother. Orin, I will contend, appears to have a more efficient, though crass, narcissistic strategy for deriving affection while maintaining a high level of control over the women

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<sup>11</sup> Holland, "The Art's Heart's Purpose," 227.

<sup>12</sup> Nichols writes that the film's victims become stuck in something like a developmental stage: "In mimicking the undifferentiating gaze of an infant, the lens itself ensures that its viewers will remain in a perpetual state of liminality." Nichols, "Dialogizing Postmodern Carnival," 12-13; Oxford English Dictionary, 'Liminality,' (*Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford University Press, 2016. <http://www.oed.com.ezproxyd.bham.ac.uk/view/Entry/248158?redirectedFrom=liminality#eid>)



of his encounters. Irony of course enters the picture in both characters' self-protective distancing, in the sense that the ironic-narcissistic strategy is the primary self-protective function. Hal's ironically distanced constitution renders him emotionally withdrawn, hollowed-out, and isolated, whereas Orin works a 'hip ironic transcendence' in an apparent effort to control the threat of engulfment. To this end, I will move first to Hal's and then Orin's specific proximal arrangement with regards to the double-bind, in order to show the way in which the characters' narcissistic subjectivity mitigates the two poles.

### **Hal's Dissolution**

In the character analysis of Hal, I will first focus on his self-image, which is caught in the ironic dead-end that relates to his father. Afterward, I re-state the insufficient paternal function that I suggested in the second chapter, in order to show the specific way in which the deficiency affects Hal. Finally, I explore the latter's entrapment within his mother's world and the anxiety surrounding a condition that is directly related to his dissolution in the opening pages of the novel. This leads me to conclude that Hal's position in relation to the double-bind is extremely fragile and therefore exemplary of the urgency of the bind in the novel. To start with the image, Hal seems to see himself as something of a linguistic-athletic machine with no experience of emotion or sentiment "since he was tiny" (694); of course, as I have said, he secretly suspects that this protects against a fear of being human, but that does not imply that he has any idea what 'being human' might be, short of his comments that link sentiment to infantilism. Hal's mechanical identity has a lot to do with language, since he has memorized a majority of the Oxford English Dictionary (28): "he finds terms like *joie* and *value* to be like so many variables in rarified equations, and he can manipulate them well enough to satisfy everyone but himself that he's in there, inside his own hull, as a human being—but in fact he's far

more robotic than John Wayne” (694, *emph. in original*).<sup>13</sup>

The narrative evinces Hal’s self-image on certain occasions, such as Hal’s conversation with his brother regarding the grief counselling sessions he attended after his father’s suicide. In this passage, Hal suggests that, since he is unable to feel, he can only mimic the counsellor’s desired effect of grieving in order to complete the therapy; therefore, after a frustrating struggle to provide the counsellor what he was looking for, Hal finally reads the appropriate research on grieving and manages to perform the desired emotions (254-6). Nonetheless, as the narrative elsewhere suggests, it is not the case that Hal is actually devoid of all possible emotion, but that he has negated emotion in order to protect himself against its threat: “some kind of fear of being really human” (694-5). The grief counsellor scene demonstrates the lengths to which Hal must take this identity of being robotic in order to protect himself against his fears. In this sense, the strategy also demonstrates a secondary narcissism, since Hal uses the other (the grief counsellor) in order to reinforce his self-image as a kind of machine to defend himself against emotional vulnerability, demonstrated in Orin’s skepticism over certain of Hal’s details regarding the scene.<sup>14</sup> In the same way, it seems that Hal’s fear of being a linguistic machine propels him to question his subjectivity, which eventually leads to the breakdown.

Perhaps Hal’s sense of emptiness can be explained as his awareness of the dead-end of the ironic-narcissistic strategy; that is, he senses the isolative end of the ironic formula of what A.A. labels “Analysis Paralysis” (203-4)—another mechanism that elevates and isolates rather than clarifies. The cold and analytical ironic-narcissistic defence seems fragile to Hal, for whom there are

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<sup>13</sup> John Wayne is the E.T.A.’s top tennis prospect. On a separate note, Hal’s name recalls Hal 9000 from Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*—a reference that speaks to the inhuman and robotic nature of Hal’s self-image. It appears that Toon Theuwis was the first to write about Hal 9000 in reference to Hal Incandenza. Toon Theuwis, *The Quest for Infinite Jest: An Inquiry into the Encyclopedic and Postmodernist Nature of David Foster Wallace’s Infinite Jest*, (Dissertation, Ghent University, 1999. Available at <https://lib.ugent.be/catalog/rug01:001642987>). The A.I. in the film, of course, demonstrates a non-programmed human trait of deception, then, later on, begs not to be dismantled. Hal likewise goes through a process of being robotic to questioning this nature, after which he similarly attempts to plead with the admissions committee that he is, in fact, human (11-12).

<sup>14</sup> Another passage that relates to Hal’s self-image is Wallace’s description of himself as a young man writing *Broom of the System*: he writes that he had gone from “a fear that he was just a 98.6° calculating machine to a fear that he was nothing but a linguistic construct.” Wallace, “An Expanded Interview,” *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, 41; David Foster Wallace, *Broom of the System*, (New York: Viking Penguin, 1987. Reprint, New York: Penguin Group, 2004).

warnings throughout the novel that his subject-position could rupture at any time. The narrator describes that for such a subject, “[e]verything becomes an outline of the thing. Objects become schemata. The world becomes a map of the world, an anhedonic can navigate but has no location” (693). This mirrors a dream Hal describes, which is, according to Hal, the reason that he began secretly smoking cannabis; in the dream, Hal is playing tennis, but the court is completely distorted: “The lines that bound and define play are on this court as complex and convolved as a sculpture of string. There are lines going every which way, and they run oblique or meet and form relationships and boxes and rivers and tributaries and systems inside systems” (67). Likewise, Hal is paralyzed by watching the complex E.T.A. game Eschaton, which “seems so terribly abstract and fraught with implications and consequences that even thinking about how to articulate it seems so complexly stressful that being almost incapacitated with absorption is almost the only way out of the complex stress” (340).<sup>15</sup> So, Hal’s sense of the world is under siege by the threat of chaotic disintegration. Therefore, he retreats to the anhedonic world, but lacks anchoring principles, a fixed point of reference, and any functional sense of feeling. As Goerlandt points out, Hal is “suffering from a lack of ‘final vocabulary,’”<sup>16</sup> or, in a Lacanian way, the absent phallic function (the root of entry into subjectivity) threatens his stability. Hal is aware of this at some level; for instance, after Hal loses a tennis match, a coach tells him that he “just never quite occurred out there,” which “chills Hal to the root” (686). This vague critique disturbs Hal clearly at the level of being and recalls his unanchored sense of self.

On this point, as I explored in the chapter on the paternal, there is barely a trace of the father in Hal’s sense of his own experiences; for instance, I have written on Hal’s most intimate memory of his

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<sup>15</sup> Wallace describes his experience as a junior tennis player in similar terminology: “I’d grown up inside vectors, lines and lines athwart lines, grids—and, on the scale of horizons, broad curving lines of geographic force, the weird topographical drain-swirl of a whole lot of ice-ironed flatland that sits and spins atop plates.” David Foster Wallace, “Tennis, Trigonometry, Tornadoes: A Midwestern Boyhood,” (*Harper’s Magazine*, New York, 1991. Accessed on June 24, 2016. <https://harpers.org/wp-content/uploads/HarpersMagazine-1991-12-0000710.pdf>), 68.

