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PLEASURE AS PATHOLOGY: TRAUMA AND PERVERSION IN THE FICTION OF  
DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

by

ERIK COFER

Under the Direction of Calvin Thomas

ABSTRACT

Scholarship on David Foster Wallace understandably tends to focus on addiction in his novel *Infinite Jest*, as well as on his stated desire for a literary movement that transcends the recursive, ironic loop of the postmodern. This essay, however, explores issues of trauma and perversion in Wallace's fiction – primarily beginning with *Infinite Jest*, chronologically speaking – demonstrating Wallace's concern with the freedom of choice. A palpable friction exists between conservatism and sexual taboos, and this friction characterizes much, if not most, of Wallace's fictional oeuvre. A principally psychoanalytic reading of the sexual elements at play in *Infinite Jest*, as well as in several stories from *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* and *Oblivion*, cultivates a more thorough understanding of the addiction theme present in his work.

INDEX WORDS: Trauma, Perversion, Play, Incest, Wallace, Postmodern

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ERIK COFER

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DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

by

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>CHAPTER ONE: TRAUMA AND (THE SPECTER OF) INCEST IN <i>INFINITE JEST</i></b>	
<b>AND BEYOND.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>CHAPTER TWO: PERVERSION, <i>JOUISSANCE</i>, AND FORMS OF PLAY.....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>WORKS CITED.....</b>	<b>51</b>

## INTRODUCTION

In discussing the lure of passive spectation during a 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery, David Foster Wallace argues that “Pleasure becomes a value, a teleological end in itself,” expressing concern that the average human desire is for an existence that “maximizes the pleasure-to-pain ratio” (*Conversations* 23). Not surprisingly, this quest for pleasure – “a teleological end in itself” – factors significantly into Wallace’s 1996 *magnum opus*, *Infinite Jest*. The novel’s characters are riddled by what Wallace considers a uniquely Western, primarily American, compulsion of pleasure-seeking. In the McCaffery interview, Wallace speaks on the state of contemporary television, referring to television’s function as a profit machine that aims “simply to *entertain*, [to] give people sheer pleasure” (24).<sup>1</sup> He then poses the question, “to what end, this pleasure-giving?” (24). Equally pertinent to the novel *Infinite Jest* is the question “to what end, this *pleasure-seeking*?” For the characters of Wallace’s novel, this end proves remarkably self-infantilizing. Those exposed to the absolute pleasure of James O. Incandenza’s last film cartridge *Infinite Jest*, known more cryptically as the “Entertainment,” inevitably succumb to the profound seduction of passive entertainment found in the late auteur’s final piece, rendering them comatose and incontinent.

The Entertainment’s aura and mystique pique the curiosity of the public – those of the television-obsessed culture that Wallace criticizes in the McCaffery interview, as well as in his 1993 essay “E. Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction” – so that even warnings of the utter debilitation that a viewing of the film produces do not always significantly deter individuals from viewing. Rémy Marathe, a member of the Canadian terrorist organization *Assassins des Fauteuils* Rollents, condemns U.S. culture’s pleasure-seeking tendencies in a

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<sup>1</sup> The state of contemporary television has evolved somewhat in the twenty years between the McCaffery interview and the writing of this essay. More serious, sophisticated dramas have arguably arisen on networks such as HBO and AMC, and many comedic sitcoms have transcended the once-requisite accompaniment of laugh-tracks.



conversation with U.S. field agent Hugh Steeply. Marathe questions the sustainability of a culture that exhibits such blatant, narrow-minded disregard for any mitigating factors that this pleasure-seeking entails: “A U.S.A. that would die – and let its children die, each one – for the so-called perfect Entertainment, this film. Who would die for this chance to be fed this death of pleasure with spoons, in their warm homes, alone, unmoving . . . can such a U.S.A. hope to survive for a much longer time?” (*IJ* 318). The incapacitated state to which the Entertainment reduces spectators demonstrates that this absolute pleasure – while perhaps a marvelous, self-fulfilling concept in theory – cannot be endured in practice.

Pleasure as either too overwhelming to bear or too idealized to render satisfaction in the pleasure-seeking agent are recurring concepts in Wallace’s post-*Infinite Jest* fiction, as well. The short story collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* is replete with stories in which the central characters struggle with the disharmony between their conscious desires and the fulfillment of those desires. The narrator of “The Depressed Person” battles with the dilemma between her desire to appear less pathetic and narcissistic than she feels and the propensity for her every action to only *further* this sensation. “Octet” features a hyperaware narrator who attempts to veil his presence through second-person narration but ultimately finds himself mired in what Wallace considers metafictional recursion’s problem of “mediating narrative consciousness” (*Conversations* 45).

The most abundant and significant issues in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, however, are of an explicitly sexual nature. The adjoined stories “Adult World (I)” and “Adult World (II)” portray the worries that a woman, Jeni Roberts, faces with regard to her ability to please her husband sexually. Her concerns prove warranted, as she discovers that he has been frequenting an adult video store called Adult World that features a backroom where he can masturbate to

pornographic videos. As she never divulges her discovery to him, he continues to masturbate in secret. Meanwhile, she no longer feels guilty about masturbating openly in the bedroom.

Nonetheless, she pleasures herself to the elusory fantasy inspired by her ex-lover who still loves her: “J.O.R.’s most frequent/ pleasurable masturbation fantasy in 6<sup>th</sup> yr of marriage = a face-less, hypertrophic male figure who loves but cannot have J.O.R. spurns all other living women & chooses instead to masturbate daily to fantasies of lvmking w/ J.O.R” (*Brief Interviews* 188).<sup>2</sup>

Nearly all of the numerous stories that fall under the heading “Brief Interviews with Hideous Men” are men’s accounts of their sexual frustrations, triumphs, or perversions. These stories, presented as interviews with the questions redacted, reveal sexual problems as mundane as the fear of one’s own inability to ejaculate during sex (“Brief Interview #51”) to the rather unique habit of compulsively shouting “Victory for the Forces of Democratic Freedom!” upon sexual climax (“Brief Interview #14”) to the full-blown masturbation rituals that the interviewee of “Brief Interview #59” recounts. It is implied that this subject’s childhood masturbation issue became so severe that it led to his removal from society.<sup>3</sup>

Sexual dysfunction gives way to sexual abuse (or at least the specter of sexual abuse) in “Signifying Nothing,” as well as in the stories “Oblivion” and “The Soul is Not a Smithy” from Wallace’s last published collection of stories, *Oblivion*. Each of these three stories feature a character who may be suffering from a trauma sexual in origin, though the narrators never explicitly establish this with any certainty to the reader – nor can they, as they themselves are not

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<sup>2</sup> All truncated words *sic*.

<sup>3</sup> The subject’s childhood obsession centered around the television program *Bewitched*. When he began masturbating in adolescence, he would envision being able to freeze the action of all individuals except for the object of his gaze, with whom he would perform coitus with in this fantasy. The need to control every aspect of the fabrication was a major component of the fantasy itself. As the subject admits, “if once a logical inconsistency in the fantasy’s setting occurred to me, it demanded a resolution consistent with the enframing logic of the hand’s powers” (218). This rendered the fantasy unsustainable, since there would always be logical inconsistencies evident in a fantasy stimulated by the far-fetched plot of a television program. It is never revealed whether the fantasy itself was symptomatic of an existing medical condition or if this was the origin of his downward spiral.

entirely sure whether they have been the victims of sexual abuse. “Signifying Nothing” involves the *question* of a relatively mild breach of the incest prohibition as it pertains to the father-son relationship, while “Oblivion” suggests a more heinous, hedonistic transgression of the father-daughter relationship.<sup>4</sup> “The Soul is Not a Smithy” proves more ambiguous; unlike the other two stories, this story never even broaches the subject of sexual transgressions. Nonetheless, ample textual evidence to support a trauma-based reading can be found.

One of Wallace's chief aims with his fiction is to confront the destructive elements of narcissism and solipsism, to achieve "Freedom from one's own head, one's inescapable P.O.V." (IJ 742). D.T. Max asserts in his Wallace biography *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story* that *Infinite Jest* "didn't just diagnose a malaise. It proposed a treatment" (214). If such a treatment exists, it lies in the importance of making informed, adult choices that will not always be the most immediately pleasurable choices one can make. David H. Evans argues in "The Chains of Not Choosing" that by the novel's conclusion, Hal and Gately "seem to be moving in the direction of freedom" (181) as a result of learning how to choose.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, most of the vignettes in *Infinite Jest* depict characters who wholly submit to the pleasure principle. While I will refer to the Entertainment tangentially, the bulk of my analysis of *Infinite Jest* will consider elements of abuse, trauma, incest, and perversion and their association with the broader motifs of pleasure seeking and the freedom to choose.

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<sup>4</sup> The breach involved in “Signifying Nothing” is “relatively mild” in juxtaposition with the sexual implications present in “Oblivion” and many of the other instances of sexual abuse in Wallace’s fiction. I will discuss “Signifying Nothing” more extensively later in this essay.

<sup>5</sup> Evans's argument that Hal successfully asserts independence at the beginning of the novel seems rather shaky. Hal has apparently conquered his marijuana addiction, but his inability to outwardly convey his thoughts suggests that he still remains in a quasi-solipsistic state.

The numerous instances of incest and other forms of perversion in *Infinite Jest* have rarely been examined in detail in Wallace scholarship.<sup>6</sup> With Freud's aid, I will demonstrate that the prevalence of incest, transvestism, and other trauma-inducing sexual abnormalities in *Infinite Jest* is integral to the novel's theme of pleasure at all costs.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, I will illustrate the carryover of these elements and the theme of narcissistic pleasure seeking in Wallace's short stories. The first chapter will primarily focus on the many forms of abuse hinted at in Wallace's fiction, as well as the trauma related to this abuse. The phenomenon of recovered memory will be addressed in my treatment of "Signifying Nothing," and Freud's interpretation of dreams will be heavily incorporated into my analysis of "Oblivion." This chapter will also begin to discuss the strained mother-son relationship between Avril and Orin. In the second chapter, I will more extensively analyze this relationship, especially as it pertains to Orin's elaborate seduction ritual. The rituals, or "games," constructed by Randy Lenz and the subject of "Brief Interview #48" will receive significant treatment in the second chapter as well, with Freud's theories of the death drive and perversion, as well as Deleuze's interpretation of sadomasochism, substantially factoring into my analysis. Through this primarily psychoanalytic undertaking, which will also address issues such as transvestism, I hope to illuminate the underpinnings of Wallace's meditations on choice, sacrifice, narcissism, and pleasure – ideas that Wallace flirts with in virtually all of his fiction.

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<sup>6</sup> In "Some Assembly Required: The Embodied Politics of *Infinite Jest*," Emily Russell briefly references the AA speaker's recount of her sister being molested by their father, considering this to be one of the novel's examples of a bodily taboo being transgressed. Heather Houser argues in "*Infinite Jest's* Environmental Case for Disgust" that the novel "imagines an aesthetic stance generating a perverse environmental politics, one that depends on the same detachment that compromises social relations and ethical engagement" (125). For Houser, "space and body are coconstitutive" (129).

