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**Habit-Forming: Reading *Infinite Jest* as a Rhetoric of Humility**

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**Habit-Forming: Reading *Infinite Jest* as a Rhetoric of Humility**

**by**

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**Report**

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## **Dedication**

*For Sharon Crowley, whose proximity first crushed my already nonexistent balls—*

*and for everyone else whose belief in me has conditioned my possibility*

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My infinite thanks to Diane Davis, who by the gift of her readership raises the caliber of my work; and to Ann Cvetkovich, who waited two years while I discovered what I had invested in *The Thick Book*.

## Abstract

### Habit-Forming: Reading *Infinite Jest* as a Rhetoric of Humility

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In this project, I argue that David Foster Wallace's 1996 novel *Infinite Jest* (or *IJ*) is both about recovering from addiction through humility, and also it produces that humility in some of its readers by making us feel ourselves to be addicts to a certain kind of reading: a reading to find closure, certainty, and resolution. But, in frustrating the desires for closure, certainty, resolution, etc., *IJ* denies readers the satisfaction of completing the fix. It is precisely this denial that prompts readers to re-read, repeating the structure of addiction—but also deconstructing it, by installing habits of reading that pleasure in the failure to close, the uncertainty, the impossibility of resolution—habits which I treat as humility. Following a thread in the performative theory of J.L. Austin, Jacques Derrida, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, I clear space for reconceptualizing the performative utterance through an unusual example of a performative utterance: I take *IJ* to be the utterance of humility. Drawing on Avital Ronell's "narcoanalysis" in *Crack Wars*, I argue that *IJ*'s performative or substantializing work is in exploiting one kind of habit (addiction) in order to replace it with another (humility). The rhetorical transformation (to humility) effects itself through *IJ*'s performative formation (in the

reader) of the humbled habit. This project is a reading of a performative utterance (*II*) that produces a rhetorical effect, which effect is the formation of the habit of humility.

## Table of Contents

<b>HABIT-FORMING: READING <i>INFINITE JEST</i> AS A RHETORIC OF HUMILITY.....</b>	<b>1</b>
1. Introduction .....	1
2. Queer Performativity: Other Than "I Do" .....	2
3. My Perversion: Humility .....	6
4. Warning: May Be Habit-Forming.....	11
5. Reading-Addiction: Reading Habits .....	18
6. Reading/Addiction: Stupidity and Humility .....	21
7. Reading Addiction: Something Like an Ontology of Addiction .....	27
8. Humility and Recovery: Why AA is Different than Demerol .....	31
9. Conclusion: Reading <i>Infinite Jest</i> as a Rhetoric of Humility .....	34
10. Coda: Grieving the Death of The Author .....	36
Bibliography .....	37
Vita .....	39

## Habit-Forming: Reading *Infinite Jest* as a Rhetoric of Humility

What looks like the cage's exit is actually the bars of the cage... The entrance says *EXIT*. There isn't an exit. The ultimate annular fusion: that of exhibit and its cage... It is the cage that has entered *her*, somehow... She's lost the ability to lie to herself about being able to quit, or even about enjoying it, still. It no longer delimits and fills the hole. It no longer delimits the hole.

— David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*

The bad *pharmakon* can always parasitize the good *pharmakon*, bad repetition can always parasitize good repetition. This parasitism is at once accidental and essential. Like any good parasite, it is at once inside and outside—the outside *feeding* on the inside.

— Jacques Derrida, "The Rhetoric of Drugs"

Everyone thinks that they know what they want; sometimes, your drug chooses you.

— k.d. lang, "My Last Cigarette"

### 1. Introduction

In this project, I argue both that David Foster Wallace's 1996 novel *Infinite Jest* (or *IJ*) is about recovering from addiction through humility, and that it produces that humility in some of its readers by making us feel ourselves to be addicts to a certain kind of reading: a reading to find closure, certainty, and resolution. But, in frustrating the desires for closure, certainty, resolution, etc., *IJ* denies readers the satisfaction of completing the fix. It is precisely this denial that prompts readers to re-read, repeating the structure of addiction—but also deconstructing it, by installing habits of reading that pleasure in the failure to close, the uncertainty, the impossibility of resolution—habits which I treat as humility. *IJ*'s performative or substantializing work is in exploiting one kind of habit (addiction) in order to replace it with another (humility). The rhetorical

transformation (to humility) effects itself through *IJ*'s performative formation (in the reader) of the humbled habit. This project is a reading of a performative utterance (*IJ*) that produces a rhetorical effect, which effect is the formation of the habit of humility.

## **2. Queer Performativity: Other Than "I Do"**

In "Queer Performativity," Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick riffs on the "weird centrality" accorded to the marital vow when it's taken as a typical example of the performative utterance in such influential texts on performative theory as J.L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* and Shoshana Felman's *The Scandal of the Speaking Body* (cited in Sedgwick's article as *The Literary Speech Act*). Sedgwick writes, "I am struck by the potential interest that might also lie in speculation about versions of performativity (okay, go ahead and call them 'perversions'—or 'deformities') that might begin by placing some different kinds of utterance in the position of the exemplary" (3). Sedgwick exploits the two uses of the word "performative"—one theatrical, the other derived from speech act theory—to leverage the tension between the "*extroversion* of the actor, the *introversion* of the signifier" (2). Sedgwick is attentive to the messy genesis of the category of the performative, a category "all but repudiated in advance" (2) by J. L. Austin in his germinal *How to Do Things With Words*.