<sup>16</sup> Goerlandt, “Put the Book Down,” 313.

father being a fleeting one that may not even involve James, since the memory is transferred to the smell of Coach Schtitt's pipe. In the latter pages of the novel, when Hal considers his father at length, he does so in a critically detached way, thinking more about his films than about the man himself. His take on his father's films is highly detached and critically acute. In fact, his critique of his father's films mirrors Wallace's critique of postmodern and avant-garde literature; for instance, Hal criticizes James' films for being "aloof and over-clever" and argues that he "seems to get seduced by the very commercial formulae he was trying to invert" (703-4)—a criticism that parallels Wallace's take on postmodern fiction in the aforementioned essay-interview. Since I have already explored the insufficient phallic function in Hal, I will briefly discuss the specific sense in which Hal himself lacks as a result.<sup>17</sup>

One of Hal's critically engaging passages on James' films provides insight into the result of the missing link between Hal and his father. The film that Hal seems to like best is 'Wave Bye-Bye to the Beurocrat,' which is one of James' least ironic films, featuring a man who must choose between missing a train, thereby losing his job, and helping a young boy he has knocked over in a rush to catch the train; eventually, the titular character chooses to help the boy and subsequently acquires a new outlook on life (688-9). First, it is quite telling that Hal enjoys the story of a boy with agency in the life of a paternal figure. Nonetheless, Hal does not consider this point while assessing the film, but instead the narrative slides into a straightforward description of the plot, followed by the revelation that Hal's praise of the film is secretive—that is, he tells his brother Mario that he thinks "it's

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<sup>17</sup> Hal's negation of the father recalls Lacan's concept of foreclosure in cases of psychosis (psychotic structure: one of the three psychological structures). Bruce Fink writes that it "involves the radical rejection of . . . the element that in some sense grounds or anchors the symbolic order as a whole." Fink, *Clinical Introduction*, 79. In this very way, as I have argued, the paternal function is absent in Hal to the extent that the narrative provides convincing evidence that Hal's father had no impression on him; Hal's memories lack reference to paternal figures and an associated affective charge. Additionally, his subsequent proximity to his mother and his sense of fear that relates to the infantile and chaos in general demonstrate many of the psychoanalytic consequences of this predicament. However, given the narrative's portrayal of Hal's breakdown as a fully intact consciousness splitting from the body, the result is more of neurotic take on the horror of a conscious entrapment in a psychotic body, rather than a complete psychotic break with reality.

basically goo” (689). Interestingly, Hal stresses over his inability to remember the boy’s name in the film—a point that the narrative repeats (688, 1052 n.279); he is only able to remember the word ‘deuteragonist’ in its place. Perhaps Hal is misplacing himself in this failure to remember the name of the boy in the sense that, on some level, his relationship with his father lacks this very deuteragonism. Hal has no place in the world of his father and, as a result, that which lacks is Hal himself. If this is the case, then Hal misses a glaring connection between his appreciation of this particular film and his lacking sense of selfhood. So, while Hal can pinpoint his father’s artistic limits, he does not seem able to locate his own position in relation to his father. In the end, for all Hal’s intelligence, his lack of recognition when it comes to reflecting on his tastes in his father’s films goes a long way toward illustrating the missing element in Hal’s subjectivity—a factor, I have argued, that explains Hal’s dependency on Avril.<sup>18</sup>

Now, I will explore Hal’s proximal danger with regard to the maternal side of the double-bind. His uneasy dependency on Avril and his fear of affect and the infantile are strong indications that his breakdown is an engulfment of the conscious self by a psychotic, bodily rupture. Contrary to the completely lacking father function in Hal’s constitution, his mother exerts a dominance over the character that Hal is only beginning to recognize at this point in his life. Hal’s proximity to the mother suggests that the threat of engulfment is acute for the character, especially given his fear of the infantile and the connections between the latter and his breakdown, which I come to shortly. In a very telling passage, Orin describes a fantasy of Hal’s that “the whole cosmos was just this side of fulminating into boiling clouds of elemental gas and was being held materially together only through the heroic exercise of will and ingenuity on the part of the Moms” (1042). Even though the source of this fantasy is not noted, it illustrates the sense of Hal’s dependency on the mother. This fantasy

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<sup>18</sup> Another striking element is that Hal’s binge-watching of his father’s films—a long fragmented scene that includes Hal’s assessment of ‘The Beurocrat’ and most of Hal’s critiques of James’ other films—occurs at the time that Hal begins the downward slide toward dissociation and breakdown. It is as if he were attempting to grab hold of a missing paternal element in a final effort to anchor himself.

recalls the mould scene that I discussed in the previous chapter; it was not only Avril who ran circles around the yard, but the young and traumatized Hal chased after her (1043). Given the chaos of the scene and the lacking father function, it seems that the only thing that prevents a rupture in Hal's universe is his relationship to Avril's performative dedication to the ideal. This relation, which Hal is just beginning to question critically, seems to protect against the chaos immediately outside this function—again, a chaos that Orin describes as 'a corner of the universe suddenly peeled back.' Hal's world is held together only within the context of his mother's life; in this sense, the fantasy suggests that to appease her would be to appease the unity of the cosmos and, therefore, the stability of his subjectivity.

Armed with an encyclopedic knowledge, Hal frequently indulges Avril's militant linguistic habits for the purpose of gratification. On a few occasions in the novel, Hal explicitly performs his knowledge of terminology for her. This is especially apparent in the aforementioned thanksgiving dinner scene with Joelle Van Dyne as the guest. In an interesting and somewhat surprising moment, Joelle notes her extreme annoyance with Hal several times, since the boy, younger than in much of the story, parades his encyclopedic knowledge for the sake of attention from Avril: "Joelle kept fighting urges to slap the sleek little show-offy kid upside the head" (745). It is interesting because this is the first occasion on which the text shows this kind of critique of Hal—I would suggest that this ruptures, in a way, the image of Hal that the narrative has generated up to this point. Instead of the distanced and mechanical image of Hal, or that of the quasi-psychotic loss of control Hal suffers in the opening pages, suddenly a much different image of an emotionally desperate and utterly dependent character comes into view.

In other passages, Orin specifically discusses Hal's lack of separation from the mother. He comments on Avril's active role in this process, saying she aims "to keep Hal's skull lashed tight to hers without being so overt about it that Hallie has any idea what's going on"; also, he notes Hal's entrapment within Avril's power: "The kid's still obsessed with her approval. He lives for applause

from exactly two hands” (1040 n.234). Likewise, Hal seems to be mildly aware of his dependency on Avril, of which we are given a few clues in the novel; for instance, “Hal knows the register and inflections of his mother’s voice so well it almost makes him uncomfortable” (514). Likewise, a scene in which Hal waits with Avril outside an office at E.T.A. illustrates Hal’s discomfort with his pandering communicative habits regarding the mother; “Hal despised even the very slight suggestion of whine that came in: ‘I’ve been waiting here coming up on an hour.’ And that he liked it a little that she looked pained for him” (522). In the same scene, Avril goads him into performing his encyclopedic knowledge for her, pretending to forget an uncommon word and using it in the wrong context—a mistake that Hal corrects with the precision of a dictionary entry, but he loathes himself for it: “He hated it that she could even dream he’d be taken in by the aphasiac furrowing and finger-snapping, and then that he’s always so pleased to play along.” (525). It seems, in these passages, that Hal has recognized his lack of separation from the Moms, but finds himself entrapped in the behaviour, which evokes what he calls “[t]he special fantodish chill of feeling both complicit and obliged” (523).<sup>19</sup> Despite these indications of an attempt at separation, Hal appears unable to control this behaviour, which indicates both his dependency on her and the anxiety that surrounds the predicament.

Thus far, I have discussed the way in which Hal’s lack of fixity relates to the insufficient father and the way that his dependency on his mother has predominance in his life. These two points lead up to Hal’s dissolution, on the grounds that, without a sufficient strategy to deal with what he calls “intensity-of-interior-life-type emotion” (694), he is swallowed in the indistinction that relates to the mother-infant dyad. Toward the end of the novel, when Hal begins his slide toward dissolution that occurs in the university admissions scene at the chronological end of his story, his narrative becomes

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<sup>19</sup> As I have previously noted, Wallace uses the term ‘fantods’ on a few occasions in reference to Avril and in reference to other abject threats, such as decay (e.g., 723, 744).

first person (beginning on 851), which seems to suggest that Hal is attempting to deal with himself as a person, as an identity, instead of as the hollowed-out machine that he suspects might be a defence against the vulnerability of being human. Evidently, he does not possess the tools to deal with this becoming, given the lack that he feels at the heart of his being. Therefore, his disintegration occurs when he begins to digest the question of whether the “hip cynical transcendence of sentiment is really some kind of fear of being really human” (694-5). However, ‘being human’ is blocked by the same fear that pervades the novel: that of the “naïve and goo-prone” (695), or, rather, the anxiety of mother-infant dyad.<sup>20</sup>

This aversion comes out in a few different passages, the most direct of which is the inner infant scene, which thematically connects to the admissions scene and Hal’s breakdown. As I have mentioned, Hal wrongly stumbles into a meeting of adults behaving like young infants and experiences a threat that evolves through the scene, starting with a “bad personal feeling” (801), to “a wave of nausea” (802), then “whole digestive tract spasms” (805).<sup>21</sup> It seems that Hal’s body is just beginning to act out, given the progression here from the first ‘personal’ feeling all the way to the organ spasms near the end of the scene. Likewise, in Hal’s breakdown during the university admissions interview, Hal loses control over his bodily functions, trapped in a conscious reaction to the loss of control.<sup>22</sup> In this regard, the narrative explains that Hal fears “this hideous internal self, incontinent of sentiment and need, that pules and *writhes* just under the hip empty mask, anhedonia”

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<sup>20</sup> The abject has many potential incarnations, of which ‘good’ is included. The key quality that I have discussed is that of amorphousness: gooeyness, *it*ness, thingness, and shapelessness, and mould.