<sup>7</sup> Mary K. Holland argues in "Mediated Immediacy in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*" that Wallace's fiction outlines "essential Freudian ideas about primary narcissism, the tripartite self and its conflicted system of drives, the interdependent relationship between self and other, the omnipresent threat of solipsism due to both the nature of the self and contemporary culture's exacerbation of that narcissistic core" (115).

## CHAPTER ONE: TRAUMA AND (THE SPECTER OF) INCEST IN *INFINITE JEST* AND BEYOND

As I asserted in the introduction, Freudian theory will be applied extensively to my analysis of *Infinite Jest* and a select number of David Foster Wallace's short stories. This certainly holds true when it comes to the exploration of trauma and incestuous behavior in these works. Given that modern trends in psychology have, in many respects, veered away from Freud's psychoanalytic discourse, I feel it prudent to qualify this chapter – and the essay as a whole – by conceding that my analysis is more concerned with the relationship between literature and psychoanalysis than it is with the relationship between psychoanalysis and current psychological theories. With that said, I do feel compelled to briefly discuss anthropologist Edward Westermarck's postulation on the incest taboo before transitioning to a generally Freudian take on the subject as it manifests itself in Wallace's fiction.<sup>8</sup>

Westermarck argues that the aversion to incest pre-exists the taboo itself. In *A Short History of Human Marriage*, originally published in 1891, he notes that "there is a remarkable absence of erotic feelings between people living closely together from childhood" (80). This supposed sexual aversion between close family members, or *de facto* family members, has gained considerable traction, and within the realms of psychology and anthropology, has indisputably won out over Freud's theory of the incest taboo. Indeed, most modern psychologists and anthropologists focused on incest aversion are more concerned with how this aversion works; that the aversion exists prior to the taboo is now regarded as a foregone conclusion. Arthur P. Wolf is one such anthropologist whose studies have concerned the machinations of sexual aversion between individuals raised in close proximity to one another. Wolf's examination

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<sup>8</sup> With regard to Mr. Westermarck's first name, I am here adopting the UK spelling, which changes "Edvard" to "Edward."

of Taiwanese marriages in which husband and wife are first introduced in infancy found that these marriages yielded below average fertility rates for the wife, as well as a divorce rate significantly above the norm. Based on these findings, Wolf revises the Westermarck hypothesis to read "There is a remarkable absence of erotic feelings between people who live together and play together before age ten. The absence is particularly marked among couples brought together before age three, and, for any given couple, largely depends on the age of the younger partner when they first meet" (86).

Concluding that the absence of erotic feelings in such marriages "largely depends on the age of the younger partner" consequently renders complete acceptance of the Westermarck effect problematic. If incest aversion is innate – i.e., it does not require the imposition of a taboo – then it follows that age should be irrelevant to the equation. Wolf's studies, however, suggest the opposite: the sexual aversion between spouses raised together primarily exists in cases when they first met as infants. As psychoanalysis informs us, cultural intervention begins even before the process of self-identification. To attest that the seeds of sexual aversion can develop in human infancy, prior to any conception of the incest taboo, seems to vastly underestimate the social forces actively at work upon the infant subject. With my position on this matter clarified, let us now turn to the problem of trauma as it pertains to Wallace's fiction.

### **I. Abuse, Incest, and the Importance of Choice in *Infinite Jest***

Though any of the short stories to be analyzed in this essay would function as equally apt starting points, I will begin with *Infinite Jest* and proceed in chronological order with respect to publication dates. In the introduction, I cited David H. Evans's contention that in Wallace's fiction, particularly *Infinite Jest*, he stresses the importance of choice. While I quibbled with his suggestion that the novel's chronological conclusion portrays a positive vision for Hal, or that

Hal's decision to abstain from marijuana had unequivocally transformed him for the better, I nonetheless agree with Evans on the matter of Don Gately.<sup>9</sup> One might argue that Marathe, who waxes philosophical to Steeply, and relays his past to Kate Gompert at a jazz club, exemplifies the ethics Wallace had in mind, but never in the novel do we truly see Marathe faced with the type of pleasure versus pain scenario that Gately faces in the latter parts of the novel. For Gately, there are quite simply two options: 1) accept the pain medication, which would provide temporary comfort, allowing him to dwell for some time in a quasi-oceanic state but at the potential price of once again becoming a slave to immediate pleasure, or 2) refuse the medication, bear the pain, and preserve his autonomy.

For those who have never dealt with substance abuse, Gately's choice to refuse medication may seem more foolish than noble, which is understandable. Certainly, the average person would welcome the Demerol without any misgivings about submitting to pharmaceutical pleasures (i.e. painkillers). For Gately, however, the choice marks a transformation that can only be fully appreciated after first examining his past, including the earliest description Wallace offers in the Year of Dairy Products from the American Heartland: "Don Gately was a twenty-seven-year-old oral narcotics addict . . . and a more or less professional burglar" (*IJ* 55).<sup>10</sup> Such an account hardly warrants sympathy from readers, but we learn much later that constant turmoil marred Gately's childhood. His mother, "pretty definitely an alcoholic" (446), wedded a former Navy M.P. who physically abused her in front of the prepubescent Gately. After a substantial period of sobriety, Gately "out of the psychic blue" begins to recall painful memories of his mother's largely untreated alcoholism, and the M.P.'s abusive treatment of her (447). These

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<sup>9</sup> "Physically incapacitated, [Gately] has no action left for him but that of choice, to resist the drugs that would allay his misery, but at the cost of abandoning the free will he has so painstakingly realized, and shutting the gate on his own self-determination" (Evans 182).

<sup>10</sup> Hal references Gately in the novel's stream-of-consciousness opening, though the larger context of his remark can only be captured retroactively after reading the novel.

repressed memories of Gately's signal posttraumatic stress, due in large part to what psychologist John Briere calls child "terrorization" (22). In *Child Abuse Trauma*, Briere argues that PTSD symptoms are common in studies conducted on adults "who were terrorized but never physically injured in childhood" (22). Furthermore, his mother's alcohol addiction fostered an environment of unpredictability, leading to Gately's own alcohol addiction "at age ten or eleven" (*IJ* 448).

Gately's childhood account is consistent with real-life accounts of children raised in homes with chronic physical and substance abuse. The fact that so many of such children grow up to mimic the behavior of their parents can be explained by what Briere refers to as the abuse dichotomy. According to Briere, an abused or terrorized child reasons that there are two possibilities for the abuse: "Either I am bad or my parent is" (28). Because children are taught to trust and obey authority figures (i.e. adults), they conclude that the abuse inflicted by the parent serves as punishment for their actions, which conversely renders the behavior of the parent acceptable. Gately's issues in adulthood primarily emerge from the abusive environment he was raised in, and by accounting for those circumstances, the full magnitude of his transformation becomes evident.<sup>11</sup>

An astute reader of *Infinite Jest* might counter that I have misguidedly attempted to attribute Gately's addiction to exterior factors, a cardinal sin in the AA community.<sup>12</sup> Whereas Wallace stresses the importance of choice, and the tendency to conveniently allow denial and self-pity to eliminate unpleasurable choices, I have here offered a root cause which would, in the AA community, effectively be regarded as an excuse for Gately's behavior. In response to this

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<sup>11</sup> By the novel's chronological end, Gately has been sober for over a year: "Gately has been completely Substance-free for 421 days today" (*IJ* 274).

<sup>12</sup> Per the narrator, AA cautions against "an appeal to exterior *Cause* that can slide, in the addictive mind, so insidiously into *Excuse* that any causal attribution is in Boston AA feared, shunned, punished by empathic distress. The *Why* of the Disease is a labyrinth it is strongly suggested all AAs boycott, inhabited as the maze is by the twin minotaurs of *Why me?* And *Why not?*, a.k.a. Self-Pity and Denial" (*IJ* 374).



imagined counterargument, let me stress that my intention here has not been to defend substance addiction. I began with a discussion of Gately, not just because of his prominent role in *Infinite Jest*, particularly in the novel's latter half, but also because of his ability to abide – to overcome both trauma and addiction and embrace the meaning of choice. As the rest of this essay will demonstrate, such feats are rare in Wallace's work.

The absurdist elements infused in *Infinite Jest* can, at times, distract the reader from the intensely gritty and gruesome subject matter. Jeffrey Staiger contends that scenarios in the novel are "taken to lurid and parodic extremes," consequently situating the novel in the realm of "hysterical realism" (644). Such a classification further detracts from the undercurrent of solemnity running through the novel, even during those superficially humorous occasions. To take Wallace at his word, he wanted "to do a book that was sad" (*Conversations* 55), and, indeed, characters' childhood accounts in *Infinite Jest* are almost universally sad. Numerous anecdotes and vignettes suggest sexual abuse, or the transgression of the incest taboo, but Wallace never affirms most of these suggested transgressions. Rather, he treats these scandals in the same manner in which he treats the novel's conclusion; he presents certain dots, but leaves it up to the reader to connect them. For all of the novel's ambiguity, however, there are two disturbingly clear accounts of sexual abuse recounted.

The first of these stories occurs during an AA meeting. The AA speaker communicates the story of her childhood victimization upon adoption, and explains that this victimization resulted in her foray into exotic dancing (and drug addiction). She repeatedly bore witness to the sexual abuse of her "totally paralyzed and retarded and catatonic" sister (*IJ* 371), perpetrated by the speaker's adoptive father. The father's biological daughter's catatonia rendered her a susceptible and ideal target for the realization of his sexual urges. The narrator frequently

interjects in order to outline the AA mantra, and clarify why this particular story – admittedly horrendous, but chock-full of self-pity – fails to jibe with the AA community. Despite undergoing his own childhood tumults, Gately never seems to sympathize with the AA speaker. While it is tempting to ascribe this lack of identification to his AA commitment, the AA speaker's coping mechanisms and Gately's wildly differ – with the exception of their similar descents into substance addiction. The AA speaker vividly remembers the terror of witnessing her adoptive father rape his biological daughter, whereas Gately effectively repressed his painful memories through his addiction – and understandably so, given his age both at the time of the terrorization and at his initial exposure to alcohol. Gately's "amnesia" became an "adaptive strategy" (Briere 133), allowing him to function without consciously recalling the traumatic experiences of his youth.

The speaker, on the other hand, clearly remembers lying in bed, "pretending to sleep, silent, shell-breathing" while the father "incestuously diddled" her adoptive sister (*IJ* 371-372). The cultural contexts governing the public telling of stories, especially to strangers, prevented the speaker from exposing the father's perverse crimes, and thus facilitated his continued rapes. She even recounts covering for the father – though primarily to preserve her own body from the undesirable fatherly penetration – and the "sick unspoken complicity" between them on this matter (372). Here we return to the concept of the abuse dichotomy, as the father's status as the adult, or the authority figure, allowed him to commit his indiscretions without palpable fear of his adoptive daughter disclosing his transgressions to his wife. I will further elaborate on the nature of these transgressions in the next chapter, but will now turn to the second explicit account of sexual abuse in *Infinite Jest*, for which the abuse dichotomy proves more relevant.

The incestuous rape that Matty Pemulis experiences from his father, detailed late in the novel, illuminates the ease with which a manipulative adult may use the abuse dichotomy to their advantage. Matty accepts blame for his own victimhood, always attempting to conceal his fear when his father would molest him, because he "knew early on that his being afraid fueled the thing somehow" (*IJ* 685). He "cursed himself for a coward" deserving of the abuse (685). Only as an adult did he realize that his father was manipulating him, fostering complicity through guilt.