Austin characterizes the example of the marriage vow in grammatical terms, adopting as typical tense the first person singular present indicative active. Sedgwick intervenes by pointing out the ways that queer people are excluded from this tense, "those whose subjectivity is lodged in refusals or deflections of (or by) the logic of the

heterosexual supplement; in far less simple associations attaching to state authority; in far less complacent relation to the witness of others. The emergence of the first person, of the singular, of the present, of the active, and of the indicative are all questions, rather than presumptions, for queer performativity" (4). Replacing "I do" with "Shame on you," (4) which changes tense, and invokes a "you" but no "I" (4), Sedgwick argues that the utterance of shame "records the place in which an I, in conferring shame, has effaced itself and its own agency" (4). What Sedgwick calls the "verblessness" of the utterance of shame throws into question its speaker's "singular/plural status," its "past/present/future status," and even its "agency/passivity" status. The self-identity of the speaker of Sedgwick's performative cannot be taken for granted. Sedgwick defends the selection of shame as a queer performative utterance for the same reason the reclamation of the word *queer* itself has been a powerful political move: *queer* "cleaves to that scene [of childhood shame] as a near-inexhaustible source of transformational energy" (4). In the spoiled-ness of queer identity, there is "experimental, creative, performative force" (4).

Sedgwick further argues that shame is a production of failure;<sup>1</sup> in theories of psychology, shame first appears in the break in the infant/caregiver circuit of recognition—the failure of the caregiver to recognize the infant, or the failure of the infant to garner the caregiver's recognition. In a parenthetical aside, Sedgwick notes that the fact of this circuit's so-called primary "narcissism from the very first throws itself

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<sup>1</sup> Felman argues that the promise too is a production of failure when she argues that Don Juan fails to keep his word "because his word, his promise, is at the outset constituted by the act of failing, missing: missing (failing) the present" (32). The promise depends on a deferral of its own realization, a deferral which promise-keeping, or fulfillment, would shut down.

sociably, dangerously into the gravitational field of the other" (5).<sup>2</sup> Sedgwick therefore calls shame "communicative," since it signals from one to the other both "trouble" with sustaining the circuit's connection and "a desire to reconstitute the [broken] interpersonal bridge" (5). Sedgwick proposes that putting shame in the place of the exemplary performative mediates the tension between theatricality and speech act theory, since shame carries dimensions of both display—the invitation to be seen—and of the constitution of the subject as an object of shame (6). Part of shame's force is in its ability to constitute identity. Shame, Sedgwick argues, "delineates [identity] without defining it or giving it content" (12); that is, shame marks a threshold "between sociability and introversion," which threshold may actually be "established or naturalized in the first instance *through shame*" (12, emphasis in original).<sup>3</sup>

As an affect, shame "is not a discrete intrapsychic structure, but a kind of free radical that... attaches to and permanently intensifies or alters the meaning of—of almost anything: a zone of the body, a sensory system, a prohibited or indeed a permitted behavior, another affect such as anger or arousal, a named identity, a script for interpreting other people's behavior toward oneself" (12). Shame's affective character enables it to rearrange the map of "almost anything" exposed to it or flooded by it. Since

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<sup>2</sup> Diane Davis argues in the first chapter of *Inessential Solidarity* that prior to identification, there is first a disidentification: "a dissociation that takes place at the very moment of association, an untying tie in which identity appears in (or as) the movement of its disappearance" (28). The laceration we (try to) understand as losing the other is first an interruption of devouring affection "by a surplus of alterity that remains indigestible, inassimilable, unabsorbable" (34). It is the interruption, the failure to assimilate the surplus, that produces both identity and alterity, and by it, sociality (35).

<sup>3</sup> Some questions provoked by reading Sedgwick with Davis, but not taken up here, include: Can shame be read as the affective register of the failure of devouring affection? Can the inassimilable alterity of the face prompt the admission of failure (failure to encounter the other and not *my idea* of the other; failure to devour and digest the other—"trouble") through shame? Can the face compel a response through the shame-ful "desire to reconstitute the interpersonal bridge"?

shame constitutes identity, then "one of the things that anyone's character or personality *is*, is a record of the highly individual histories by which the fleeting emotion of shame has instituted far more durable, structural changes in one's relational and interpretive strategies toward both self and others" (12-13, emphasis in original). Though Sedgwick calls these histories "highly individual," there may be reason to suspect they are also highly social, since the durable structures shame leaves behind are nothing other than citational chains, repetitions of "relational and interpretive strategies," or of acts of the body, readings of the senses, prohibited or permitted behaviors—repetitions with the alterations made by shame.

Thus, Sedgwick argues, therapeutics or politics predicated on getting rid of shame—that is, ridding oneself or one's community of shame—may "do work" but cannot "work in the way they say they work" (13), because shame is not a part "of a group or individual identity that can be excised; [it is] instead integral to and residual in the processes by which identity itself is formed" (13). Shame can still be deployed—Sedgwick says it is "available for the work of metamorphosis, reframing, refiguration, transfiguration, affective and symbolic loading and deformation" (13)—but it cannot be purged, as if to close the circuit of the recognition that shame shows to be broken. Sedgwick reads queer performativity in the performative utterance of shame because, she argues, "it generates and legitimates the place of identity—the *question* of identity—at the origin of the impulse to the performative, but does so without giving that identity-space the standing of an essence. It [queer performativity] constitutes it [identity] as to-be-constituted" (14). The political work of a queer performativity may still find some

leverage in identity, but it must do so through the constitution of identity, its very historicity and mutability: a performativity of identity as the to-be-constituted is important because it is the very possibility of intervention into identity's production.