<sup>21</sup> On this point, the younger Hal suffers from “low salivary output” (27), but the older Hal, dealing with issues of identity and desire, has problems with excess salivation. In the inner infant scene, he carries a cup into which he can salivate (801-3); elsewhere, in a passage with Hal and his mother, Hal eats an apple that smells like Avril’s perfume, which “stimulated a torrent of saliva” (523). This suggests a link between Hal’s amorphous needs-desires in the context of the mother-infant dyad and his increasing incontinence in the chronological advancement of the story.

<sup>22</sup> Peter Sloane describes Hal’s predicament as the mind resenting the body. Certainly, Hal’s linguistic command of objects coextends the idea of a resentment of the body as an object, especially in the sense that, in the end, the body stages its counterinsurgency against Hal in the admissions scene. Peter Sloane, “The Divided Selves of David Foster Wallace.” (*Tropos* 1.1, 2014. UCL Discovery. Accessed 23 February 2017. <http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/1420208/>), 69. Not only do minds attempt to suppress bodies, but, as Emily Russell argues, institutions command bodies in *Infinite Jest* as well: Emily Russell, “Some Assembly Required: The Embodied Politics of *Infinite Jest*,” (*Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 66.3, 2010), 147-169.



(695, *emph. mine*). An officer in the admissions scene uses precisely this word, “writhing,” to describe Hal’s loss of control over his body (14). In this sense, the infantile, for Hal, or, the fear of being human, is a fear of the sub-human: the indistinct, the amorphous, and the gooey relations of mother and infant.

Hal’s fear involves the amorphous quality of infantile need and, given the admissions scene, this indicates that his breakdown leads precisely to the chaotic spasms of the ‘inner infant.’ On this very note, Hal elsewhere surmises that to be human is “to be unavoidably sentimental and naïve 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, gooey drool” (695).<sup>23</sup> In this way, Hal’s dissolution seems to result from a gradual attempt to come to grips with being human, but ultimately ends with the engulfment into the chaotic needs, utter dependency, and indistinction of the infant. Hal seems to have an insufficient strategy to manage his attempt at being human, since, in the admissions scene, he suffers a complete breakdown of bodily command and exhibits the monstrous infantile qualities that relate to the threat found throughout the novel. Ultimately, Hal’s distanced selfhood—the blank and inert subjectivity upheld by the self-protective distancing of narcissistic irony—cannot process the ‘intensity-of-interior-life-type emotion.’ For this reason, the given affect ruptures his fragile ironic-narcissistic self. As I have said, Hal’s limited idea of ‘being human’ relates to the threat posed by the chaotic infantile experience of emotion and the sense of incontinence that accompanies it. This provokes anxiety that, as he seems to realize at times, leads to his defensive ironic personality that keeps him separated from

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<sup>23</sup> The mould operates as an image of the gooeyness—a term, I have shown, that is used repeatedly in the novel. In the scene, the mould (and Hal having ingested it) correlates to Avril’s hysteric reaction to the ‘chaotic interior’ that her performance aims to evade. I have also mentioned that Hal tells Mario that his father’s film ‘Wave Bye Bye To the Beurocrat’ is goo. So, the term ‘goo’ operates in the same way as ‘infantile’ in the sense that both terms conjoin the idea of naivety with the amorphousness fear—a key point that sees the ironist’s attempted distancing from affect not only in relation to an aversion to naivety (gooeyness as emotion), but to a fear that relates to the indistinction of the mother-infant dyad (gooeyness as an amorphous threat).

emotion. However, this strategy, as Wallace passionately argues in the early 90s and metaphorizes in James Incandenza's suicide, is insufficient on the grounds that it repudiates 'anything real,' or negates affective reciprocal relationships. In Hal's position between the threats of isolation and engulfment, he has, at least at the chronological end of his story, failed to mitigate this bind, experiencing a dissolution that sees the amorphous and indistinctive affectivity of the mother-infant dyad overthrow his ironic-narcissistic, distanced self. As I have shown, there is a double movement in the characters, one toward intersubjective affect and one away from it, but the latter is not simply catalyzed by an ironic distaste of naivety; rather, the catalyst is a horror of the mother-infant dyad as a real threat of psychotic dissolution. In this sense, Hal's irony is, of course, not affectless, but is part of an anxiety of isolation that he is beginning to understand; also, approaching affect does not resolve this isolation, since it engulfs Hal in the end. This end does not simply show that double-bind is unmanageable—I demonstrate, in the next section, how Orin accomplishes this—but that Hal has failed to mitigate it at this juncture of his life. Any attempted solution, then, entails an anxiety-ridden re-coordination of distance and closeness that can only hope to provide relief from the tension. It seems that, for at least Hal, such an effort comes at the cost of a hard reset, so to speak, in the sense that Hal's attempt at becoming human leads to a rupture in what little subjective consistency he had.

### **Orin's Control**

Orin's specific arrangement shares the proximal dilemma between distance and closeness with that of Hal, but differs in the sense that Orin has managed to attain consistent, if pathological, access to affect, while maintaining sufficient distance to avoid any immediate engulfing threat. He manages this by taking on a curious position with regards to the mother's desire, which remains enigmatic for him, even though he stabilizes this enigma through overtly narcissistic behaviour, such as his highly controlled encounters with the 'Subjects' of his short-term flings. Largely, I contend that Orin appears to derive affection from these Subjects—a move that reinforces his sense of selfhood—while

maintaining a safe, ironic distance from the maternal threat.<sup>24</sup> In my analysis of Orin, then, I follow a similar layout as in my analysis of Hal. I begin by unpacking Orin's self-image, then show how he deploys the ironic-narcissistic strategy in relation to the women of his encounters; after this, I explore Orin's position in relation to his mother, arguing that the former is caught in a cyclical process of mitigating the enigma of the desire by means of his flings; finally, I explore Orin's traumatic end, which inverts his position with regards to desire, demonstrating his ultimately isolated selfhood. In sum, Orin maintains access to affection, but, at the same time, uses it to elevate his self-image, thus establishing the distance required to avoid the threat of engulfment; however, this is a manipulative strategy that renders the character emotionally isolated. In this way, Orin is also between the two poles of the double-bind, but in a singular arrangement—a point that further demonstrates the double-bind as an impasse without resolution.

Orin's self-image, like that of his mother and in some ways his father, is formed on narcissistic support, in the sense that his relations with others, as far as the text illustrates, are bent toward reinforcing the ego.<sup>25</sup> As I have suggested, both James and Avril are engaged in maintaining a certain image: James as the avant-garde artist and Avril as the ideal mother; in an equally intense way, Orin's interaction with others revolves around feeding his sense of self. This is most obviously the case in

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<sup>24</sup> I am using 'affection' with Orin because this seems to be the closest term to denote his sense of the payoff of his short-term relationships. Still, I must stress the alignment of 'affection' with the engulfment side of the double-bind, since the excess of affection would be a traumatic encounter with jouissance for Orin, as I demonstrate shortly. As I laid out in the third chapter, jouissance is the affective threat of engulfment that, in the novel, has strong ties to the mother and maternal desire.