In both of these incestuous accounts, the father *chooses* to sate his sexual appetite at the physical and psychological expense of his vulnerable, helpless child. Again and again, Wallace presents us with scenarios in which one person's option for immediate pleasure entails disastrous effects. In terms of categorically conveying this message, Marathe serves as Wallace's most adroit vehicle. It is Marathe who questions the U.S.'s inclination towards making "a child's greedy choices" (32), and "precisely whose pleasure and whose pain" (423) is involved in the U.S. mentality. For Marathe, the ability to make choices not governed by the self's individualistic drive for pleasure exemplifies the problem with American culture: "This appetite to choose death by pleasure if it is available to choose – this *appetite* of your people unable to choose appetites, *this* is the death (319). Although the choice of sexual molestation does not result in the literal death that exposure to the Entertainment does, Marathe's argument illustrates the more important death that occurs prior to the physical one; the quest for maximal pleasure leads to a sort of human emptiness that is itself a form of death.

Transitioning from the terrorization and abuse experienced by the AA speaker and Matty Pemulis to the *specter* of incest elsewhere in *Infinite Jest* brings us into the realm of epistemological uncertainty. Cryptic references to possible intra-familial sexual transgressions

loom over *Infinite Jest*'s primary maternal figure Avril Incandenza, yet the only sexual transgression we know for sure she committed occurred outside the family, with the medical attaché. Although no evidence exists to suggest there was an incestuous component to Wallace's childhood, Avril is undeniably based on his mother. He constructs her as a woman who interacts with her children in a nauseatingly non-confrontational manner, using their own senses of guilt to passive-aggressively manipulate them.<sup>13</sup> This parenting approach allows her the façade of absolute agreeability. Her contrivances are not as heinous as those of Matty Pemulis's father, but the abundant hints dropped throughout the novel seem to encourage an arousal of suspicion when it comes to Avril.

Though Avril bears the reputation of a sexually licentious woman, this reputation can scarcely be accounted for based solely on explicit actions in the novel. The lone sexual escapade involving Avril occurs roughly midway into the novel, as ETA student Michael Pemulis observes her in her office wearing a "little green-and-white cheerleader's outfit" while one of Pemulis's ETA peers, John Wayne, sports a "football helmet and light shoulderpads and a Russell athletic supporter and socks and shoes and nothing else" (552). This scene clearly urges the reader to associate the implied football-related foreplay with some sort of incestuous activity between Avril and her eldest son Orin – an association only intensified when one considers that Joelle, Orin's past love interest, had been a cheerleader when Orin's infatuation with her began. The implication of incest, or at least of Avril's incestuous desire, could only be greater if she were wearing a scarlet-and-white outfit as opposed to a green-and-white one.<sup>14,15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> D.T. Max reports that Wallace's mother would regularly respond to her children's grammatical mistakes at the dinner table by "cough[ing] into her napkin repeatedly until the speaker saw the error," as well as ceasing verbal communication whenever something upset her (3). (To be clear, there is no evidence to suggest that the incestuous implications of *Infinite Jest* are biographical, and it is not my intention to muse a connection there.)

<sup>14</sup> Of course, a depiction of actual incest would trump the mere implication of incest.

<sup>15</sup> Orin and Joelle attended Boston University, whose primary colors are scarlet and white.

Despite such implications, none of the brothers ever mentions the Moms engaging with them sexually. In fact, the only perspicuous statement of possible incestuous behavior between Avril and Orin occurs when Joelle Van Dyne's less-than-reliable roommate Molly Notkin tells Rodney Tine that Mrs. Incandenza "was engaging in sexual enmeshments with just about everything with a Y-chromosome . . . including possibly with the Auteur's son and Madame's craven lover, as a child" (791). Even this statement must be qualified by the word "possibly," denoting an alternative possibility that Avril was *not* sexually enmeshed with her eldest son. Nonetheless, a sexual relationship between Avril and Orin would certainly help explain the latter's infatuation with "young married mothers he can strategize into betraying their spouses and maybe damaging their kids for all time" (1014-1015). Orin knows of his mother's affair with the medical attaché, and if Molly Notkin's claim holds true, he was a participant in another of Avril's affairs. His desire to seduce married women into philandering suggests that he may be using mimicry as a coping mechanism, and since his mother psychically damaged him as a child, he perceives inflicting psychic damage on other children to be his only recourse.

The possibility that Avril may have engaged sexually with her own son would serve as the most damning example of her sexual iniquities, though the specter of intra-familial breaches looms elsewhere. There are, for instance, persistent implications throughout the novel that Avril may have carried on, or continues to carry on, a sexual liason with her brother, Charles Tavis. The novel frequently advances the notion that Mario is Tavis's son.<sup>16</sup> For instance, Wallace describes Mario Incandenza as an "object of some weird attracto-repulsive gestalt for Charles Tavis" (316), and, more straightforwardly, refers to Mario later as "the thing it's not entirely impossible [Tavis] may have fathered" (451). Finally, Hal informs us that C.T.'s own mother was

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<sup>16</sup> e.g. "The first birth of the Incandenzas' second son was a surprise" (312). If the child were unmistakably the child of *both* Incandenzas, there would be no need to qualify it as the "first" birth of the second son. Mario would simply be their second-born child and Hal their third-born. (This hint, however, does not implicate Tavis himself.)

"almost certainly to have been a dwarf" with "a huge square head" like Mario's and a smile that is "homodontic" (901).<sup>17</sup> Though Hal deduces that Tavis "is probably not related to the Moms by actual blood" (900), a sexual relationship between individuals raised as siblings – especially a relationship that produces a child – still constitutes a breach of the incest prohibition.<sup>18</sup>

In *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Claude Lévi-Strauss calls the incest prohibition a "scandal," because it retains universality despite being subject to culture (8). This prohibition is "at once social, in that it is a rule, and pre-social, in its universality and the type of relationships upon which it imposes its norm" (Lévi-Strauss 12). The universality of the incest prohibition that Lévi-Strauss stresses has, as I touched upon in the opening of the chapter, been a subject of much debate. Freud asserts in *Totem and Taboo* that taboo prohibitions such as the one imposed upon incest "have no grounds" (25) and imply "a thing that is desired" (87). Hill Gates succinctly asserts in "Refining the Incest Taboo" that the "incest taboo is a willed override of nature by culture" (142), and Larry Arnhart expands on this: ". . . there is no universal, cosmic imperative of reason that dictates that incest is wrong. Rather, incest is wrong for a particular species of animal . . . [with] strong moral emotions against incest . . . some individuals do not feel an aversion to incest, but they will be treated by the rest of us as moral strangers" (190). Whether purely socio-cultural or somehow informed by nature, the existence of the taboo itself cannot be denied.

The incest taboo's inclusion of stepsiblings, stepparents, adoptive siblings, adoptive parents, in-laws, etc. seems to undercut the argument that the taboo and the prohibition are

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<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, Hal also claims that Orin claims that C.T. and the Moms claim that Mrs. Tavis was "not a true homodont the way – for instance – Mario is a true homodont" (901).

<sup>18</sup> Hal informs us that the Avril's father had disappeared from their potato farm then returned several weeks later with "a new bride the Moms had known nothing about . . . C.T. was the infant son she'd brought to the new union, his father a ne'er-do-well killed in a freak accident playing competitive darts in a Brattleboro tavern" while C.T. was being born (901). C.T. is earlier presented as "either Mrs. Incandenza's half-brother or adoptive brother, depending on the version" (81).

natural or biological. Rather, taboos such as the one placed on incest stem from social bonds that already incorporate the natural, or biological. Freud's study of Totemism in Australia indicates that exogamy "effects more (and therefore *aims* at more) than the prevention of incest with a man's mother and sisters. It makes sexual intercourse impossible for a man with all the women of his own clan . . . by treating them all as though they *were* his blood-relatives" (*Totem* 9).

The likely sexual relationship between Avril and C.T. not only violates the incest prohibition, but it also runs contrary to the studies of Arthur P. Wolf and others which illustrate a palpable sexual aversion in adults who grew up in the same home. One theory, provided by Freud, explains that prohibitions repress impulses but do not abolish them. Since the taboo and the prohibition that the taboo necessitates exist only by virtue of a desire to transgress the prohibition and become taboo, cultural norms naturalize these taboos and prohibitions. It holds that the majority of humans will aim to conform to the prevalent cultural norms, thus repressing such desires. In the case of Avril and C.T., a transgression of the incest prohibition would indicate their drives have overridden the prohibition. Given Avril's sexual notoriety, it does not seem altogether unlikely that her sexual drive could abrogate the fear of stigmatization.

Freud's analysis of incest also proves useful when examining the strange dynamic that makes up Joelle's relationship with her father, Joe Lon van Dyne. Always partial *to* her and protective *of* her, Joelle's father becomes increasingly obsessed with her as she matures. He shelters her until she reaches college, using infantilizing terms like "*Pookie*," "*Putti*," and "Nasty Pootem Wooky Bam-Bams" (792). Anecdotal evidence abounds of Joelle's father's infatuation with her, culminating in his admission over Thanksgiving dinner in the Year of the Tucks Medicated Pad that he is in love with her:

. . . he'd been secretly, silently in love with Madame Psychosis from way, way back; that the love had been the real thing, pure, unspoken, genuflectory, timeless, impossible; that he never touched her, wouldn't, nor ogle, less out of a horror of being the sort of mid-South father who touched and ogled than out of the purity of his doomed love for [her] . . . the repression and disguisability of his pure love hadn't been all that hard when Madame Psychosis had been juvenile and sexless but that at the onset of puberty and nobility the pressure'd become so great that he could compensate only by regressing the child mentally to an age of incontinence. (793-794)

Freud asserts that in civilized societies there is "scarcely room for doubt that something in the psychological relation of a mother-in-law to a son-in-law breeds hostility between them" (*Totem* 19). Though this exact scenario does not apply to the 'love triangle' of Joelle, her father, and Orin, the core of Freud's argument *does* seem applicable – at least as it pertains to Joelle's father. Freud posits that the mother-in-law expresses "reluctance to give up the possession of her daughter, distrust of the stranger to whom she is to be handed over, an impulse to retain the dominating position which she has occupied in her own house" (19).

As Molly Notkin tells Rodney Tine, Joelle's father had "apparently had an extremely close relationship with his own mother and seemed to reenact that closeness with Madame Psychosis" (*IJ* 792). He refuses to accept Joelle's growth, thus resorting to infantilizing actions such as "taking her to increasingly child-rated films" (792) or rebuffing her attempt to remove stuffed animals from her room. He confesses his jealousy of Orin, "a nonrelated mature male" (794). Joelle's "Own Personal Daddy" perceives Orin as a threat to his dominance over Joelle. His feeble attempts to suspend Joelle's physical and mental development spring from his fear of losing possession of her to another man, and thus exploding the cathexis that drives him. Freud argues that a man regularly chooses his mother as "the object of his love . . . before passing on to his final choice" (*Totem* 21). Joelle's father's mother has been supplanted by his own daughter, but their roles have been reversed. He has assumed the role of his mother and aims to keep Joelle



from outgrowing their relationship. His inability to "liberate himself from this incestuous attraction" indicates a "psychical infantilism" and a failure "to get free from the psycho-sexual conditions that prevailed in his childhood" (*Totem* 22).