### **3. My Perversion: Humility**

This project riffs on the "weird centrality" of identity constitution in Sedgwick, and of centrality itself, and makes another perversion of performativity through substitution, following Sedgwick's substitution of shame for the marriage vow. In their place, this project substitutes humility. Humility is my selection, and I have to defend it: but to frame the argument as belonging to me is an arrogant pretension, and I should just come clean with you: *I am humility's* selection, or this project is humility's selection, and "I" am just the name who volunteered—who *was* volunteered—to sign for it.

Humility emerges as a habit, the formation of which is a rhetorical effect produced by a particular performative utterance. But which? Instead of taking up a centrality, humility decenters: so we won't begin with an utterance like "I do" or "Shame on you." If these are the utterance of the marriage vow, and the utterance of shame, respectively, then what is the utterance of humility? I doubt we will find it in Austin's first person singular present indicative active—for reason of many of the same problems posed to this tense by Sedgwick and queer shame. Sedgwick's elegant solution involves a "verbless" utterance that rearranges the pronoun matrix of the performative—invokes a "you" but no "I." Humility's solution will not be nearly so elegant. For how can the utterance of humility be said by the humble speaker, without making the speaker (sound)

proud of their humility? Humility, instead, says *you*, the way it has been saying me lo these prideful years.<sup>4</sup> Humility does not seize the speaker's microphone; humility finds its sayings not by being said: the utterance of humility is an address, a call, a way of finding my own hand raised always at the moment just when "I" thought I was folding my arms over my chest. It has less to do with the crucible in which identity is forged and more to do with the paths "identity" will route you through—and, with what to do if identity becomes murderous of difference.

Sedgwick sees the flush of shame on the face of Henry James, and it illuminates her traversing of shame's performativity. I'd try to adopt some other parallel and clever sensory metaphor for my text and my perversion of performativity, but humility did not command my attention with the immediacy of tangible sensation. Humility worked on me and worked me over, for awhile at first without asking for my conscious attention at all. But then without my even noticing, humility sank into the wetware, became a *habit*, and then has drawn my attention not by revealing itself to my keen inquisitive mind's eye, but by letting my attention begin to approach, cautiously, over a field of tension, the way a stray dog allows you begin to approach. But enough of my stalling, and my imitative yarn—who am I trying to be, anyway?<sup>5</sup>—you will see what I've swallowed, whose spirits I am on. I find my incandescence and the performative utterance of humility in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*.

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<sup>4</sup> "And Lo" (*IJ* 184), an audible order to *look!* —a kind of (reverse, or oblique) interpellation? By being said or named by humility, one comes into being, but not as the stable subject. You are not hailed to turn around, but rather, hailed to *stand aside*. So humility can hail you and hail you while you're trying to hold your ego together at the center—lo, these prideful years—in fact, what better time for humility to make its call? The meek don't really need to hear from humility, now, do they?

<sup>5</sup> DFW? Or Ronell?

*IJ* has been described by some critics as quite the opposite of all things humility: as pretentious, purposefully difficult to read or pay attention to, even cruel.<sup>6</sup> But these descriptions are not alone in their rendering *IJ* an odd choice to play the role of performative utterance of humility. Weighing nearly two pounds in print, *IJ* is a 1079-page novel, inclusive of 388 end-notes, far exceeding in length and complexity the two-word "I do" of Austin or the three word "Shame on you" of Sedgwick. As a novel, *IJ* crosses conspicuously into the terrain of the fictional—a terrain some have considered non-serious and so closed to the operation of performativity.<sup>7</sup> *IJ* is signed for by one David Foster Wallace, a kind of cult-hero to his readers,<sup>8</sup> whose death by suicide on September 12, 2008 haunts both Wallace scholarship and DFW's authority over his works' own signification—if not overtly, at least possibly, and so we are haunted by the possibility of the haunting.<sup>9</sup> DFW's depression, with its stories of chemical imbalances and prescribed chemical interventions, haunts us, too: how determining was chemistry (neurological, pharmacological) in DFW's death? in his writing? his life? Moreover, it is not even Wallace but I, as a reader, who stands in here for the subject of *IJ*, humility's utterance, throwing into question all the subject's grammatical statuses. Who utters a performative novel? In what person: DFW, the human person? Wallace, the author? David Foster Wallace, the name? I, the reader? Is the speaker of such an utterance

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<sup>6</sup> For examples, see Peck and Kakutani.

<sup>7</sup> See Austin, but especially Searle, "Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida" and *Speech Acts*.

<sup>8</sup> See remarks by Wallace scholar Stephen Burn: "His name glows in the dark" (qtd. in Howard).