<sup>25</sup> Since I have already said quite a lot on the insufficiency of the father, I will not go into this again on Orin. Nonetheless, it is still the case that Orin feels a similar sense of lack with regards to his father as Hal: "Jim's internal life was to Orin a black hole. . . so blankly and irretrievably hidden that Orin said he'd come to see him as like autistic, almost catatonic" (737). Further, Orin quite clearly utilizes the ironic-narcissistic defence in his strategy to access affection while maintaining distance. Contrary to Hal, though, James did have something of an oedipal impression on Orin in the sense that the latter becomes jealous of James' professional relationship with his then-girlfriend Joelle (737, 743). To this end, Timothy Jacobs analyzes the correlation between *Infinite Jest* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, noting how the tension between the sons and fathers plays to the theme of faltering paternal influence in both texts; in both cases, the eldest son rages against the flawed paternal function. Timothy Jacobs, "The Brothers Incandenza: Translating Ideology in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*," (*Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 49.3, 2007), 265-292; Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett, (Project Gutenberg, Urbana, Illinois: Project Gutenberg, 2009. Accessed on 11 August 2016. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/28054/28054-h/28054-h.html>).

his vacuous relationships with women, but also apparent in his conversations with Hal and in some other characters' criticisms of him. Despite Orin's attempt at establishing an image that attempts to "Transcend-The-Common-Disingenuity-In-A-Bar-Herd-In-A-Particularly-Hip-And-Witty-Self-Aware-Way" (1048), the fact of his motive is explicitly uncovered by a couple of characters who know Orin personally. The first is Hal, who repeatedly points out Orin's emotional emptiness (956, 1007-10). The second is Orin's childhood friend Marlon, who says that despite the apparent openness of the aforementioned strategy, Orin is "the *least open man* I know." (1048, *emph. in original*). Marlon witnessed Orin become the poseur that we find in the novel and is convinced that Avril's pathological behaviour is the cause, since her dedication to the image eclipses the possibility of engagement at an emotional level. So, for him it seems that Orin only learned to engage with others in a way that reinforces the self-image. As I will explore in more detail shortly, Orin's strategy with women avoids intimate emotional engagement by means of an ironic performance aimed at satisfying the woman's taste in men. It is not that Orin's self-image is caught up in the performance *per se*, but the disinterest itself seems to be at the root of his desired effect. In this way, Orin's strategy appears to be ground-zero of Hal's critique of his generation, which also mirrors Wallace's critique of the 'crank-turning' narcissistic uses of irony: the "hip cynical transcendence of sentiment" (694-5).

Orin deploys a womanizing strategy that is amusing, cringe-worthy, and horrifying at the same time.<sup>26</sup> It is immediately apparent that Orin's pick-up strategy is not that of the stereotypical jock (Orin plays football for the Arizona Cardinals), even though he does engage in the clichéd short-term sexual encounters with models and sports journalists. At first, Orin's strategy appears to be quite

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<sup>26</sup> Hugh 'Helen' Steeply—a government agent on the hunt for 'Infinite Jest' the film—poses as a female journalist to interview Orin. Here, in the midst of answering Steeply's questions, Orin breaks into a cringe-worthy flirtation sequence directed at Helen that provides a sense of his position with regards to women. He asks Helen: "Or is there something more going on here, some kind of strange bond I feel between us that sort of like tears down all my normal personal-life boundaries and makes me totally open to you? I guess I have to hope you won't take advantage. Does this all sound like some kind of line? Maybe if it was a line it'd sound less lame. I guess I do wish I could come off more suave. I don't know what else to do except just tell what's going on inside me, even if it sounds lame" (1043 n.234). In this scene it is glaringly obvious, even without prior knowledge of character, that the emotional openness is feigned.

aggressive, since he uses the woman for temporary access to affection, then moves on. It becomes quite clear, however, that there is a defensive aspect to this strategy, designed to protect a fragile ego, in the sense that it thwarts the woman's access to him. In a telling quote, he asks his Subjects to "[t]ell me what sort of man you prefer, and then I'll affect the demeanor of that man" (1048).<sup>27</sup> So, at one level, Orin concedes some control to the woman, inviting her into a directorial position in his performance. In this regard, the narrator describes Orin's belief that his encounters are "not conquest, but surrender" (566), which implies that Orin concedes his demeanor to the woman in question. Nonetheless, this concession is not really a surrender, since it has the effect of blocking the woman from accessing Orin at an emotional level, or, rather, prevents the encounter from involving any sentiment; that is, the characters connect only at the level of the ironic distancing involved in both partners' awareness of the performative aspect of the encounter. In other words, by inviting the woman to direct his performance, he only appears to concede his agency, which means that by performing for the woman, he blockades any chance of intimacy and, thereby, makes himself emotionally invulnerable.

As I have said, the strategy has a lot to do with the ego; for instance, if Orin can successfully reproduce the demeanor of a woman's ideal man—another passage suggests that he is skilled in this area<sup>28</sup>—then he can have a claim to satisfying her desire. Consequently, since Orin's strategy prevents emotional closeness and aims at reinforcing the ego, it is he who is ultimately in control. Likewise, in a similar effort, he boasts about these affairs to Hal during their conversations on the phone, which would further have the effect of establishing and reinforcing the self-image (1007-10). Nonetheless, given my claim that *Infinite Jest* illustrates an engulfment threat, it is imperative to question Orin's motive—what lies at the root of Orin's avoidance of intimacy? Of course, there is the

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<sup>27</sup> It is interesting that Orin uses the term 'affect' here. I would suggest that this relates to the sense that Orin's performance revolves around accessing a certain level of affect from his Subjects, rather than simply performing a role as a kind of distanced power-play over the women. In this sense, he is 'affected' in the context of the performance, which is his way of obtaining both closeness and maintaining a safe distance.

<sup>28</sup> For instance, Joelle commends his "credible impressions" at the dinner table (744).

standard idea of protecting oneself from emotional vulnerability, getting hurt, and so on. However, in light of the predominance of the mother-infant theme in the novel, in the sense that this relation occurs prior to the development of selfhood, it seems there is more going on than Orin's ego.

As I have shown throughout this paper, the root of egoic defensiveness tends to point to the maternal theme and, more specifically, to the associated affective threat. That Orin leaves the women after only a brief affair—a behaviour he calls “The Excitement-Hope-Acquisition-Contempt cycle of seduction” (574)—attests to the sense that the ironic-narcissistic elevation of the ego is not the only operation in his behaviour; that is, the encounters end with *contempt*, which mirrors Orin's hostile view of his mother. Orin's relationship with Avril is highly antagonistic, to the point that he is estranged from her.<sup>29</sup> As I have mentioned, according to Joelle, Orin refers to his mother as the ‘emotional sun’ turned ‘black hole’ (738, 521); this attests to the two-sided nature of affect that I have discussed: the affection has a limit, past which is an excess. Further, it attests to Avril's predominance in the Incandenza family, in the sense that what lies at the center of Orin's experience is this figure that provokes an overwhelming anxiety in the characters. In an important quote that I will mention again, Orin hyperbolically describes his sense of Avril's breakdown in the mould scene as ‘a corner of the universe suddenly peeled back to reveal what seethed out there just beyond tidiness’—a description that recalls the chaotic quality of the engulfment threat that the characters face. The threat is further alluded to in the vague hints that Avril and Orin had an incestuous relationship; the narrative provokes a kind of paranoia regarding this point, in the sense that the issue is never directly confronted, but hinted at on a few separate occasions by various characters. For instance, Molly Notkin shares an unsubstantiated theory that Avril abused Orin as a child and, furthermore, an Enfield student catches Avril engaged in probable sexual activity with another student while dressed as a

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<sup>29</sup> Orin's nightmares are saturated with the mother-infant theme; for instance, on one occasion, “he'd awakened from a night of horror-show dreams—woke up with an abrupt fetal spasm, unrefreshed and benighted of soul, his eyes wobbling and his wet silhouette on the bottom sheet like a coroner's chalk outline” (47).

cheerleader and football player, respectively (791, 552-3). The ambiguous narrative on this adds to the sense of anxiety Avril provokes in Orin, which further adds to her enigmatic effect in a particularly perverse way.

As I have argued, this anxiety relates to the mother's desire, particularly to the threat that is posed by the enigma of this desire. This idea illuminates Orin's strategy with his Subjects, which revolves around his performance of the woman's ideal man. Again, Orin requests that the woman tell him the qualities of the type of man she desires—"tell me what sort of man you prefer" (1048). Is this not precisely the question that the Lacanian child unconsciously poses to the mother? That is to say, the question '*che vuoi?*' 'what do you want from me?' also attempts to decipher the enigma of the desire of the woman. Furthermore, the resolution to the question of the woman's desire is also parallel in these cases—that is, just as Orin will "affect the demeanor of that man" (1048), the Lacanian child seeks to become the mother's phallus. So, by positioning himself as 'object' of desire, he becomes the phallus, which temporarily answers the question of maternal desire. So, in the act of becoming the object of the woman's desire, Orin resolves the anxiety of the desire of the other, at least for the duration of the encounter. This is found in the narrative on Orin's encounters with one of his Subjects: "he *has* her and is what she sees and all she sees" (566, *emph.* in original); again, this is not as simple as a man's possession of a woman for the sake of feeling dominant, but, rather, Orin attempts to capture her desire to become its exclusive object, which means that there is no remainder, no excess, and therefore no threat. In other words, Orin possesses the woman's desire so that he is 'all she sees,' thereby temporarily relieving the anxiety—the enigma, the question—of the other's desire. In this way, Orin both desires the attention or affection of his Subjects, but also fears its excess, so attempts to control it in the conditions of the performance.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> The narrator explains Orin's fear that "were there for him just one, now, special and only, the One would be not he or she but what was between them, the obliterating trinity of You and I and We. Orin felt this once and has never recovered, and will never again" (566-567). In my reading, the distinction of the self is a protection against the indistinction that relates to that of the mother-infant dyad: 'what was between them.'