Freudian discourse on this matter also proves useful when applied to Orin and Avril. Just as the sexually-charged scene between Avril and John Wayne indicates a prohibited desire for Avril to be with her son, Orin's actions throughout the novel indicate a socially stigmatized passion for his mother. The object of his love has been supplanted by another "woman" – the cross-dressed Hugh Steeply. Masquerading as journalist Helen Steeply, he appears before Marathe as a "massive and unfortunate-looking U.S.A. female" (*IJ* 419) with a "meaty electrolysized face" (375). Orin, on the other hand, refers to "Helen" as "large but not unerotic" (246) and "weirdly sexy" (247). Whereas most of the sexual ventures he undertakes with his "Subjects" have the primary motive of conquest, Orin feels a genuine attraction to Steeply. He concedes as much to Hal: "Helen's a different sort of Subject. I've discovered levels and dimensions to Helen that have nothing to do with profiles" (1012). S/he can effectively be understood as the projection of the Moms, who stands "197 cm. tall in flats" (898).<sup>19</sup>

As I previously mentioned, the character of Avril has been, in some cases, linked to Wallace's own mother. By addressing this connection, I do not mean to argue for a direct correspondence between the two. Rather, I do so because I feel it is an association that cannot be entirely ignored. Whereas the more explicit examples of incest in *Infinite Jest* accord with Wallace's meditations on the importance of choice, the atypical mother-son relationship between Avril and Orin seems to emerge from an entirely different place in Wallace's psyche. Upon reviewing the manuscript of the novel, Wallace's sister questioned "if he really felt this was the right way to deal with his anger at his mother" (Max 211). Moreover, Wallace was unable to

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<sup>19</sup> 197 cm. equates to roughly 6'5".

successfully convince his mother that Avril was not based on her (Max 321). Using Marlon Bain as his vehicle, Wallace actually invokes the term "abuse" in reference to Avril's passive-aggressive parenting techniques. While admitting that her behavior may not be classified as abuse as readily as "beatings, diddlings, rapes, deprivations, domineerment, humiliation, captivity, torture" etc., he poses the question "What would you call a parent who is so neurasthenic and depressive that any opposition to his parental will plunges him into the sort of psychotic depression where he . . . just sits there in his bed cleaning his revolver, so that the child would be terrified of opposing his will . . . and maybe causing him to suicide?" (*IJ* 1050).

Wallace further meditates on the relationship between a mother and her child in "Suicide as a Sort of Present."<sup>20</sup> In this story, a mother struggles with her "deepest and most natural inclination" to loathe her child (*Brief Interviews* 285), resulting from the "heavy psychic shit laid on her as a little girl . . . some of [which] qualified as parental abuse" (283). For Bain's part, he never definitively claims that Avril abused Orin; he does, however, submit that her "pathological generosity" was "not *right*" and "*creepy*, even on the culturally stellar surface" (*IJ* 1051). The absence of clarity amidst the hints of foul play, characteristic of so much of *Infinite Jest*, lingers on into his short fiction.

## II. Signifying Ambiguity

Two stories in the collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* demand lengthy psychoanalytic exploration: "Signifying Nothing" and one of the numerous interview-style stories found under the heading "Brief Interviews with Hideous Men," which I will refer to as "Brief Interview #48." The former appropriately adopts *Infinite Jest's* uncertainty, as the first-person narrator – a young adult male – suddenly recalls a childhood moment in which his father

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<sup>20</sup> Max states that the story was Wallace's meditation "on his difficult relationship with his mother . . . In the story – as, he believed, in his own life – a mother's intense love for and disappointment in her son is the root of his neurosis" (241).

stood before him "wagging his dick in [his] face" (75). Despite possessing no prior recollection of the event, he feels *sure* that this transgression occurred, even to the extent that he recounts minute details concerning the movement and physical makeup of his father's flaccid penis: "I remember the dick was a little bit darker than the rest of him, and big, with a big ugly vein down one side of it . . . [and] my father wagged the dick, keeping the dick threateningly in my face no matter where I moved my head around to" (76). Along with the memory of afterwards pacing around the house "in a haze . . . totally freaked out, not telling anybody about it" (76), this description comprises the totality of his memory of the supposed event.

The reader should quickly question the narrator's assurance that the memory is "so detailed and solid-seeming" that it must be "totally true" (75), as a few sentences later he begins his recollection by stating he "was 8 or 9" (75). His seemingly photographic, pinpoint recall appears at odds with his hazy memory of his own age at the time of the putative transgression. In *The Origin and Development of Psychoanalysis*, Freud cautions against perceiving memory as infallible, alluding to the "incompatible, repressed wishes of childhood which lend their power to the creation of symptoms" (48). Additionally, he maintains that "we must consider these mighty wishes of childhood very generally as sexual in nature" (49).

The first-person perspective Wallace employs makes determining the validity of the narrator's claims an impossibility. Much like in *Infinite Jest*, however, Wallace sprinkles hints throughout the story; although these hints cannot be combined to form a complete picture, they nonetheless seem to guide the reader in a particular direction. As opposed to *Infinite Jest*, the direction of these hints in "Signifying Nothing" actually appears to point *away* from the occurrence of a sexual, quasi-incestuous happening and *toward* the likelihood of a false memory. Discussing traumatic childhood episodes, Freud asserts that the suffering patients "remember the

painful experiences of the distant past . . . because they are still strongly affected by them" (*Origin and Development* 12). The narrator of Wallace's story claims the memory "comes up out of nowhere" at the age of nineteen (*Brief Interviews* 75), but nonetheless struggles with the memory in the story. In her essay "Documenting the Pedophile," Gillian Harkins argues that "memories of child sexual abuse repeatedly return prototypical white men to scenes of a specifically sexual vulnerability" (24).<sup>21</sup> Harkins draws attention to the upsurge in accusations of incestuous abuse during the 1980s, attributing the dramatic increase to white males' "fraught sense of agency" in the face of "flexible capitalism" and neo-liberalism (24). The narrator of "Signifying Nothing" claims his father's offending behavior occurred "down in the rec room . . . between me and the TV" (75). The presence of a "rec room" alone suggests an upper-middle-class background. A decidedly cynical reading would conclude that the narrator suffers from the very "fraught sense of agency" that Harkins outlines, and, moreover, that his narcissism and crisis of location have caused him to contrive this memory, thus carving out for himself a history of victimhood. Harkins criticizes this form of response, noting the overcorrection that took place in the 1990s: "Public sentiment shifted from sympathy to suspicion and media coverage emphasized the dangers of false accusations and faulty memory" (28).

In the real world, as well as the fictional world of "Signifying Nothing," the ambiguity of memory and the attempt to survey every detail in search of an unequivocal conclusion leads us to a quandary when it comes to accusations of sexual impropriety towards a child. A perpetual battle exists between those who place the burden on the accused to prove their innocence, and those inclined to cite past examples of false accusations as grounds for dismissing any accusation that holds the slightest degree of ambiguity. The frustration of not knowing whether Wallace's

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<sup>21</sup> Harkins specifically alludes to contemporary film here, but her argument proves equally relevant when applied to literary works.

narrator's version of events is accurate mimics the frustration experienced by those attempting to validate (or invalidate) fallible childhood accounts. Late in the story, for instance, the narrator reveals something quite peculiar: "As a little kid, I remembered having a weird fascination in the wine bottles with all the dried wax running all over them, and of having to be asked, over and over, by my father, not to keep picking the wax off" (*Brief Interviews* 80-81). I contend that Wallace deliberately inserted this nugget of information in order to mire the reader in even further ambivalence. Interpreted in conjunction with other subtle insinuations, this quote seems to imply that the narrator's phallic interest has manifested itself in the false memory of his father wagging his penis in front of him. Nevertheless, the memory of the wine bottles could also be related to a prior repression of the "dick-wagging" memory.

There also, of course, exist a profuse number of other valid interpretations, including the possibility that nothing is being signified at all. Indeed, an analysis of this particular story would not be complete without investigating the meaning of the title, which implies meaninglessness. To interpret the "nothing" as "the absence of a penis," – as though Wallace has once again alluded to Hamlet – one must arrive at the conclusion that the narrator did not, indeed, witness what he claims to have witnessed. If, however, one were to perceive the title as exemplifying the story's utter inconclusiveness – and, to extend outside the diegetic realm, to epitomize the inconclusiveness of memory altogether – the matter remains indecipherable.<sup>22</sup>

Regardless of the conclusion one draws from "Signifying Nothing," it would be difficult to convincingly argue that Wallace is hinting at a full blown case of sexual abuse. In "Brief Interview #48," however, the specter of sexual abuse looms large. The subject – i.e., the "hideous" man being interviewed, not to be confused with Orin's "Subjects" – offers a detailed

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<sup>22</sup> By seemingly establishing a binary relationship between these two interpretations of the title, I do not mean to indicate that the title may only have a single meaning.

account of his perverse dating ritual, always occurring when he reaches the third date with a woman. He refers to the ritual as a game of "*masochistic play*" (106), and he attributes the game to "certain internal consequences" stemming from his "rather irregular childhood relations with [his] mother and twin sister" (104). He recounts his mother's erratic behavior towards him, believing that she now dominates his "adult psychological life," and that this fact explains his compulsion to repeatedly play out this game (111).<sup>23</sup> While he attests that his mother cared more consistently for his twin sister than she did for him, subject #48 never reveals what was so irregular about his own "relations" with his sister. Peculiarly, he feels compelled to inform the interviewer that his sister and he are fraternal, rather than identical, twins. Almost as if sensing the need to preemptively defend himself against some impending judgment on behalf of the interviewer, subject #48 emphasizes that "in adulthood [they] look scarcely anything alike" (104). Given subject #48's inclination to distance himself from his sister in adulthood, coupled with the rather cryptic statements the interviewee offers about his childhood, there is reason to suspect a possible sexual relationship, or attraction, between the siblings.

Characters in *Infinite Jest* who battle addiction or deviant impulses are nearly universally the victims of unstable, often abusive, parents. It hardly seems a stretch to assert that Wallace continues this theme of psychic damage in his short fiction. In "Brief Interview #48," the subject's behavior accords with the behavior of adults who were sexually abused as children, as such adults are more likely to report difficulties in the sexual arena, often entailing a "history of multiple, superficial, often quite brief sexual relationships that quickly end as intimacy develops" (Briere 52). Moreover, child victims of sexual abuse are "more likely than their peers to display

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<sup>23</sup> The interviewee describes the way that his mother would at times wholly and instantly withdraw her affection, then, just as promptly, inundate him with the affection she had previously withheld. Similarly, the interviewee's game consists of power ensued by submission. The conclusion of the game is not fetishistic, S&M sexual play, but his emotional breakdown: he lies down next to them, weeps, and explains to them "the psychological origins of the game" (114).

age-inappropriate sexual awareness" (Briere 52). By virtue of the limited perspective we are privy to, we can hardly conclude with any certainty whether the interviewee's childhood was or was not marred by insidious sexual behavior from his mother, nor can we definitely state that he was engaged in incestuous acts with his sister. We can, however, psychoanalyze his sexual sentiments towards his mother and sister, and establish common ground between his relationship with his mother and Orin's relationship with Avril in *Infinite Jest*.