<sup>9</sup> See remarks by scholars Lee Konstantinou and Samuel Cohen, editors of the forthcoming collection *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*: "One danger... Wallace scholars must sidestep is the temptation to let the writer's suicide overshadow everything else. 'I think we're still in kind of a moment of mourning, at least in academic scholarship on Wallace,' Konstantinou says" and "'It's an unspoken fear of mine that everything will be read through his suicide,' Cohen says." (Howard).

singular or plural: one author, one reader, or many? When does the utterance occur, past, present, or future: for Wallace when he wrote, for me as I read, or for all possible readers to come? Is the rhetorical effect of the utterance active, by and for utterer, or passive, happening to the one who responds? And who responds: the author, the reader, the critic or scholar? Humility does not require these statuses to resolve into stable, singular answers. Nor does humility require us to decode the meaning of DFW's bodily chemistry, nor of his depression. It does not require unfailing custodianship or perfection from the author-hero. But neither does humility separate these questions out entirely, as if irrelevant or non-serious. As Derrida argues in *Limited Inc*, no "simple logic" can separate serious from non-serious, or fiction from non-fiction (75, emphasis in original), because performativity's structural unconscious may introduce these second terms into the first, by definition un-intentionally. Even after their exclusion, their traces remain. And so the most important question such a strange selection for the utterance of humility raises is not whether *IJ*'s peculiarities disqualify it from having a performative force, but rather: how do they constitute the very field on which that performative force does its work? How do the very particularities of such an unusual utterance produce the rhetorical effect of humility?

But first, for my readers who are not yet readers of *IJ*, let me mount a brief summary and introduction. *IJ* revolves around a film, also called "Infinite Jest,"<sup>10</sup> which film is supposed to be so pleasurable and engaging that watching it causes the viewer to

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<sup>10</sup> By convention in Wallace scholarship, *Infinite Jest* the novel is italicized and "Infinite Jest" the film appears in quotation marks.

neglect all other needs and bodily functions and to keep watching it until they die. The filmmaker of "Infinite Jest," James Incandenza, made genius-level contributions in several fields, including advanced optics and lenses, a waste-driven energy production cycle called annular fusion, and junior competitive tennis pedagogy. Incandenza founded the Enfield Tennis Academy (or ETA) in Boston MA, his penultimate endeavor, followed by his last career in film. "Infinite Jest" is the last listed entry in Incandenza's filmography (which filmography occupies eight and a half pages in the novel's endnotes). Incandenza killed himself by microwaving his own head.

After Incandenza's death, ETA has come under the direction of his wife Avril, a militant grammarian with graduate school ties to the radical element of Quebecois separatists, and her step- or possibly half-brother Charles Tavis. The three Incandenza sons have each resided at ETA: the oldest, Orin, now a serial womanizer and punter for the Arizona Cardinals; the middle, Mario, who was born with several severe physical disabilities and does not play tennis but does enjoy making films of his own; and the youngest, Hal, a top-rated tennis player and all-around prodigy who is possibly addicted to smoking pot, or maybe to keeping his pot smoking secret from others, especially Avril, his mom.

ETA sits atop a hill at the foot of which is located the Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House, staffed by Don Gately, a recovering addict who accidentally killed a VIP Quebecois separatist by gagging the man who was home sick when Gately broke in to rob his house. (The man was unable to breathe through his nose and suffocated.) Finally but not totally, permit me to note that the Quebecois have suffered

the brunt of Reconfiguration, a move by which the United States gifted to Canada land it had ruined by launching its waste in giant catapults and accidentally creating an annular cycle of desolation and profusion. A fearsome group of wheelchair-bound Quebecois assassins are trying to obtain the master copy of "Infinite Jest" so as to disseminate it in an act of terrorism that would bring the American-dominated administration of the Organization of North American Nations (or ONAN) to its knees.

#### **4. Warning: May Be Habit-Forming**

*IJ* doesn't come with much of a warning label, but I will not be the first to suggest that reading *IJ* may be habit-forming. Scholars, reviewers, and "casual" readers alike have suggested that *IJ* is a novel about kinds of addiction and, at the same time, has the power to make its readers feel addicted to the novel itself. To read *IJ* as a performative utterance productive of humility is to raise the questions of addiction and humility in terms of habit formation. That is, how does feeling like an addict while reading about addiction produce another kind of habit altogether, a habit of humility? The first move is in the shift from reading a novel to becoming an addict.

To cite but one example of the intense affect readers invest in *IJ*, I turn to a blog titled *Reading Infinite Jest* that chronicles one reader's immersion in *IJ* beginning January 2009. The blogger of *Reading Infinite Jest* calls *IJ* The Thick Book, and responds to its unwieldiness by dismembering it, literally cutting the book's spine<sup>11</sup> so that he can take a

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<sup>11</sup> "Sideways Cut." *Reading Infinite Jest*. n.p., 7 Jan. 2009. Web. 5 May 2011. <<http://readinginfinitejest.blogspot.com/2009/01/sideways-cut.html>>.

few pages of *IJ* with him wherever he goes. This perhaps peculiar style of reading produces a concomitant habit of saving the book's strings of binding and glue in a plastic baggie as they peel off from the book's body—or as he calls it, The Carcass. Only a few days into his blog (and his first reading of *IJ*), he describes himself through his habits of reading as "a psycho-murderer who has the potential to become a serial killer (of 'books')." <sup>12</sup> On my third reading of *IJ* I did the same—turned The Thick Book into The Carcass—started snapping spines, saving glue. I tend to take a little set of pages folded over in my pocket with me wherever I go. At times it feels like a kind of dependence, a need to have a little fix of pages available to me at all times.