With regards to Orin's entrapment in the question of desire that threatens him, given his anxiety about his mother, Orin's end has his position of control reversed. The final passage on Orin in the novel has him trapped in an upside-down glass tumbler full of roaches while being interrogated by the A.F.R. (the Quebecois wheelchair assassins) on the topic of the master copy of his father's 'Infinite Jest.' As it turns out, one of his Subjects, a Swiss hand model named 'Luria P...' is an agent for the A.F.R. who turns the tables on Orin, making him the Subject of an interrogation. In some way, the jar attests to Orin's closed-off relations with other people, particularly his Subjects, one of whom is standing immediately outside of it. More importantly, the inversion of Orin's position turns his arrangement on its head, since, in this situation, he is being informed of the desired element (the master copy of 'Infinite Jest'), but (most likely, it seems) does not possess it. This contrasts Orin's position as the performer of the object of desire, since, in those controlled situations, he manages to account for the desire of the woman, temporarily plugging the sense of threat. A tortuous interrogation is, of course, horrific on its own, but the interrogation is even further traumatic in the sense that, here, Orin faces the lack within himself, as he is not able to constitute the object of desire.<sup>31</sup> In this scene, even when Orin is trapped in the tumbler of roaches facing torture, the narrative describes Orin's "bizarre anxiety of not being able to get the adoring Subject to acknowledge anything he said through the glass" (972). So, cutting through the actual threat of torture, there persists an anxiety regarding Orin's (in)ability to be the phallus for the other, or to get the other to respond to his performance. Ultimately, the reversal demonstrates that the root of Orin's strategy is a fear that relates to entrapment and engulfment in the desire of the other.

This ending illustrates Orin's ultimate isolation from truly intimate engagement, which, of course, one can also glean from other characters' opinions of him, such as those of Hal and Marlon.

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<sup>31</sup> This is another case in which it is highly unclear whether or not Orin has the film, since there is some scattered evidence that he might, in fact, possess it. However, given what we know of Orin's personality, it seems unlikely that he would concede to torture for any organization or principle.



Orin's isolation, then, parallels Wallace's critique of the irony that elevates the ego but does nothing outside this narcissistic function: the "pose of poselessness" (1048). However, unlike Hal's utter inability to access affect without dissolution, Orin's strategy of 'Excitement-Hope-Acquisition-Contempt' shows that he at least has an approach, so manages to mitigate the sense of impending doom felt by Hal. So, whereas Hal's end has him engulfed by an infantile, bodily incontinence, Orin's inverted tumbler scene illustrates his isolation despite the limited approach that he has to accessing some form of interpersonal affect. His final scene, then, in which he is trapped, unable to communicate, and barely able to see the others in the room, functions metaphorically with regards to the ultimate isolation of his position of control.<sup>32</sup>

In this way, Orin manages a kind of access to affectivity, yet avoids engulfment by carefully positioning both himself and his Subjects and repeatedly playing out the same routine; however, the strategy is shown to be sterile and isolative in the final sequence. So, Orin deals with a pre-constructed image of the women as something like affection machines rather than individual subjects, or, actual others. He performs a kind of obliteration of the other that recalls the pathologies of his parents; specifically, by manipulating the women of his encounter into a re-enactment of the pre-constructed arrangement, he reduces them to figurants. Therefore, much like the operation involved in James' hostility toward his audience (including 'Infinite Jest's' obliteration of the viewer), James Sr.'s obliteration of his son, and Avril's negation of her children's needs, Orin negates the women of his encounters by engaging them in a pre-constructed routine, instead of engaging with them in a more sincere or emotionally intimate way. With regards to his brother's criticism of him, which, again, mirrors Wallace's critique of the popular figures of irony and the GMNs, it is clear that Orin's

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<sup>32</sup> This ending is a kind of retribution for the way Orin treats the women of his encounters. It is fairly clear that his narcissistic strategy toward his Subjects is not benign, since he basically uses the women for the exclusive purposes of access to a highly controlled source of affection. The narrator supports the idea that Orin gains complete command in his sexual encounters with women, explaining that "he is both offense and defense and she neither" (566): offense in the sense that he consciously positions the woman as the director of his drama that involves the mother's desire, and defence on the grounds of his protecting himself from the threat of intimacy and engulfment.

strategy demonstrates a pathological mitigation of the isolation-engulfment predicament—a pathological strategy that manages to keep him from annihilation.

### **Stuck Between Two Things**

So, although Hal and Orin differ in many ways, the threats of isolation and engulfment converge in the boys' narcissistically operative irony that incites the anxiety of isolation, a desire for affectivity, and the fear of engulfment that catalyzes the need for distance. To be clear on this, I will re-capitulate the positions of Hal and Orin in this very order, then tie these predicaments into my claim on the novel as a whole. First, the characters converge in the sense of the insufficient father—that because of his absence from the boys' lives, the father could not resolve the dilemma of the mother's desire, so it remained enigmatic for them. For instance, in Hal's case, the paternal function appears absent, which is seen in the way Hal has basically negated his father in certain crucial memories and seems largely unaffected by his father, even upon discovering his dead body and exploded head (251-4). For Orin, the father is a 'black hole' of isolation who provides an insufficient foundation for mitigation of the mother's desire and the connected threat of engulfment. In this regard, both Hal and Orin take on the dead-ended ironic-narcissistic strategy that distances the subject from interpersonal affectivity.

Catalyzed by the concomitant fear of isolation, both characters require affection on some level. With Hal, he feels an acute sense of emptiness and desires human connection, despite the fact that he lacks a sense of what that might be beyond the threat of infantilism. For Orin, he derives it from his Subjects and seems to sustain himself on the attention received from these exploits.

However, from the other pole of the bind, the engulfment threat disrupts this thrust toward interpersonal affectivity—a fear that relates to the mother-infant dyad. Hal also fears an infantile threat that resides beneath the empty form of subjectivity into which he has grown; at the time we meet Hal in the novel, he has already begun to question his dependency on his mother through reflections on her enigmatic peculiarities and his behaviour toward her. Similarly, Orin fears the

mother's desire and attempts to control his proximity to the threat in various aspects of his life, from being estranged from his mother to engaging in only short-term relationships that lack intimacy. Orin is stuck in the mother's desire on the grounds that he has no fixed answer to it: he fears the mother's motive, severs her access to him, and repeatedly performs an 'answer' (himself) to the enigma of desire. In these ways, the boys are caught in the same double-bind, but in singular formulations that attest to the richness of the novel and to the urgency of the bind.

This chapter, then, has demonstrated how the characters operate between the two poles of the double-bind that I have laid out. Caught in a position that attempts to mitigate the predicament, both Hal and Orin engage with others in a way that reinforces a self-image, which defends against the fear of excess affect and the threat of chaos that comes with it. To be clear on the way in which this demonstrates my claim that irony is one component of the narcissistic dilemma that has characters caught between two affective poles, I will retrace my argument that has led to my investigation of these specific character predicaments. This is with a view to highlighting the idea that irony and affect are not antagonistic in the sense that approaches to the latter resolves a predicament of the former; rather, narcissistically operative irony is surrounded by affect that is desired and feared by the characters.