Borrowing from Freud once again, I will note that the initial sexual attractions for the male are the immediate female family members – namely, his mother and his sister. Freud insists that the incest taboo causes the properly socialized male to redirect his desire to a substitute female figure, and that the man whose "incestuous fixations of libido continue to play (or begin once more to play) the principal part in his unconscious mental life" must suffer from "the nuclear complex of neurosis" (*Totem* 22). The subject of the interview, much like Joelle's father, has failed to repress his incestuous attraction. This failure becomes evident when, in his extended chicken-sexing analogy, he remarks "Neither my sister's husband nor my father were ever involved in poultry in any way" (*Brief Interviews* 112), indicating the rival positions that these male figures occupy in his familial paradigm.

The subject's characterization of his mother proves, in many respects, eerily similar to the characterization of Avril Incandenza. The subject describes his mother as a domineering woman, much as Bain describes Avril. Unlike Avril, however, the subject's mother failed to affect a calm demeanor at all times:

She could at one moment be very, very warm and maternal, and then in the flash of an instant would become angry with me over some real or imagined trifle and would completely withdraw her affection. She became cold and rejecting, rebuffing any attempts as a small child on my part to receive reassurance and affection, sometimes sending me alone to my bedroom and refusing to let me out for some rigidly specified period. (110)

After this "rigidly specified period," the mother would return her affections to the child, creating a chaotic cycle in which the subject perpetually experienced maternal love followed by maternal disgust, and so on. The interviewee acknowledges that his mother's erratic behavior almost certainly influenced his third date ritual, which will be more intensively scrutinized in the next chapter.

### III. Trauma and Incest in *Oblivion*?

As I did with *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* in the last section of this chapter, I will in this section limit my discussion of *Oblivion* to two stories – "The Soul is not a Smithy" and "Oblivion" – rather than treating all the stories in the collection. Trauma permeates "The Soul is not a Smithy," putatively emanating from a childhood moment in which the narrator's substitute Civics teacher suffered a nervous breakdown during class. The narrator's account appears highly suspect, especially considering his efforts to block out some already-existing trauma while sitting in the Civics classroom – the supposed site of the "original" trauma. He reveals that this period of his youth was hamstrung by literacy issues: "Ages seven to ten were . . . the troubling and upsetting period (particularly for my parents) when I could not, in any strictly accepted sense, read" (*Oblivion* 72). This problem "reversed itself, almost as mysteriously as it had first appeared, somewhere around [his] tenth birthday" (72). His tenth birthday is April 8th (72), while the substitute teacher's meltdown occurs on March 14th (81). The sudden extirpation of his reading issues suggests not only that the event on March 14th cannot be the site of the original trauma, but that, paradoxically, the most traumatic aspect of this event remains his inability to feel any powerfully negative effects from it. The narrator's insistence that this particular occasion was the source of his trauma may be a coping mechanism; by diverting attention away *from* – and possibly repressing memories *of* – the real traumatic source, he can account for his



superficial boyhood issues, such as struggling to read, without rehashing the more painful, trauma-related memories. In addition to his existent literary problems and his tendency to distract himself from life around him, the narrator's recollection of Mr. Johnson's meltdown implies that the ordeal barely registered with him at the time. Most of the children were reduced to hysteria, "sitting bolt upright with many of their eyes bulging out and rolling around and around in their heads like cartoon characters' eyes" (101), but the narrator simply sat there, primarily fixated on the window's wire mesh, creating comic-like story panels out of the squares. Although one may argue that the narrator's absence of both action and emotion were due to shock, his persistent descriptions of just how efficiently he distracted himself refute this notion.<sup>24</sup>

Through the classroom windows, the narrator observes a pair of dogs interacting: "The two dogs entered the window's upper right grid from a copse of trees . . . then began moving in gradually diminishing circles around each other, apparently preparing to copulate" (73). This assumption – i.e., the assumption that the dogs' movement signifies the preparation of sexual congress – seems atypical for a child under the age of ten. One would imagine a child his age to assign an asexual motive to the dogs' activity, only later to learn of its carnal association. The narrator, however, begins with a sexual observation, only afterwards conceding "it could have been one dog merely asserting its dominance over another, as I later learned was common" (74). Freud recounts in *Totem and Taboo* M. Wulff of Odesa's story of a nine-year-old boy with a dog phobia, agreeing with Wulff that animal phobias "almost invariably turn out to be a displacement on to the animals of the child's fear of one of his parents" (159). Although the narrator does not suffer from a phobia of the dogs, he nonetheless may be displacing the image of parental, human copulation with the more benign animal copulation.

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<sup>24</sup> As he confesses, he was "absent in both mind and spirit" for most of class (*Oblivion* 80).

In “Oblivion,” Wallace expresses the trauma and sexual tension more demonstrably, strongly insinuating an incestuous relationship between Randall’s wife Hope and her stepfather during her childhood. Hope's sister Vivian has made “public accusations” against the stepfather, influenced by “‘Recovered’ memories” (207) – once again taking us into the realm of potentially false memories. Vivian “recovered” these memories through psychotherapy, which has sometimes been criticized for igniting false memory syndrome in some patients.<sup>25</sup> Though we never explicitly learn that these memories pertain to sexual abuse on behalf of the stepfather, Wallace supplies ample hints throughout the narrative.<sup>26</sup> The narrator documents the “tableau” in which Hope and her stepfather are seated together in a car; in the tableau, Hope appears “younger and noticeably more lissome and voluptuous” and her stepfather, referred to as ‘Father,’ sits with his “posture erect” (197). The “whole brief tableau or interior ‘vision,’ or shot [was] so rapid and incongruous that it can only be truly, as it were, ‘seen’ in retrospect” (197). In light of the story’s conclusion, in which we realize that the entire narrative has been Hope’s dream from the perspective of her husband, this tableau factors significantly into an assessment of Hope as a victim of father-perpetrated molestation.

Throughout "Oblivion," Randall comments on Audrey’s physical maturation, as well as on Hope’s uneasiness regarding the manner in which he gazes at ‘their’ Audrey. Randall occupies a troubling space, as he is of no blood relation to Audrey yet he must nevertheless act in accordance with the incest prohibition. In this sense, the prohibition extends beyond the literally sexual act, seeping into the mere act of observation. To enact the male gaze onto Audrey signals

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<sup>25</sup> The False Memory Syndrome Foundation consists of parents who defend themselves against what they believe to be psychotherapy’s destructive tendency to create false memories of abuse, particularly in women. Psychoanalytic clinician and self-professed feminist Janice Haaken concedes that there are dangers involved in the therapeutic attempt to retrieve repressed, trauma-based memories: “the emotional truth of the past is never reducible to the concrete facticity of events but is always bound up in interpretation, both in the initial experience of events and in their later elaborations and workings-through in memory” (118).

<sup>26</sup> E.g. “The sound of struggles and muffled breathing and a male- or ‘Father’ figure’s whispered grunts and shushing” (227). Even the name of the sleep center – the *Darling* Memorial Clinic – has an incestuous overtone.

a breach of social norms, given his position as the stepfather. Moreover, even her nubile friends are ‘off-limits’ due to “the obvious social restrictions erected by [his] role as their friend’s adoptive father” (193). Thus, Randall feels guilty simply looking at them. Hope senses that Randall harbors sexual feelings toward Audrey, and this influences her desire for Audrey to attend college out of state. Not until the narrative closes, however, do we learn that while standing before a mirror, Randall has been “masturbating with a saffron scented under-garment” (236); previously, he depicts Audrey in a “saffron bustier” (212).<sup>27</sup> Shortly after this admission, Hope awakes from the dream, suggesting that she was probing too close to the root of her trauma. As Freud asserts, the process of "dream-work" entails "the disguise of the unconscious dream thoughts" (*Origin* 39). Condensation and displacement are two operations integral to Freud's theory. I mentioned in f.n. 26 that the name "Darling Memorial Clinic" is incestuously suggestive as it pertains to this particular story. This clinic may represent Hope's festering doubts about her stepfather's conduct, as well as Randall's desire for Audrey. Additionally, the clinic functions in the dream as the location where Hope and Randall are to discover the "truth" about Randall's supposed snoring; therefore, the clinic also represents a confrontational, revelatory site. The dream's manifest content – what Freud deems "the disguised surrogate for the unconscious dream thoughts" (*Origin* 38) – suggests that this debate over Randall's putative snoring is the primary issue at hand, but the snoring really only displaces the incestuous issues plaguing Hope's unconscious.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud describes a “compulsion to repeat – something that seems more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle which it over-rides” (17). Revising his hypothesis that dreams function to fulfill wishes, Freud posits that

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<sup>27</sup> Of course, as the dream belongs to Hope, such statements may merely be the suspicions she harbors but refuses to consciously acknowledge.

dreams once functioned for other purposes. He relates the repetition compulsion to dreams that occur in trauma neurosis. Freud's revised dream theory helps further explain Hope's dream, as well as her inability to remain asleep.<sup>28</sup> The constant presence of single-quotation marks clue us in to the manifest content's struggle to mask the dream's latent content. When Randall mentions "the strange and absurdly frustrating marital conflict between Hope and myself over the issue of my so-called 'snoring'" (*Oblivion* 192), the single-quotation marks suggest that Hope finds the actual conflict too traumatic to consciously address. Similarly, whenever the subject of 'Father's' possible indiscretions enters as manifest content, such as when s/he reveals "it was not at all difficult to conceive . . . [his] right hand clamped tight" over Hope's mouth (214), the narrative focus shifts.

The incestuous and abusive scenarios I have heretofore highlighted epitomize the friction between pleasure-seeking and the freedom to choose. After all, prohibitions are "mainly directed against liberty of enjoyment and against freedom of movement and communication" (*Totem* 28). The "liberty of enjoyment," however, loses its imperative when it entails self-destruction or the encroachment of others – whether that encroachment is physical, psychological, or both. For Wallace, such encroachments begin to dissipate whenever one learns to make decisions not governed by the self, but the reverse is also true. The relationship between Avril and Orin is a fine example of the destructiveness of narcissistic choosing. The complicated dynamic in their mother-son relationship, which I have established to be at least somewhat influenced by Wallace's relationship with his own mother, will be further explored in the next chapter. And

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<sup>28</sup> This assumes that the friction between Hope and her husband with respect to his snoring actually exists. The narrative's status as a dream makes analysis of anything within the narrative somewhat tenuous. *Even within the diegetic world of the story*, the distinction between real and fictional proves imprecise. E.g., they may not have a daughter. If Audrey does not exist, though, she clearly serves as a representation for Hope herself, with Randall representing 'Father.'

while I have primarily fixated on Avril's (possible) transgressions in this chapter, Orin will be the focal point of my next discussion of this pair.

Wallace displays an appreciable measure of conservatism insofar as his fiction tends to let social norms go unquestioned. While incestuous rape or pedophilia can pass as perverse acts worthy of prohibition, Wallace neglects to question even those acts that do not encroach upon another's freedom to choose, such as transvestism. In the next chapter, I will delve into such instances of perversion, performativity, and obsession in *Infinite Jest*, and offer a more extensive look into what message Wallace intends to convey through the masochistic play that characterizes "Brief Interview #48."