My first reading of *IJ* began the same summer (2009) as an online reading group formed, dedicated to getting through *IJ* in three months, called *Infinite Summer*. <sup>13</sup> I was ahead of *Infinite Summer*, though I also became a reader of the blog entries there. The start of the semester and the end of *IJ* approached at the same time. Getting close to page 981, which is the final page in *IJ*'s non-endnote body, gave me a sense of trembling—what would I do when *IJ* was *finished*? When I finished reading? When *IJ* finished with me? But even when page 981 was read, I found that *IJ* wasn't finished with me at all. I tremulously abstained from reading <sup>14</sup> for less than twenty-fours before turning back to page 1, and starting the reading all over again.

In a 2000 article in *Narrative*, Frank Louis Cioffi argues that *IJ* stages a performance of addiction in the mind and body of its reader, in part by "forc[ing] the

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<sup>12</sup> "My first footnote." *Reading Infinite Jest*. n.p., 8 Jan. 2009. Web. 5 May 2011. <<http://readinginfinitejest.blogspot.com/2009/01/my-first-footnote.html>>.

<sup>13</sup> *Infinite Summer*. n.p., 2009. Web. 5 May 2011. <<http://infinitesummer.org/>>.

<sup>14</sup> *IJ* calls abrupt withdrawal doing "the Old Cold Bird" (300).

reader to perform actions that he wouldn't ordinarily have to do while reading" (162), including questioning one's own reading ability, re-reading, looking up highly technical jargon or highly specialized slang (some of which—both slang and jargon—turn out to be Wallace's coinage), refusing to reflect on or remember an upsetting scene or passage, even committing to oneself to "hide this book for a week" (162). Cioffi reads the *IJ*-habit as a "narrative-addiction (similar to a drug addiction)," "a weird mixture of effects that has some of the same mesmerizing, disturbing, addictive power as the fatal videotape" (171). For Cioffi, "To read *Infinite Jest* is, almost, to watch the fatal videotape. Indeed, rendering oneself numb to the external world ('high,' 'buzzed,' 'stoned,' 'whacked,' etc.) is essentially a performance for an audience of one; as the reader binds to the book, so the addict isolates himself from social interaction" (171). Cioffi invokes a commonplace critique of the addict to draw an inference about the novel's geopolitics, addiction, and self-referential pleasure: "Not surprisingly, in the world of the novel, the U.S. has been renamed O.N.A.N., an acronym suggesting the self-absorbed disconnection and solitary pleasure-seeking of its citizenry" (171).

While I agree with Cioffi that the resemblance between the reader I had become by the time I reached the end of *IJ* and the addicts in the novel—in all their stages of denial, relapse, and recovery—was striking, I don't think the resemblance is identical. That is to say, reading *IJ* is not a performance for an audience of one. The reader of *IJ* is never alone with the text—not even with herself. At a minimum, the reader of *IJ* is no performer without *IJ*'s author. Wallace's writing engenders what Cioffi calls the reader's performance. Moreover, there are more voices in *IJ* than the one we attach to "David

Foster Wallace" the proper name. The trace that survives him haunts *IJ*, but it always has, since the moment of writing—even the moment of imagination (*Limited Inc* 6)—and renders the question of (his) "presence and/or absence" undecidable (*Limited Inc* 83). And readers of *IJ* tend to be, especially in their frustration and confusion, highly motivated to seek social connection with other readers. This famously is the genesis of the still-active list-serv Wallace-I, where readers sustain multiple discussions of *IJ* and other works of Wallace's. Perhaps, then, like the addict, readers of *IJ* need a society to support their habit, or even to become readers at all. The addict, after all, is precisely *not* disconnected. As the various webs of network and connection in *IJ*'s Boston MA illustrate, every Substance<sup>15</sup> depends on multiple stages of manufacturing, distribution, and delivery, of which networks the addict develops intimate knowledge and routes of access in order to sustain their addiction, whether the Substance is drug, drink, or novel.<sup>16</sup> Even addiction opens, rather than isolates.

Cioffi's experience of reading *IJ* found it both "an easy, pleasurable novel to read" and also "a trying, annoying, difficult novel that is constantly interrupting itself, breaking comfortable routines it has set up, and, in many cases, syntactically reinventing the English language" (162). In other words, *IJ* can be grossly engaging, difficult and

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<sup>15</sup> Substance with a capital *S* is an *IJ* term for one's addictive drug-of-choice, or perhaps more accurately put, the drug that chooses you.

<sup>16</sup> Or Töblerone: "Wednesday is the U.S.A. weekday on which fresh Töblerone hits Boston, Massachusetts U.S.A.'s Newbury Street's import-confectioners' shelves, and the Saudi Minister of Home Entertainment's inability to control his appetites for Wednesday Töblerone often requires the medical attaché to remain in personal attendance all evening on the bulk-rented fourteenth floor of the Back Bay Hilton, juggling tongue-depressors and cotton swabs, nystatin and ibuprofen and styptics and antibiotic thrush salves, rehabilitating the mucous membranes of the dyspeptic and distressed and often (but not always) penitent and appreciative Saudi Prince" (*IJ* 34).

challenging, and even desperately boring. *IJ* thus offers literally *exhaustive* detail about technical or esoteric subjects at some times, and scant detail about interesting ones at others; interruptions and distractions at some points, and deserts of uninterrupted meditation at others. But the novel is also about—and thoroughly imbricated with issues of—entertainment. And what right do I have, as a reader, to be always entertained? I.e., why shouldn't I sometimes, as a reader, have to be bored?