In an effort to retrace my logic on the bind, I will first recall the opening emphasis on irony and narcissism. First, I showed the way in which Wallace's critique of the culture of irony operates as a criticism of its narcissistic function. Specifically, I explored Wallace's idea that the operation in which irony enables a user to become elevated over some hypocrisy had wound up elevating only the user's sense of self. In other words, Wallace does not criticize irony as a mode or even as a social-political strategy, but as an operation of secondary narcissism. As I argued, as a part of secondary narcissism, the ironic strategy uses the other to reinforce a self-image. For instance, both Incandenza boys that I have discussed are boastful on the specific points that relate to their self-image: for

instance, Hal about his intellectual victory over the grief counsellor (242-58) and Orin about his Subjects. On this point, the former buttresses the image of an unemotional, athletic-linguistic machine, whereas Orin reinforces his sense of control and image of superior openness. Both characters deal with the isolative result of the ironic-narcissistic distancing strategy, but in specific ways. In Hal's case, he seems to recognize the obliterating condition of distance and isolation, seen in his criticism of his father and brother, so he seeks to resolve it through an approach to 'being human,' which, ultimately, is doomed on the basis of engulfment into the incontinent, violent, affective, body. As for Orin—a character who does not seem to fully recognize his own isolation—his strategy consists of repeatedly accessing affection while establishing sufficient distance from intimacy in order to avoid the threat of closeness.

Next, I stressed the engulfment side of the double-bind with regards to the mother-infant theme. The dilemma is not as simple as an egotistic individual obsessed with projecting an image to elevate the self for the sake of authority or dominance; instead, the need for distance is catalyzed by the threat of indistinction, amorphousness, and engulfment. This relates to the mother-infant theme in the sense that the distinction of the self from the other contrasts the indistinction of the infant's inseparable existence with the mother's body, seen in the psychotic anxiety surrounding Avril and the mother-death figure from the film. Further, the characters who suffer from the side of psychotic depression speak of engulfment, being swallowed, and other amorphous qualities of the affects involved in their condition; for instance, as I have mentioned, Hal uses this kind of language, describing the threat as "boiling clouds of elemental gas" and a "not-quite-right-looking infant" (1042, 695) and Orin expresses it as a "corner of the universe suddenly peeled back" and a "Black Hole" (694, 591, both specifically reference Avril). Therefore, the distancing function of irony as part of the secondary narcissistic strategy protects them against the affective threat that relates to the proximal dilemma with the mother that thematically pervades the text; likewise, the latter threatens

the very separation and distance of the ego on the grounds that the threat is one of indistinction. These two poles, then, form the basis of the impasse in which Wallace's characters operate.

With regards to the larger thrust of *Infinite Jest*, the narrator does express various formulations of the isolation versus engulfment predicament in a few aforementioned passages: "hip cynical transcendence of sentiment is really some kind of fear of being really human" (694-5); "dead-eyed anhedonia is but a remora on the ventral flank of the true predator, the Great White Shark of pain" (695); "weary cynicism . . . saves us from gooey sentiment" (694); While the terms used in these passages are not exactly equal in threat-value, they do share the same basic principle of the impasse of narcissistic subjectivity—the threats of both distance and closeness. In essence, what I have tried to demonstrate is that 'weary cynicism' does protect against 'gooey sentiment,' but only on the grounds that the latter is not as benign as the term suggests—that is, at the same end of the pole is the horror of the 'not-quite-right-looking infant' and the mother-death figure.

Again, characters are entrapped in a need to access an affectivity that also threatens their being. The mitigations of this dilemma constitute the double-bind; the distancing ironic subjectivity results in annihilation by isolation, but the attempt at reaching affectivity leads to annihilation by engulfment. This means that Wallace's subjects both crave and fear emotional engagement, leading to either the threat of engulfment that relates to the indistinction of the mother-infant dyad, or the emotionally distanced ironic anhedonia that leads to total isolation—a predicament that recalls the relations of primary and secondary narcissism, respectively. Consequently, my claim on narcissism in Wallace's fiction does not follow the same path as the aforementioned theses on irony—that Wallace seeks alternatives to an ironic problem, leading to affective 'resolutions' such as empathy, sincerity, and paying attention. Rather, my claim follows the narcissistic underpinning of both the object of critique (irony) and the supposed resolutions (affectivity), which means that the entanglement of irony and affect is part of a deadlock in the novel. Affect resides on both sides of the double-bind,

whereas irony becomes part of the narcissistic subject's distancing mechanism, away from the horror of indistinction, but on a trajectory that ends with isolation.

As the analysis of Hal and Orin shows, the ironic-narcissistic distancing operation protects subjects but leads to the unbearable possibility of isolation and, subsequently, approaches to affect are thwarted by the fear that connects to the mother-infant dyad. So, as I have shown, the characters persistently attempt to mitigate the threats of isolation and engulfment. In this way, irony is not the central problem, but is part of a larger problematic involving affect: specifically, the anxiety of distance, but also that of closeness. In the same way, affective alternatives do not resolve the issue if affect lies at both ends of the bind. That is not to say approaches to 'single-entendre' principles, sincerity, or attentiveness cannot mitigate the subjects' predicament, but it problematizes the idea that approaches to affect resolve a cultural ironic dilemma.

## CONCLUSION

In a reference to ‘Infinite Jest’ the film that doubles as a muted reference to addiction, Joelle asks whether “the allegedly fatally entertaining and scopophilic thing Jim alleges he made out of her unveiled face here at the start of Y.T.S.D.B. [is] a cage or really a door?” (230). Here, Joelle is considering whether or not the deadly film (or drug)—that is, the thrust toward an affective indistinction that constitutes both the desire and fear of many characters in a number of ways—is a cataleptic entrapment or an escape from the encaged self. While contemplating this question, she makes an interesting point that suggests more than it initially seems—that “[t]here was nothing coherent in the mother-death-cosmology and apologies she’d repeated over and over” (320). Joelle’s criticism here could suggest, in answer to her question, either position: a cage if she believes the notion of mother-death to be literally nonsensical and, therefore, that the thrust toward the affect, the drug, or the film is a dead-end; a door if the very incoherence of the affect, the drug, or the mother-death is the way out. That is to say, the latter suggests that the *incoherence* of the escape from the cage of self is a way out of the ironist’s ‘total’ coherence, also called ‘Analysis Paralysis’ by Alcoholics Anonymous. On one side, then, the encaged self—as Wallace puts it, we are “marooned” in our “own skull”<sup>1</sup>—involves the ironic-narcissistic subjectivity of a self that is extracted and thereby isolated from the world; on the other side, the raw, maternally themed, affective charge, which is incoherent on the basis that it is ultimately un-articulable—a self-less space.

I would argue that Wallace is certainly not positing the drug, the film, *It*, the *thing*, shapelessness, the mother-infant dyad, engulfment, and ultimately psychosis as a proper means of escape in *Infinite Jest*; Neither am I suggesting that Wallace’s characters are ‘trapped in a cage’ of irony or narcissism, since a certain distance is clearly a requirement of subjectivity, just as critical

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<sup>1</sup> Wallace, “An Expanded Interview,” in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, 22.

thinking is a requirement for an adequate reading of such a dense and rich novel.<sup>2</sup> Rather, I suggest that the cage-door predicament is precisely that of the double-bind—an impasse, but between which lies the space of possibility through mitigation. Both sides are affective: the cage as the condition of isolation and the door as that of engulfment and dissolution of the subject. Whereas the cage is the isolated self, the door is Staes' 'death of the individual.'

In this final section, then, I will emphasize my point that *Infinite Jest* indicates a mitigation, rather than a resolution, with regards to character predicaments. In the same sense that Joelle's cage-door question itself suggests that the thrust toward affectivity is a release from the self, but at the price of death, the predicament of Wallace's characters is an impasse—a condition of subjectivity; it is more like a management, then, of cage and door. I am not saying that this is necessarily pessimistic, since, given the specificity of characters' predicaments in *Infinite Jest* and the array of both interpersonal and institutional forms of mitigation, the possibility for mitigation seems quite infinite in Wallace's view.<sup>3</sup> As Paul Curtis argues, of the many double-binds in *Infinite Jest*, some are entrapping while others are freeing; he divides the double-binds into negative (addiction) and positive (logic of AA), arguing that certain binds can relieve the tension of others.<sup>4</sup> Like my model, Curtis evades the idea of irony as an ur-problem and that approaches to affect resolve it, instead finding possibilities for resolution in specific binds (though A.A. is the primary model). However, my claim rests on the bind of isolation-engulfment in narcissistic subjectivity, in which I suggest mitigations are not divisible

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<sup>2</sup> David Letzler, rightly I would say, suggests that "[n]o one who champions a work so original and thought-dense can possibly endorse Ennet's beliefs about living by clichés." David Letzler, "Encyclopedic Novels and the Craft of Fiction: *Infinite Jest's* Endnotes," (*Studies in the Novel* 44.3, 2012), 319.