## CHAPTER TWO: PERVERSION, JOUISSANCE, AND FORMS OF PLAY

In this chapter, I will examine the perversions that haunt Wallace's fiction, beginning with *Infinite Jest*. To clarify, the perverse processes analyzed will be sexual in nature. Psychoanalyst Joël Dor notes that "we cannot speak of the perversions except in relation to sexuality" and "it is always in the context of the sexual drives that [Freud] describes the dynamics of the perverse process" (69). Thus, references to perverse acts and fantasies will adhere to perversion's conception within the psychoanalytic field, preventing the "intrusion of ideology" (69), except in my attempts to tie in Wallace's own moral foundation. Perversion and narcissism will be analyzed almost entirely from the perspective of the male, as Wallace's perverts and narcissists tend to be male.

By setting this chapter apart from the previous one, I do not mean to suggest that incest and perversion are not closely related. As Freud argues, the maternal figure is the first object of the infant's desire, meaning the initial desire is decidedly incestuous. While perversion takes many forms, and certainly doesn't necessitate an incestuous manifestation, incest appears, on some level, inextricable from perversion. The incestuous implications in Orin and Avril's relationship must thus be analyzed further in this chapter. The overall focus will, however, shift from pleasure-seeking agency to those behaviors which Freud submits "cannot always be in harmony with the tendency towards pleasure" (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 3-4).

### I. Transvestism and Performativity in *Infinite Jest*

At its core, perversion involves the disavowal of the mother's desire for the father, meaning that "what is being disavowed is sexual difference" (Dor 133-134). "Disavowal" does not imply that the pervert perceives no distinction between the sexes; rather, to disavow necessitates that he *does* perceive a distinction, but he challenges the meaning or significance of this distinction. Thus, the perversion of transvestism lies in "the sexual arousal produced by

wearing the clothing of the opposite sex" (Dor 189). Unlike the transsexual, the male transvestite only engages in the fantasy of being a woman, while still feeling like a man, and often engaging in typically masculine behavior when not in "drag," so to speak.<sup>29</sup> He has accepted that he "is" a man, but this acceptance paradoxically produces a palpable desire to transgress the structure of sexual identity – if only temporarily.

We learn rather early on in *Infinite Jest* that in the U.S.S. Millicent Kent's pre-ETA childhood, she came home from after-school drills one day to find her father clad in her leotard, and "in the dining room he'd moved all the furniture over to the side" for the purposes of "pirouetting and rondelling" in front of the mirror (*IJ* 124). Kent's father, like Joelle's father, has unsuccessfully repressed the original desire for the mother, instead merely transferring this desire onto the female relatives in his household, with the mirror allowing him to simultaneously conjure the male gaze and the presence of the Other. As Kent informs Mario, her father's transvestitic perversion required that he dress in a "*relative's* female clothes" (124). Similarly, Janus Strzyzewsky and Maria Zierhoffer outline a case study in which an adolescent male was treated for transvestism: "At age fourteen he began to dress in his mother's clothes while he masturbated, sometimes watching himself in the mirror. Sometimes he achieved sexual pleasure by wearing his mother's underwear all day" (163). The mother discovered her son's perverse practice and attempted to abolish it, but "this only caused him to be more careful about hiding his deviant sexual activity" (164). He underwent aversion therapy three times a day for five days, which forced him to view slides of himself in women's undergarments while a drug, apomorphine, was administered so that "ringing sounds in the head . . . nausea, and sometimes vomiting" would accompany the viewing of these slides (165). By therapy's end, the subject no

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<sup>29</sup> To what degree the male transsexual – i.e., the anatomically male who desires to be a woman – feels 'like a man' or 'like a woman' is debatable, and likely varies case-by-case, but there is nevertheless the desire or intention to *become a woman*. This desire need not be present in transvestites.

longer felt satisfaction when masturbating to women's clothing, though the desire to do so *was not completely purged*.

The fact that the desire lingers on even after the act no longer registers pleasure for the subject returns us to Wallace's emphasis on choice. An undeniable degree of conservatism exists in Wallace's meditations on choice and the willful abstinence from pleasure. By conservative, I mean in the term's most literal sense – i.e., Wallace's conclusions on matters of pleasure, both sexual and not, tend to reinforce more conventional social standards. The depictions of even relatively mundane sexual "transgressions" such as transvestism situate Wallace within the heteronormative realm. By and large, these depictions suggest that Wallace perceives these deviations from the norm as inhibiting, rather than liberating.

Wallace constructs a spectrum of desire for individual pleasure, on which the Entertainment's viewers represent the negative extreme, submitting so fully to the pleasure principle that they lose sentience, and Gately represents the positive extreme, demonstrating sacrifice and self-discipline. The Entertainment's lethality rests in its ability to seduce the already-submissive viewer into a state of passivity that cannot be refused after it's been glimpsed. In effect, the choice for powerful, immediate pleasure increases one's desire for this pleasure, hence the state of the addict. On the other end of the spectrum, abstinence from indulgences, will, after an extended period of time, help to alleviate the cravings for such indulgences.

Transvestism, especially as detailed in the Strzyzewsky & Zierhoffer case study, rests somewhere near the negative end of this imaginary spectrum.<sup>30</sup> There is reason to believe that Wallace would be in favor of the subject resisting his transvestitic masturbation, but given Wallace's less-than-ringing endorsement of traditional therapy and its methods of pathology and

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<sup>30</sup> Although the transvestite cannot be classified as an addict proper, there still exists within him a desire for pleasure unharnessed by self-discipline.



standardization, it is unlikely that he would agree with the aversion therapy the patient was subjected to.<sup>31</sup> It requires effort to choose *not* to indulge, and therefore, a drug-induced aversion proves ill-conceived.

From here, let us again turn our attention to Hugh Steeply's cross-dressed performance as Helen Steeply. Steeply's reasons for engaging in drag are inconsistent with the pervert's reasons for doing so. He only hopes to glean information from the Incandenza family. Nevertheless, Steeply's *performance* requires a certain level of immersion into the role. He practices behaving in a feminine way, with Marathe, through the narrator, noting "that the more grotesque or unconvincing [Steeply] seemed likely to be as a disguised persona the more nourished and actualized his deep parts felt" (*IJ* 420). However unconvincing Steeply's feminine performance may appear to Marathe, who already possessed the fixed image of the male Steeply, it is successful enough to deceive Orin and his football teammates – a fact that challenges the rigidity of gender itself.

Judith Butler posits in "Imitation and Gender Subordination" that "there is no original or primary gender that drag imitates, *but gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original*" (127). In this sense, all gender is performance, and thus we are all performers of gender, regardless of whether or not we adhere to the prevailing gender norms. Butler clarifies what she means by performance: "I do not mean to suggest that drag is a 'role' that can be taken on or off at will . . . On the contrary, the very possibility of becoming a viable subject requires that a certain gender mime be already underway" (130). In other words, we enact the gender we were groomed to enact, lest we wish to face the derision of the gender police. Neither Steeply

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<sup>31</sup> In addition to Hal's experience with therapy – in which he feels pushed towards a prescribed, textbook response to Himself's death – the narrator of "The Depressed Person" fails to break out of her narcissistic loop through therapy; in some ways, individual therapy actually helps facilitate her narcissism. By contrast, Wallace's depiction of AA's communal approach is much more positive.

nor the U.S.S. Millicent Kent's father wish to face such derision, although the latter *does* experience the "transgressive pleasures produced by [the] very prohibitions" (Butler 130) of incorrect gender performance.

While heteronormative gender performativity usually occurs without much concerted effort on behalf of the performer, even Butler must acknowledge that some performances require greater artifice than the mere submission to the Symbolic Order. That is to say, some performances *are* consciously played – for transgressive purposes or otherwise. Many performances in *Infinite Jest* can be characterized in this manner, but two sexually-charged instances immediately come to mind: Avril and John Wayne's footballer-cheerleader play, and the AA speaker's incestuously diddling adoptive father's incestuous, pedophilic play. The importance of both of these events as they pertain to perverse performance is the appearance, or presence, of a third party. Although the scene between Avril and John Wayne typically elicits laughter, and can safely be regarded as a comedic scene, there also seems to be something sinister about it, even going beyond the rather unsubtle implication that Avril has been engaged in sexual activity with a minor in her charge. In accordance with Avril's absurdly neurotic wishes, there are no doors to the Dean of Academic Affairs's office, meaning that not even the most rudimentary safeguard is in place to prevent someone – in this case, Pemulis – from observing her transgression. One would be hard pressed to believe that Avril, with her obsessive tendencies, would unintentionally neglect such a detail. Unlike the U.S.S. Millicent's Kent's father, whose perverse acts are only witnessed when his children unexpectedly arrive home early, Avril only affects surprise; she desires what amounts to a confession – the desire for her transgression to be observed.

The case of the AA speaker's adoptive father requires further elaboration, as it more fully brings us into the realm of perversion. The major component of the adoptive father's ritualistic molestation of his biological daughter involves placing a "cheesy rubber Raquel Welch full-head pull-on *mask*, with hair" over the head of the daughter and calling her "'*RAQUEL!*' in moments of incestuous extremity" (*IJ* 371). He desires not to have incestuous sex with his daughter, but to 'literalize' his fantasy of establishing sexual dominance over Raquel Welch.<sup>32</sup> While masking usually entails performance on behalf of the masked individual, this proves impossible with the catatonic daughter. Instead, the Raquel Welch mask allows the father to assume the phantasmic role of the libidinous man, where he achieves sexual conquests of attractive movie stars instead of committing pedophilic and incestuous rape on his disabled daughter. This is not to say that the father has successfully blurred the lines between fantasy and reality to the extent that he truly fails to conceive that the source of his penetration is someone other than Raquel Welch. Rather, he disavows this fact when in the act.

Though he never mentions it, the father is well aware that the adoptive daughter knows of his ritual. It would be nearly impossible for him not to be, given that on multiple occasions he departed the room with the mask still over the daughter's head. Fitting with the pervert's methods in psychoanalytic discourse, the father's omission places the adoptive daughter – the third party – in a precarious position: "The third party must either keep silent and feel guilty about it or reveal the secret and feel just as guilty for having been the agent of a misfortune that the pervert had warned him about" (Dor 144). The warning here is a tacit one: keep quiet or you're next. Under this unspoken threat of retribution, the adoptive daughter understandably keeps the father's secret, rendering her complicit in his transgression. For the father's part, he succeeds in

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<sup>32</sup> In keeping with Wallace's theme of television as an addictive, destructive force, one may surmise that this particular fantasy originated in the adolescent spectation of Raquel Welch films.

maintaining the semblance of an otherwise normal life, never acknowledging the adoptive daughter's "post-incestuous tidying up" (*IJ* 372). In *Three Essays on Sexuality*, Freud contends that people can "substitute a perversion . . . for the normal sexual aim for quite a time, or can find place for the one alongside the other" (160). Freud further accounts for the comingling of normal sexual behavior and perverse behavior when he discusses the splitting of the ego in *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis*: "It is indeed a universal characteristic of neuroses that there are present in the subject's mental life, as regards some particular behavior, two different attitudes, contrary to each other and independent of each other" (204). The incestuous father exemplifies these two different attitudes, at least superficially, as his wife has no inkling of his transgressions.<sup>33</sup> Stephen J. Burn comments on the pervasiveness of such splits throughout the novel, noting the ubiquity of "self-division" and the inescapability of "schizophrenic splits" ("Webs of Nerves" 71-72). This splitting, which eludes the wife, helps explain the incredulity that the wives of convicted pedophiles often express when the allegations initially surface; they were never privy to the perverse side.