Some readers (or some would-be-readers) have complained that *IJ* is too long, including the vituperative review of *IJ* by Dale Peck for the *London Review of Books*: "I resent the five weeks of my life I gave over to reading the thing"—as well as the *New York Times*'s Michiko Kakutani, who admits *IJ* is "often compulsively entertaining, though hardly in any lethal sense. It won't kill you, though its sheer length and readability might give you eyestrain and a stiff neck." Kakutani, perhaps missing the joy of *IJ*'s excess, writes: "The book seems to have been written and edited (or not edited) on the principle that bigger is better, more means more important, and this results in a big psychedelic jumble of characters, anecdotes, jokes, soliloquies, reminiscences and footnotes, uproarious and mind-boggling, but also arbitrary and self-indulgent" and "the whole novel often seems like an excuse for Wallace to simply show off his remarkable skills as a writer and empty the contents of his restless mind". Defenders of the text and its length have, in reply, often made recourse to Wallace's obsessive diligence, commitment to detailed research, wicked wit, and to a rigorous selectiveness<sup>17</sup> that cut

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Wallace's remarks to Jonathan Franzen w/r/t Wallace's last novel, *The Pale King*: "in order to complete it he [Wallace] would have to write 'a 5,000 page manuscript and then winnow it by 90%" (qtd. in Flood).

hundreds of pages more from the final draft of *IJ*.<sup>18</sup> But *IJ*'s heft is perhaps best defended by an appeal to excess for its own sake, a way of elaborating, expanding, and distending typical objects of readerly interest (such as plot and characterization but also endnotes, pages, physical weight) through sustained engagement and baroque detail, in order to make them over, make them unfamiliar, and make them interesting—even *as* objects of interest. *IJ*'s excesses are a way of breaking the scales with which a reader weighs fiction, and in so doing, letting the reader look at how the scales work—which some of us find at least as interesting as simply using the scales by design.

In fact this kind of breakage is perhaps a part of the way the *IJ* compels one's attention. Cioffi writes, "One repeatedly asks, 'Why am I reading this?' 'Why am I looking up this word?' 'Why am I bothering with that endnote?' and *yet one reads on, captivated* by it just the same, but its sheer performative coruscation, by its way of taking the reader into its world: the reader is *worked on*—or *over*—by this novel" (169, emphasis mine). *IJ* is compelling (when it is compelling) because of the way it does things to you. To me. The way it puts me through frustration and thwartedness, discouragement, confusion, disorientation, as well as joy, humor, outrage, heartache, sympathy, and so on, which experiences are made available to readers not *in spite of* but often *because of* *IJ*'s too-long-ness. Reading *IJ* works on me and works me over.

I've read *IJ* for hours and hours in a row, both riveted and bored. It's been both eager to amuse me and indifferent to my attention. I've read it both diligently and less

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. reporting by D.T. Max's on *IJ*'s editing: "Pietsch [Wallace's editor] suggested extensive cuts, many of which Wallace accepted. Eventually, he learned to erase passages that he liked from his hard drive, in order to keep himself from putting them back in. In all, he delivered seventeen hundred pages, of which Pietsch cut several hundred."

than carefully. Sometimes it has horrified me, and I've read with hostility and suspicion, harboring insult, with my stomach churning. Cioffi argues that *IJ*, by "exceed[ing] normal limits and expectations" (162), becomes "disturbing," which term he deploys in a technical sense "as a way to describe the rather private performance of a text as it enacts itself within the consciousness of the reader" (163). While Cioffi appeals to his own "private" experiences of *IJ*, as perhaps do I, there is very little about the experience of reading *IJ* that I think can accurately be described as "private." In the first place, the similarities between my experience of reading and Cioffi's, or mine and the blogger of *Reading Infinite Jest*, are striking, and they establish a kind of relation between readers like the relation between people who grew up in the same town but never knew each other there.<sup>19</sup> But moreover, these experiences establish a field of relationship between and among readers of *IJ*,<sup>20</sup> and perhaps most unmistakably, with DFW.<sup>21</sup> *IJ* is decidedly *not* a drama staged within the private theater of one reader's consciousness—and it couldn't be—nor could one reader's consciousness ever be simply private.

But that Cioffi feels this possibility to be violative and addicting (177) is precisely evidence that a reader is *not* alone with the book inside her own head. Exactly what makes *IJ* disturbing is the way its intoxicating influence transgresses what the reader had supposed to be the boundaries of her own consciousness, the way it obsesses what she

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<sup>19</sup> A relation which itself forms the basis for much of *IJ*'s subtler collisions, and near-misses, of plot.

<sup>20</sup> Listserv Wallace-I, website *The Howling Fantods!*, *Infinite Summer* and other reading groups, a recent panel at Austin's SXSW conference, two recent scholarly conferences, celebrations around DFW's archive at the Harry Ransom Center and memorial readings held on the anniversary of his death, as well as the rich anticipation and reception of his last unfinished novel, *The Pale King*, all testify to the profoundly affective community established among Wallace's readers.