<sup>3</sup> I have already discussed many perspectives that see Wallace's work in an optimistic light (for instance, Andersen, Boswell, Cioffi, Den Dulk, Henry). Perhaps the critic who sees Wallace's project most pessimistically is Blakey Vermeule, who compares Wallace to Arthur Schopenhauer, finding the latter to be more optimistic: Blakey Vermeule, "The Terrible Master: David Foster Wallace and the Suffering of Consciousness (with guest Arthur Schopenhauer)," in *Gesturing Toward Reality*, edited by Robert K. Bolger and Scott Korb, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 103-20. The present paper takes the middle way, suggesting that there is an impasse, but within which possible combinations for mitigation are limitless.

<sup>4</sup> Paul M. Curtis, "'Yo Man so what's Your Story': The Double Bind and Addiction in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*," (*Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 49.4, 2016), 37-52.



into positive and negative; for instance, A.A. provides a functional way to live for some characters, but the novel spends as much time discussing its shortcomings. For Wallace, so-called resolutions always seem two-sided, which is the reason that any chance for transformation must be a *continual* mitigation of a “default-setting”<sup>5</sup>—a point that I elucidate shortly. In essence, Wallace seeks functional ways for subjects to re-coordinate their position with regards to the isolation-engulfment predicament, or, in his words, “to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in [the world].”<sup>6</sup>

To be clear on this point, I will re-trace the argument I have made throughout this paper. Wallace’s critique of irony operates more as a criticism of narcissistic uses of irony, so the division between irony and affect is thrown into question. Narcissistically operative irony, then, is affective in three ways: the most readily apparent is the aggressivity involved in narcissistic elevation of a self over the other, especially considering some of the characters from *Brief Interviews*, Orin Incandenza, and James Incandenza (especially his relationship with his father and audience); the second, as elucidated by David Rando, is the anxiety involved in the subject’s distancing that leads to utter isolation, which is one side of the double-bind; third, the other side of the bind, the root of the distancing in the first place relates to the un-articulable affective excess that many of the characters in the novel face. In this way, although irony aims to distance the subject from threatening affects, it only isolates the subject from affective interpersonal connection, leading to the anxiety of isolation. Consequently, when these subjects attempt to access affect, they tend to be repulsed at the threat of being swallowed into the indistinction that threatens dissolution of the ironic-narcissistic self.

Similarly, in contrast with the view that negative irony is overcome by alternatives that approach affect—a paradigm that sees intersubjective affect as the ultimate aim of Wallace’s logical

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<sup>5</sup> Wallace, “David Foster Wallace on Life and Work,” n.p.

<sup>6</sup> Wallace, “An Expanded Interview,” in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, 26.

resolutions to irony—the deadliness of model of affect that I have laid out is equal to that of the isolative and solipsistic condition that Wallace explores. In this sense, the horror that surrounds the second pole of the affective double-bind problematizes the idea of intersubjective affect as a resolution. To put it another way, if affect is taken to be a threat as much as a desire, then ‘approaches to affect’ do not exactly *resolve* the problem. The psychoanalytically informed (narcissistic) model that I have proposed in this paper, then, sees the dilemma not as a negative irony outdone by approaches to positive affect, but as a double-bind of isolation and engulfment that forms an impasse. In this sense, narcissism for Wallace is not simply a deviation from a healthier state of being that can be relieved by providing alternatives to irony, but is a grounding condition of selfhood insofar as the self is an extraction from the world; again, we are ‘marooned in our own skull,’ to use Wallace’s phrase.<sup>7</sup> This is the reason I suggest that the narcissistic double-bind for Wallace is an impasse from which ‘redemption’ is not exactly achieved. Mitigation, however—the management of the proximal dilemma of subjectivity—seems an appropriate term to describe the way in which Wallace’s characters attempt to re-align themselves in the face of the extremes. Mitigation of the bind, then, concerns a character’s specific psychological coordination with regards to distance and closeness. For instance, Avril manages the abject threat by means of obsessions, phobias, and taking ‘emotional hostages,’ whereas Orin arranges for himself non-committal relationships that provide a limited access to affection while maintaining a manageable distance. Of course, these are quite pathological, but the narrative on other characters demonstrates alternate possibilities. Joelle Van Dyne at times seems to occupy the same ironic space as many of the characters (e.g., her crude comments on Mario)

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<sup>7</sup> In the commencement speech, Wallace elucidates this point: “Everything in my own immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the absolute center of the universe, the realest, most vivid and important person in existence. We rarely talk about this sort of natural, basic self-centeredness, because it’s so socially repulsive, but it’s pretty much the same for all of us, deep down. It is our default-setting, hard-wired into our boards at birth. Think about it: There is no experience you’ve had that you were not at the absolute center of. The world as you experience it is right there in front of you, or behind you, to the left or right of you, on your TV, or your monitor, or whatever. Other people’s thoughts and feelings have to be communicated to you somehow, but your own are so immediate, urgent, *real*—you get the idea.” Wallace, “David Foster Wallace on Life and Work,” n.p. (emph. in original).

and she also adjoins Avril's obsessive and phobic arrangement (all isolative). As I have said, it is uncertain whether Joelle grasps the transgression of her Personal Daddy, so perhaps she has not yet critically approached the affective undercurrent that seems to catalyze her addiction and attempted suicide; on the other hand, she appears to have a love interest in Don Gately, which, given the latter's thus far successful sobriety, could suggest a needed support for Joelle in the management of her dilemma of the threatening affective undercurrent to the ironic and narcissistic defenses.<sup>8</sup> By contrast, Hal's end seems caught between an immediacy of isolating and engulfing threats; his story ends in an ambulance on the way to a health-care facility (15-7). Hal's re-coordination, then, would perhaps depend on his ability and willingness to engage in the therapy that he receives.<sup>9</sup> The novel, of course, has many other characters for which the double-bind could be explicated, but the essential point would hold that the characters are, in highly specific ways, largely narcissistically and often ironically distanced (to the point of extreme anxiety) from an affective threat, engaged in a vast number of arrangements that mitigate this double-bind.

This leads me to briefly discuss the different forms of mitigation with regards to the impasse in both *Infinite Jest* and Wallace's other work. Of the forms of mitigation that have been critically explored to a good extent, some are interpersonal (modes of sincerity, imaginary identification, paying

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<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, given the narrative's account of Joelle's emotional dependency on Orin in their relationship, her interest in Gately could be a transition to another, equally debilitating dependency.

<sup>9</sup> On this, I disagree with Eric Thomas' assessment that Wallace scathingly criticizes psychotherapy. Eric A. Thomas, "'Psychotic Depression' and Suicide in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*," (*Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 54.3, 2013), 288. Certainly, the novel's psychotherapist Dr. Dolores Rusk is ironized for unloading an inappropriately direct, jargon-filled analysis onto an E.T.A. student as he leaves her office and, as I have explored, the Inner Infant group is given an ironic treatment as well, but these are exaggerated parodies of therapeutic situations. In contrast, the first passage with Kate Gompert provides a fair view of both doctor and patient (68-78). Likewise, Wallace's other fictional accounts of therapy are double-edged. On one hand, his characters often assume they are intellectually superior to their therapists (including Hal, see 436-7), but, on the other, this is precisely part of the excessive narcissistic defence that Wallace criticizes and that analysts locate. In both "The Depressed Person" and "Good Old Neon," the protagonists seem to be progressing when their therapists suffer dramatically ill-timed and fatal setbacks and the patients are left alone in the middle of treatment. However, there is no such occurrence in *Infinite Jest*, so the treatment's potential is left completely open, so that Hal's resolution would depend on the direction and efficacy of that treatment. That is, if the treatment would enable Hal to foster an account of his relation to the other (and, of course, if Hal is able and willing to attempt this), then perhaps he has a chance at developing a more reciprocal model for relationships and a more livable interpersonal proximity. "The Depressed Person" in: Wallace, *Brief Interviews*; Wallace, "Good Old Neon."

attention, and ‘communication over expression’<sup>10</sup>) and some are institutional or organizational (A.A., Inner Infant therapy, psychotherapy, ‘Old World’ principles, religion<sup>11</sup>). Regarding the interpersonal forms of mitigating the bind, many of these operate to ‘take the edge off’ secondary narcissism, so to speak. Perhaps the best example of this is found in Wallace’s commencement speech, to which I have referred a few times throughout this paper; Wallace implores the audience to imaginatively identify with others in order to do away with the isolating frustration of mundane everyday tasks:

“It’s not impossible that some of these people in SUV’s have been in horrible auto accidents in the past and now find driving so traumatic that their therapist has all but ordered them to get a huge, heavy SUV so they can feel safe enough to drive; or that the Hummer that just cut me off is maybe being driven by a father whose little child is hurt or sick in the seat next to him, and he’s trying to rush to the hospital, and he’s in a way bigger, more legitimate hurry than I am -- it is actually *I* who am in *his* way.”<sup>12</sup>

Importantly, the suggestion still does not *resolve* either irony or narcissism, to say nothing of threats of indistinction, amorphousness, and psychosis. Approaches that deliver access to intersubjective affects do not, in Wallace’s work, entail anything more than *imaginary identification* with the other.<sup>13</sup> This model does not undo the self to the extent of, for instance, Hal’s end in the novel, but it serves to

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<sup>10</sup> I have already discussed the first three. The fourth example, ‘communicative over expressive’ is described by Shannon Elderon in an article on *The Pale King*; she writes that Wallace “ultimately set aside concerns about sincerity and authenticity, questions that the novel suggests rest on a naïve picture of a prelinguistic ‘true self’ that can be discovered given the right amount of navel-gazing and expressed given the right amount of earnestness. Instead, both Rand and Fogle become reconciled to the importance of art(ifice) in the construction of shapely stories. They move, that is, from what Wallace referred to in several interviews as an ‘expressive’ orientation to a ‘communicative’ orientation.” Shannon Elderon, “The Shaping of Storied Selves in David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King*,” (*Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 55.5, 2014), 508-9.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Old World’ principles refers to E.T.A. Coach Schitt’s belief in fidelity to a larger unit (79-85), which Wallace described as both fascist and the only sane position at the E.T.A. on the grounds that it is, despite its fascism, the only non-isolating principle there. Wallace, “David Foster Wallace: Infinite Jest,” Interviewed by Michael Silverblatt. For a brief but informative discussion on Wallace’s churchgoing, see D.T. Max, “Questions for D.T. Max,” Interviewed by The New Yorker, (*The New Yorker*. 27 February 2009. Accessed on 25 August, 2017. <https://www.newyorker.com/books/ask-the-author/questions-for-d-t-max>).

<sup>12</sup> Wallace, “David Foster Wallace on Life and Work,” n.p. (emph. in original).

<sup>13</sup> Even in later Wallace, transfigurative potential for characters is confined to the individual’s body and mind. For instance, noting Drinion’s physical elevation while transfixed in conversation in *The Pale King*, Jon Baskin notes “a kind of fantasy of unselfconsciousness that held no small appeal for many in Wallace’s television-obsessed generation.” Jon Baskin, “Untrendy Problems: The Pale King’s Philosophical Inspirations,” in *Gesturing Toward Reality*, edited by Robert K. Bolger and Scott Korb, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 147; David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King*, (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2011).

*mitigate* the threat by evading, in this case, the extreme ironic-narcissistic trajectory of isolation.

Crucially, imaginary identification remains within fantasy, so it also eludes closeness; in essence, it is still within the impasse.

As for the institutional forms of mitigating narcissism's edge, Wallace explores an array of options throughout many of his works. In lieu of explicating any one of these in too much detail, the general idea is that each approach provides a model by which subjects can reposition themselves with regards to the double-bind. For instance, A.A. gives addicts a series of slogan-based approaches to the degrading experiences involved in addiction, providing a stable, distanced view of their desire for the drug. In this sense, the addict is pulled away from the chaos of addiction by means of a clear approach that only ever requires one decision—to 'Keep Coming.' Another example is the Inner Infant group, which provides a supportive environment for its members to gather the courage to directly ask the other for affection, though Wallace takes an appropriately nuanced ironic approach to this idea; in fact, the humour of this scene is perhaps a defence against coming too close to this awkward display of adults behaving like young children. In any case, each form of mitigation here shares the quality of repositioning subjects with regards to distance and closeness, in an effort to de-pathologize certain configurations.

Although these models do not undo the narcissism at the basis of selfhood, it seems that they would relieve the more hideous secondary narcissism that Wallace often explores. The fact that it takes persistent effort to gain the correct proximity attests to my claim that there is no resolution. A point that I have mentioned, Wallace speaks of the 'default-setting' of being the center of one's own world, trapped in consciousness and in what he sees as a hard-wired belief in oneself as the center. This center, as I have explored, is the self's extraction from the world—the initial narcissistic distancing of the subject furthered by irony's trajectory of increased distance. For Wallace, then, the default-setting remains a threat, never overcome or resolved by any particular approach. In this sense, even Elizabeth

Freudenthal's compelling model of anti-interiority, which she discusses in an article on *Infinite Jest*—"a mode of identity founded in the material world of both objects and biological bodies and divested from an essentialist notion of inner emotional, psychological, and spiritual life"<sup>14</sup>—would not resolve the issue of characters' isolation into interior selves, but can only function as another form of mitigation, to be re-affirmed and repeated again and again. The relevance of Freudenthal's idea here, although it is not quite the way she envisions it, is that, just like A.A. members' constant repetition of the clichés that tie the method together, the commitment to the anti-interiority principle must constantly be *re-instated*.<sup>15</sup> As for her primary reference point Don Gately, *Infinite Jest's* narrative indicates precisely my emphasis here that it is a repeated commitment to A.A. that is necessary to overcome his dilemma. It is repeated because it must continually overwrite the default-setting that Wallace has suggested. On this very point, Wallace notes that "the really important kind of freedom involves attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them, *over and over*, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day."<sup>16</sup> In the sense that he implores people to act 'over and over,' this implies not that the predicament can be resolved, but that various incarnations of managing one's impulses and habits must be chosen and committed repeatedly.

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<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Freudenthal, "Anti-Interiority: Compulsiveness, Objectification, and Identity in *Infinite Jest*," (*New Literary History* 41.1, 2010), 192. Lee Konstantinou posits another negative mitigation with regards to the reader: "Wallace attempts to persuade his reader to adopt a stance of nonnaïve noncynicism by means of metafiction." Lee Konstantinou, "No Bull: David Foster Wallace and Postironic Belief," in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, (Ed. Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou. Iowa: U of Iowa Press, 2012), 91.

<sup>15</sup> I cannot do Freudenthal's idea full justice here, but, with regards to Don Gately's demonstration of the principle of anti-interiority, she posits that the model of *Infinite Jest's* A.A. of rejecting hyper self-reflexive and over-analytical ways of living makes subjects contingent on social orders in a way that does not reduce selves to social products, but posits that they are continually re-created where "destructive social orders collide." Freudenthal, "Anti-Interiority," 192. The idea, in my reading of her notion, is that narcissism and the ancillary ironic operation are persistently and repetitively challenged by the dynamics in which selves are continually re-established on the basis of the social, material world. So, the principle of anti-interiority is like a constant immersion in (or persistent immanence to) one's social environment, not ignoring the interior memories and thoughts, but divesting them of any transcendence by establishing identity on the basis of the dynamics of the social orders that inform the subject. As interesting as this idea is, it falls apart a bit with regard to *Infinite Jest* because it is dependent on A.A. as a resolution, which, as I have suggested and as Letzler also points out, cannot be considered a full solution to the wide-ranging predicaments in the novel. Rather, as I am arguing, A.A. can mitigate a certain series of problems.

<sup>16</sup> Wallace, "David Foster Wallace on Life and Work," n.p. (emph. mine).

If Wallace seeks mitigation instead of resolution, then he does not locate a central *problem* so much as a central *condition*. In this sense, as I have argued, irony is not the core problem for Wallace, but operates as part of a defense. As the paradigm goes, irony conceived as the central problem implies that the alternative interpersonal models that Wallace explores are the counterpoint to irony as an affectless position. However, as I have argued, irony operates as a narcissistic function, so it is thoroughly surrounded by affect that is not exactly an opposition. The ironic-narcissistic strategy constitutes the protection against a horrific affect that entails dissolution; however, in the same movement, it distances characters to the point of isolation. So, not only is isolation itself a thoroughly affective problem, but, insofar as irony conjoins the narcissistic defense, the narcissistically operative irony is catalyzed by an affective root; the latter is a psychotic affect that problematizes the idea that approaching affect resolves anything. Therefore, characters are caught in an impasse that threatens an excess of both distance and closeness—a predicament that is never finally resolvable in Wallace's fiction. Rather, his characters mitigate the threat in various ways, both interpersonally and institutionally.

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