## II. Orin's Seduction Ritual and the Case of Randy Lenz

Joël Dor describes in *Structure and Perversions* an analysand he encountered who suffered from a recurring fantasy in which a male friend visits her by surprise:

This visit would be disconcerting, yet pleasantly so. Caught by surprise in an unkempt state, she would settle her friend comfortably and then retire for a moment to the bathroom in order to make herself more presentable. The fantasy scenario would always proceed in the following manner. Alone in the bathroom, she would enjoy imagining, with a delight she could not explain, what her friend might think she was doing in there. And yet, she explained, it was very strange that – to her great displeasure and despite her repeated efforts to keep it going – the fantasy always came to a stop at that point. (24-25)

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<sup>33</sup> Then again, the foster mother is described as "crazy as a Fucking Mud-Bug" who is "in total Denial about her biological daughter's being a vegetable" (*IJ* 370).

The identity of the male in the woman's fantasy is neither apparent nor relevant. Her desire is not in this male subject, but in having him desire *her*, effectively in "desiring something by having to make it be desired by the other" (Dor 25). Such is the case with Orin in his 'relationships' with women. Many of his conquests, or Subjects, are rendered anonymous – i.e., Orin doesn't know their name, because this piece of information isn't pertinent to his "Excitement-Hope-Acquisition-Contempt cycle of seduction" (*IJ* 574). Generally speaking, this cycle consists of Orin seeking out a married woman with children, relentlessly flattering her with courtly flirtations, having sex with her, and lastly, abandoning her in a vulnerable state – ideally inflicting permanent psychic damage upon the Subject, who now wants to be with Orin, and her children.

As it was established in Chapter One, Orin's own psyche has been more than a little rattled by his mother. Effectively, Orin has established a sexual game structured according to the behavior of his mother during his childhood. Avril's desire to appear unvaryingly agreeable while really acting in self-interest proves integral to Orin's desire to induce corporeal pleasure in his Subjects for his own vanity and sense of triumph. His mother's presence looms large even when he fails to realize it, such as when he repeats a line from her letter in a conversation with Hal: "Chortles are good. We like chortles" (1006/1016). But Avril's influence proves much more pervasive than just the mimicry of certain phrases. Orin has seemingly undergone a sort of post-infancy oedipal phase, and it is through this phase that we must trace the origins and development of his cycle of seduction.

We know from Lacan that the child wants to be what he imagines the mother lacks, and it is only at some point after learning that there is an Other who already possesses what the mother desires that the child accepts the prohibition on the mother and begins to seek out replacements

outside of the family. For Orin, however, there are only two important criteria in a woman insofar as his seduction cycle is concerned: 1) that she is married, and 2) that she has children. What appears crucial, then, is the structure of the relationship and Orin's place within it; he is not altogether interested in finding a sexual partner to replace the forbidden object of desire that is the mother, but rather, he wishes to recreate the dynamic that existed between Avril and the medical attaché. When the latter receives the Entertainment in the mail, the "padded mailer is postmarked suburban Phoenix area in Arizona U.S.A., and the return-address box has only the term '*HAPPY ANNIVERSARY!*'" (36). We can deduce that Orin was indeed the sender of the Entertainment, with his motive being revenge for what he regards as the cause of both his father's death and his deteriorated relationship with his mother. The Subjects in his seduction cycle are not sexual substitutes for his mother, but motherly figures toward whom he directs the animosity he feels for his mother. Nonetheless, we are led to suspect that on an unconscious level, Orin cannot really reject his mother. Not only does he adopt her aphorisms and refrain from destroying her in the same way he destroys the medical attaché, but his Subjects are only reminiscent of his own mother in strikingly superficial ways. To reiterate an argument made in the first chapter, it is the cross-dressed Steeply who most closely resembles Avril in physical appearance and intellect, and yet Orin reveres her too much to seduce her using his standard strategies.<sup>34</sup>

Arguably the most perverse element of Orin's seduction cycle is his desire to confide the details in Hal. He clearly derives delight from confessing his exploits, including the various strategies he employs when seducing a Subject. On one occasion, he extensively outlines to Hal the process that "Seduction Strategy Number 7" (1007) entails. Hal bluntly informs Orin that he hates hearing these stories, but Orin pushes forward nonetheless. Hal effectively functions as the

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<sup>34</sup> And in a twist on the classic oedipal scenario, Steeply doesn't quite lack what Orin supposes s/he does.

third party for whom Orin reveals his perverse secret, without concern for how this may affect Hal. Other than perhaps Randy Lenz, no character in the novel exudes selfishness more than Orin. Not surprisingly, these are two of the characters most harshly punished by Wallace. Orin's seduction ritual and fear of roaches are both used against him, and his command – "Do it to her! Do it to her!" (972) – suggests that Avril was possibly present during this torture. As for Lenz, he manages to avoid death outside Ennet House on the night of Gately's hospitalization, but the last veiled reference to him is as one of the A.F.R.'s "newly acquired test-subjects" (845).

Lenz's case differs from most of those covered thus far in that very little is known about his childhood. The closest history of Lenz we receive occurs during his malaprop-laden rant to Bruce Green while walking back from a meeting. Here we learn that Lenz's phobia of timepieces stems from his stepfather, a man with "deeply unresolved issues" who would force Lenz to "wind his pocketwatch . . . and make sure his watch's displayed time was correct to the second or else he'd lay into the pint-sized Randy with a rolled-up copy of *Track and Flange*" (557). Evidently, Lenz's obsessive-compulsive idiosyncrasies originate from such practices; precision became paramount to avoiding assault, resulting in Lenz "always checking his pulse on the inside of his wrists" (276), possessing a "strange compulsive need to be north of everything, and possibly even northeast of everything" (277), and ultimately in the animal abuse routine.

The simplest explanation for Lenz's sudden fixation with animal abuse is that deprived of narcotics, the practice serves as a coping mechanism, with the animal's demise substituting in for cocaine's intoxicating high. This explanation satisfactorily accounts for his *foray* into animal abuse, but it fails to account for either the intricacy of the practice or the increasing drive to transgress. Much like Hal, who creates an elaborate routine of secrecy in order to smoke marijuana, Lenz's ritual requires an inordinate amount of planning and induces a significant

degree of anxiety. And just as part of the pleasure Hal derives lies in the secrecy itself, so too, does the pleasure in Lenz's case. As opposed to Hal's marijuana habit, however, Lenz's animal abuse opens up a much wider range of transgressive possibilities. As an obsessional, these transgressions are limited by his insistence on custom and precision, but we nevertheless see the scope of his ritual, or game, expand greatly within a short time span.

The game begins when one night Lenz strikes and kills a rat with a chunk of concrete, then kneels down over the rat and says "*There*" (541) – a phrase he begins using every time he successfully kills an animal. The death of the animal is not enough, though. He begins stealing large Hefty trash bags, keeping them "neatly folded in an inside pocket of his topcoat" (541). After scooping an animal into a bag, he sets the bag down "next to the vicinity's northernmost wall or fence or dumpster and light[s] a gasper and hunker[s] down up next to the wall to watch the wide variety of changing shapes the bag would assume" as the animal loses air (541). Soon after his descent into animal abuse, "vermin started to get a little ho-hum and insignificant" (541), resulting in the upgrade to cats, and eventually to dogs. The practice reduces the animal to an object, effectively rendering it only so much matter to be disposed of in a garbage bag. This reduction of the animal manages to reassure Lenz: "The '*There*' turned out be crucial for the sense of brisance and closure and resolving issues of impotent rage and powerless fear that like accrued in Lenz all day being trapped in the northeastern portions of a squalid halfway house" (541). As Dor reasons, "it is in smothering the desire of the other that the obsessional manages to sustain the logic of his own" (127). Lenz's case entails a literal smothering and the absolute negation of the animal's desire to live.

Although Lenz clearly views the ritual as somehow therapeutic, capable of resolving his issues, we are privileged to see that these supposed issues are contrived by Lenz himself. His



perception of "being trapped in the northeastern portions" of Ennet House indicates a palpable degree of obliviousness to his own obsessional, self-imposed regulations. Such regulations also govern his animal abuse. While playing the game allows him to repeatedly experience a moment of pleasure, or relief, this moment only becomes possible by virtue of the unpleasurable state he has contrived. In his analysis of children's play in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud discusses the compulsion to repeat. In *fort-da* – a game similar to Peek-A-Boo – the child copes with the absence of the mother by replicating the dynamic of "disappearance and return" (9), allowing him to experience the joy of return (as in the mother's return). The pleasure at this return hinges upon a contingency: the child's construction of an unpleasurable scenario. Like the child playing *fort-da* with himself, Lenz repeatedly incurs the dissatisfaction and anxiety of the process for the payoff experienced through the animal's death.<sup>35</sup> Freud uses the repetition compulsion to support his theory of drives that go beyond the pleasure principle, such as the death drive: "If we are to take it as a truth that knows no exception that everything living dies for *internal* reasons – becomes inorganic once again – then we shall be compelled to say that '*the aim of all life is death*'" (32). Lenz's animal abuse ritual epitomizes this drive towards death in more ways than one. At its most basic level, the ritual causes Lenz to repeatedly confront his own mortality by proxy. More literally, his progressive appetite for transgression leaves him perpetually trending towards death.

But even these explanations fail to completely capture the game's allure *for* Lenz or its effect *on* him. The pleasure Lenz feels at establishing mastery over the animal converges with the reality that one day he will die; he reaches a point at which the pleasure and pain associated with the act become indistinguishable. The act's continuance occurs due to what Lacan refers to

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<sup>35</sup> Says Freud of the two acts that composed the child's *fort-da* game: "there is no doubt that the greater pleasure was attached to the second act" (9).

as "the paradox of *jouissance*" (192). In *The Lacanian Subject*, Bruce Fink defines *jouissance* as an "excitation due to sex, seeing, and/or violence, whether positively or negatively viewed by conscience, whether considered innocently pleasurable or disgustingly repulsive" and a "substitute for the lost 'mother-child unity'" (60). It is perhaps, then, not a coincidence that while Lenz walks with Bruce Green, intoxicated and anticipating the progression of the game, he begins speaking of his mother.

### **III. *Fort-Da*, Masochism, and Derridean Play in "Brief Interview #48"**

As opposed to Orin and Lenz, the respondent of "Brief Interview #48" not only recognizes the connection between the ritual and his mother, he embraces it to an extent. He readily admits to the interviewer that she "has bequeathed [him] certain psychological complexes having to do with power and, perhaps, trust" (107). Subject #48's complexes situate him firmly in the role of the pervert "haunted by the fantasy of the phallic mother" (Dor 112). At the psychical mercy of this "all-powerful mother," he is "condemned in advance to maintain an economy of desire with regard to women that is, if not impossible, at least torturing" (Dor 112). The structure of his game imparts the tortured relationships he has with women emanating from the fantasy of the phallic mother. The development of the game necessitates play, but what kind of play? It is my contention that his play can be jointly analyzed through Freudian, Deleuzian, and Derridean postulations, and I will now proceed to offer just such analyses.