<sup>21</sup> See Coda, *sub.*, for further reflections on the reader's relationship to DFW.

thinks about when her mind wanders, or of what she is reminded in her life "outside" of the book. Perhaps all texts could be like this, to a greater or lesser extent. Cioffi argues that what makes *IJ* "a highly charged and performative reading" (170)—performative used here I think with less specificity than I deploy it—is *IJ*'s provocation of "associational gallimaufry" and "the vast array of personal fictions" it draws on and resonates with in any given reader. But if these "personal fictions," too, are performative, in the sense that they are as constructed, as shared, and as structurally ambivalent as *IJ* itself, then how does their ability to *act*, to do things not only for the reader to whom they ostensibly belong, but also for others to whom that reader is connected—how does this change the the calculus of what counts as readerly performativity? Cioffi suggests a more precise answer than resonance with "personal fictions" when he argues that the effect of "making the novel a kind of addiction" is to produce "a reading experience that *modifies ordinary reading behavior* in the people who encounter it, and at the same time making it about such behavior in characters" (170, emphasis mine). Readers must confront "the world of the addict, the complex rationalizations, the myriad humiliations, the refusal to see the future, the loss of physical/psychological integrity, the overpowering force of continual need" (170)—and must do so from inside this world, the question of one's own status as addict looming or maybe suspended, perhaps irresolvable.

## **5. Reading-Addiction: Reading Habits**

Perhaps the most disturbing habit readers of *IJ* adopt is a willingness to be, potentially, an addict to a book about recovery from addiction. This kind of habit is

primarily a reading habit: both a habit *for* reading, in the sense of addiction to the practice of reading, and a habit *of* reading, in the sense of a way or style of reading that, through repetition, establishes itself as a kind of *hexis*, or a mode of reading naturalized through repeated practice. What kinds of practice does such a habit for *Infinite Jest* entail? To explore this question, I will turn to a brief moment in *IJ* that exemplifies the kind of reading habit *IJ* promotes in its readers.

In a scene titled "1 APRIL – YEAR OF THE TUCKS MEDICATED PAD" (27-31), a 10-year-old Hal Incandenza meets with a professional conversationalist, whose ranting digressions betray the conversationalist's identity as Hal's father, Jim Incandenza. Jim poses as a professional conversationalist apparently in an attempt to draw his son Hal out of himself—to get Hal to talk to Jim. Hal discovers the ruse, and by the end of this passage Hal's responses are marked three times by only '...' (31)—are we to presume Hal has gone silent? Jim's belief that Hal is becoming mute is never clearly defined as either delusional (it is so described in Jim's filmography) or prescient (the novel opens with Hal in a state so severely communicatively impaired that three University of Arizona Deans wrestle him to the ground in an admissions interview and call an ambulance when Hal tries to speak).

This brief description of only five of *IJ*'s 1079 pages already invokes many layers of the contextual tissue that constitutes *IJ*: a practice called Subsidized Time in which the numeric names of years have been replaced by corporate sponsorship; Hal Incandenza, junior competitive tennis player; Jim Incandenza, filmmaker, founder of the Enfield Tennis Academy, inventor of annular fusion, and genius in advanced optics and lenses;

Jim's delusions that might be actualities; Hal's inward bent. Even to list them simulates, or perhaps reproduces, the vertiginous lack of totality of context that must be navigated by readers of *IJ*. Reading *IJ* is often a habitual practice of recognizing the impossibility of and insufficiency of "total context" to limit and furnish meaning. Readers must develop the skill of finding or making a way to read anyway.

The events of the "professional conversationalist" scene resonate with an entry in Jim Incandenza's filmography (which appears in an endnote to a subsequent section). So apparently the event of this passage *really happened*, given the specific dating and the naming of actors (who are not Jim and Hal) in the filmography entry. Apparently, the event was dramatically recreated in the making of Jim's film. Yet the citation of the event in film breaks from its given context (1 April, YTMP—problematically indeterminable because it is April Fool's Day, or because Jim might be drunk and delusional) and inserts it into another (problematically indeterminable) context: Jim Incandenza's brilliantly experimental or else drunkenly hallucinatory or else cleverly disingenuous or else staggeringly earnest career in filmmaking. (A similar set of possibilities is sometimes considered as context for Wallace's own career in fiction.) And then there's the question of whether this event *really happened* or if the passage only represents the story told in the film, in which case the section title does not refer to the moment in time, 1 April YTMP, but rather to the setting of the film. And there's also a question about whether asking Did It Happen even matters, since the film and the event are as indistinguishable as a signature: they are the same, and the very fact of their identity is what corrupts their

singularity.<sup>22</sup> Which context should readers use? *IJ* layers them on without settling the question. Rather than a "total" context in which all uncertainties are resolved, we get an excess of contexts, detailed but incomplete. The possibility of reading through them all simultaneously—reading through or even *with* the excess—divides *IJ* from itself, generating alterity within the ostensibly singular text through the text's own differing from itself and deferral of its final reading or iteration.