The interviewee begins the interview by painstakingly elucidating the routine he has established with love interests once they reach their third date together. He first attempts to create a comforting, non-threatening environment for the woman; then, while maintaining a considerable degree of physical distance from her, he nonchalantly poses the question, "How would you feel about my tying you up?" (*Brief Interviews* 102). Subject #48 goes on to admit

that “Some will wish to play. A few will not” (103), and that the women serve as “prospective players in the . . . *game*” (104) – a game we later learn culminates in the respondent's weeping: “I lie down beside them and weep and explain to them the psychological origins of the game and the needs it serves in me. I open my innermost psyche to them and beg compassion” (114).

The “game” is thus structured into two *primary* acts: posing the bondage question and weeping by the bound woman’s side. This format reverses *fort-da*’s sequence of pleasure. There still exists the binary relationship between pleasure and unpleasure, but the pleasure for the interviewee lies in the first act rather than the second. The game’s second act remains integral, though. This act demonstrates submission, causing repulsion in the interviewee, so that like his mother, he feels inclined to reassume the dominant role. This step ensures that the game will be played once again from the start.

Once subject #48 poses the question “How would you feel about my tying you up?”, the game seems to entail “*masochistic play*” or “*bonded play*” (106). While his role in this play initially seems to be as the punishing sadist, the end of the interview reveals that his game is psychologically masochistic. In emphasizing the game's allure, he remarks that the “crucial factor here is that I am every bit as interested in the contract as in the scenario” (104). Deleuze posits that in masochism, the contract is “caricatured in order to emphasize its ambiguous destination” (80). Moreover, Deleuze construes the contract as a reversal of patriarchy:

The contract in masochism . . . [makes] the woman into the party with whom the contract is entered into. Its paradoxical intention extends even further in that it involves a master-slave relationship, and one furthermore in which the woman is the master and torturer . . . The ultimate paradox is that such a contract should be initiated, and the power conferred, by the victim himself, that is to say the male party (80)

Important to understand is that the interviewee’s decision to weep rather than complete the expected sadomasochistic bondage scenario involves more than just the insurance of continued

play. The contract provides the potential for the *real* thing – i.e., S&M sex. To actually consummate the act, however, would be to tamper with the fantasy's power. The interviewee acknowledges that intercourse does sometimes ensue after the acts of weeping and confession, but this occurs only after his supposedly sadistic intentions have been announced farcical.<sup>36</sup> The fantasy remains unscathed and the game is preserved. As with Lenz, or even Hal, the respondent frequently repeats the ritual in spite of the pain it induces, functioning as an example of what Deleuze notes as an alteration to the "normal function of repetition in its relation to the pleasure-principle" (104). Says Deleuze, repetition is no longer "governed by the idea of experiencing or re-experiencing pleasure . . . It has become an idea or ideal" (104).

While the content of the game ultimately induces psychic pain in the interviewee, he finds pleasure in the game's repetition all the same. This pleasure is due largely to the game's familiarity. In every instance in which the game is played, he controls the action up until the moment when the woman must answer "yes" or "no" to the question of being tied up. Should she acquiesce, he controls the action through the weeping scene. He is thus afforded a sense of clarity, granting him not only confidence to continue playing the game, but knowledge of the game's structure. He conveys to the interviewer a degree of pride in his ability to judge immediately upon asking the question (i.e., "How would you feel about my tying you up?") how receptive his date will be, claiming, "I will know whether it's going to happen the moment I ask. I can nearly always tell" (*Brief Interviews* 102). Furthermore, the interviewee continually stresses that there is no violence or heinousness involved, that the contract of the game is not about "*S and M*," nor is it about "seduction, conquest, intercourse, or algolagnia" (104). Apart from the fact that the interviewee undermines this renunciation of "*S and M*" shortly thereafter, these

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<sup>36</sup> "Whether it ends in actual intercourse depends. It's unpredictable. There's simply no way to tell" (*Brief Interviews* 115).

claims also signify that he has imposed boundaries to protect him from experiencing unpleasure outside of the self-prescribed form which he experiences within the confines of the game.

We must here turn to Derrida, who asserts in "Structure, Sign, and Play" that the "entire history of the concept of structure" should be thought of as a "series of substitutions of center for center, as a linked chain of determinations of the center" (279). In his estimation, the "organizing principle of the structure," or the center, "would limit what we might call the *play* of the structure" (278). Thus, the lack of a center, for Derrida, aids the movement of play.<sup>37</sup> For the respondent, however, this idea of a center is what allows for him to offer the contract in the first place. He *must* be able to place limitations on play, thereby establishing familiarity with the contract's terms. This form of play is "constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude" (Derrida 279). The "reassuring certitude" of centered play thus allows the interviewee to easily and conveniently reconcile the game and his own place within it.

Having elucidated the way these conceptions of play fit together in "Brief Interview #48," the questions of 'What is Wallace's aim with this story?' and 'Why does he spend over a dozen pages chronicling the rituals of a masochist?' invite consideration. To analyze the implications of Wallace's story, which seems to owe a debt to Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's 1870 novella *Venus in Furs*, we must place it back within the framework of the entire collection. The title itself – *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* – suggests that the interviews' contents will reveal exceptionally repulsive men, and while there *are* several interviews which feature vile or objectionable male respondents, there are also those which spotlight rather tame, even average,

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<sup>37</sup> Mark Bresnan discusses *Infinite Jest*'s instances of play in his essay "The Work of Play in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*." Citing Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois, Bresnan states that the play that tennis offers – or, more precisely, that Coach Schtitt believes it offers – "explicitly echoes structuralist definitions of play" (52). This definition of play describes a "centered activity"; the "play-ground" within which "the possibilities for play are limitless" clearly opposes the poststructuralist conception of play (52). Further on, Bresnan contends that play in *Infinite Jest* occurs neither on the tennis court nor the football field, but in self-limiting actions, or "rigidly [self-] structured events that induce anxiety and paranoia rather than autonomy" (61).

men.<sup>38</sup> Given the lack of universality in "hideous" content, the term must allude to a more ubiquitous form of hideousness. What the majority of these interviews have in common is the singular male voice. The questions, denoted as "Q.," are omitted, making us privy to unfettered male narcissism. Mary K. Holland argues that the "male appropriation of women in solipsistically conceived quests to escape despair is a gender-specific manifestation of the narcissism that Wallace has explored in fiction and nonfiction, demonstrating it as both inherent to the human experience and as exacerbated by a culture driven by image, consumption, and technological modes of representation" (108). Wallace, then, appears less interested in the content of these interviews, such as the detailed masochistic ritual of subject #48, than with evincing to the reader solipsistic vignettes that foreclose any possibility of female agency or voice.

If we are to locate the origin of this particularly male solipsism, perhaps we are to find it with Lacan's help. In *Encore*, Lacan posits that love is "in its essence . . . narcissistic" (6) and "Jouissance, qua sexual, is phallic – in other words, it is not related to the Other as such" (9). The male never fully comes to enjoy the woman's body, "precisely because what he enjoys is the jouissance of the organ" (Lacan 7). Unable to savor a heterosexual relationship that Lacan argues never existed in the first place, the man accepts society's consolation: "Courtly love is, for man – in relation to whom the lady is entirely, and in the most servile sense of the word, a subject – the only way to elegantly pull off the absence of the sexual relationship" (Lacan 69). And if the woman is but the subject of man's consolation prize, what better way to symbolize this subjection than stripping her of her voice? Clare Hayes-Brady asserts in "Language, Gender, and Modes of Power in the Work of David Foster Wallace" that in many cases, "the feminine in Wallace's writing is wholly Othered" (136).<sup>39</sup> We see, then, that the repulsiveness that these males share is an interior characteristic, rather than an indication of universal depravity amongst the interviewed subjects. To return to Marathe's philosophical speeches, we must question the ramifications of the

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<sup>38</sup> "Brief Interview #42, for instance, features a man who reveals the shame he feels concerning his father's career as a bathroom attendant.

<sup>39</sup> As Hayes-Brady points out, even Avril's words are generally "quoted by the men who surround her . . . she is influential rather than potent" (136).

narcissism Wallace reveals through the series of interviews. At what cost comes this narcissism?

Moreover, if the importance of becoming a conscientious decision-maker should be the overarching thrust of *Infinite Jest*, then perchance *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* shows us where to begin.

## CONCLUSION

By concluding the last chapter as I have, I did not intend to haphazardly insert feminist criticism into the end of this essay and then abruptly cut things off. Rather, I meant to demonstrate what I believe to be Wallace's philosophical progression from *Infinite Jest* to *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, and continuing even into his 2005 commencement speech at Kenyon College. Select stories in *Oblivion*, such as "Good Old Neon," also seem to extend his philosophical tract, but in my estimation, the majority of the stories in the collection are more chiefly affiliated with *Infinite Jest* and *Brief Interviews* in terms of their content.

The non-conclusion to *Infinite Jest*, while sometimes frustrating for readers, comes embedded with a message. Wallace reminds us that he has not signed up to be an entertainer, and, ergo, we should not assume that by the novel's close we will *have it all*. On the contrary, Wallace actively encourages us throughout the novel to purge the desire for this entertainment, this embarrassment of riches. The function of the Entertainment in *Infinite Jest* is to dissuade us from submitting to passive lures, but even agency must be parceled out into positive and negative forms, the latter of which result in a return to the destructive loop of passivity and solipsism. Here I am thinking of Randy Lenz, whose transgressions only increase and perpetuate the drive to transgress. Gately provides the model for transcending the solipsistic trap, but as opposed to the Entertainment, which strips its subjects of all human responsibility, both to themselves and to society, the way out requires effort and commitment. Lying in the hospital bed, Gately attempts to "Abide," to "imagine what kind of impossible leap it would take to live that way all the time, by choice, straight" (860). Wallace echoes this notion of sustained commitment in his commencement speech: "The really important kind of freedom involves attention, and



awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able to truly care about other people and to sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day."

Throughout *Infinite Jest*, we observe the power of confession. Whereas the confessions made in AA imply action and self-responsibility, confessions such as Orin's spiels relaying his seduction ritual are perverse and destructive. Brief *Interviews* carries this meditation on confession to its logical extreme, as the interviews are nothing but unbridled confessions that allow the men the façade of cleansing themselves when in actuality, the structure of the interviews facilitates their narcissism. When Wallace presents us with these subjects – at times even toying with his readers, such as with subject #48's confession that his mother is the source of his masochistic play – there is always an underlying condemnation. The categorization of these men as "hideous" suggests that Wallace is not only endorsing established social norms and prohibitions, but seeking to govern modes of thought. If the really important kind of freedom involves sacrifice and compassion, then the perpetrators of abuse discussed in this essay exemplify the gap we must bridge in Wallace's esteem. In his interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace states that while subverting standard formulas can be useful, "it's just as often valuable and brave to see what can be done within a set of rules" (*Conversations* 51). If, as Wallace says, "fiction's about what it is to be a fucking *human being*" (*Conversations* 26), then this "fucking" should be done within a set of rules.

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