## **6. Reading/Addiction: Stupidity and Humility**

One of the riches of even the brief "professional conversationalist" scene is the multiple questions it provokes, including questions about whether other questions are possible to answer, or even important to ask. To be a reader of *IJ* is to develop a set of strategies for managing these questions, and these questions about questions, and moreover, to be willing to read without the fix of clear and certain answers. To read is to become stupid: to suspend the question of meaning, even, in the case of *IJ*, of what happens in the story, in order to clear space for a practice of reading. *IJ*'s sheer excess demands reiterated practice: a sustained *effort* to direct one's attention, even though this effort is repeatedly overwhelmed by length and boredom and heaviness and distraction.

The question of determinate meaning is one such distraction, and readers must learn to suspend or even abandon the question of meaning for the sake of *reading*. *IJ* is

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<sup>22</sup> But then all of this above is rendered defenseless (in a *Phaedrus*-y way) by the death of Jim, a permanent absence (except that he might appear as a wraith later in the novel) that severs him from authority over his work's signification, and then rendered doubly so (i.e. defenseless) by the death of David Foster Wallace, a singular event of 9/12/2008 that knocks the mirth (if not the play) out of the author's permanent severance from the work's signification. See Coda *sub*.

not (or not only) the virtuosic masterpiece of a brilliant and talented craftsman—how can Wallace's intentions, however grand or intricate, govern the scene of the utterance when structural ambivalence divides those intentions from themselves? When the author is permanently cut off from authority over his work's signification, no matter how frenzied the effort to re-install him as Chief Intender through research in his official archive? One reason readers of many intellectual traditions and degrees of addictive personality turn back to *IJ*'s page 1 is its effervescence, the way that its meaning escapes you, even as it tempts you to believe that it has got to *be there* through suggestive juxtapositions and subtle (and then conspicuous) riffs, such as Jim Incandenza's filmography and its various small iterations throughout the "actual" events of the novel. Completists go back, maybe, because they think they're sure to see it this next time around; others just liked the rollercoaster ride and want to go again. *IJ* often gets both readers who obsess over knowing meaning and readers who pleasure in their own failures.

If you haven't already guessed, I'm one of the latter—or trying to become one. My failure, as a textual body, to stay or ever be fully composed mirrors that failure in *IJ*. But it is precisely the failure that requires an intense and prolonged practice of reading, past the fragmented narrative, past my own desires and frustrations, to the performative force that revises me through the reiteration of habit. It's not as if reading could ever yield a full account of meaning, anyway. Avital Ronell, in *Stupidity*, puts it this way:

the disruption of knowing cannot be understood in terms of absence, default, or deficiency, as if something could be filled, completed, or known by being brought out of its state of absence into unconcealedness. Rather, the rush of interference

that produces gaps and unsettles cognition must be seen as a force that weighs in performatively and must be read. The interruptive moment of interference itself calls for a reading. (101)

The incompleteness, the impossibility of fully knowing, is itself a readable text. *IJ*'s structural ambivalence, its failure to be self-identical renders the question of meaning indeterminable even while it produces the field through which its performative force will flow.

By reading *IJ* as an utterance of performativity, I'm able to ask what force escapes a reduction from the saying to the said (or perhaps, from the reading to the having understood). To concentrate on *IJ*'s meaning in search of the reconciliation, redemption, or reassembly of its scattered pieces into narrative whole is to close off the possibilities of practicing reading differently, through the unreconciled contradiction, without the telos of redemption, playing with all the available arrangements of fragmented pieces. Those possibilities are, I propose, a force of humility: a way of acknowledging—no, not even acknowledging, since it might happen to you without you even noticing—a way of altering your disposition toward texts, producing by force of habit a willingness to *not know*, but not to stop, either. This is the habit Ronell calls "reading," as opposed to interpretation:

Reading involves the undoing of interpretive figures, to the extent that it questions whether any synthesis, any single meaning, can close off a text and adequately account for its constitution. In contrast to interpretation, which involves a development over the course of a narrative toward a single figure reconciling all

its diverse moments, "reading states the logic of figure and the logic of narratives to be constantly divergent." (Burt 192 qtd. in Ronell 104)

As a habit, this kind of reading can also be a habit of humility, muting the impulse to consolidate oneself as the knowing subject, going instead where the divergent logic of figure and narrative flows, away from meaning and unification, away from what I think I want or am entitled to: away from the self-identical. Away from me. I love *IJ*, but I often felt left outside of it, sometimes when I wanted in. Sometimes I got mad at DFW and wished he had written otherwise, *been* otherwise (which is to say, sometimes, more like me). And, without having to let go of fair or just critique, humility realigns its sources and directions so that even my bad feelings are part of what I read with: they are occasions to shuffle the pieces, read generously, and above all, to read again.

To illustrate, I turn to one of *IJ*'s most central mysteries (to the extent that anything can be said in *IJ* to be central): who is sending out copies of Jim Incandenza's last film, also titled "Infinite Jest," a film so pleasurable to view that all other bodily activity stops, and the viewer watches it on loop until they die. Incandenza, the film's auteur, killed himself by microwaving his own head, unless he was actually murdered. So he's dead, unless his appearance as a wraith to recovering addict Don Gately reveals some measure of very slow wraith-time agency, which could explain the odd behavior of objects around Enfield Tennis Academy, which Incandenza founded. It could be Incandenza's son Orin, who punts for the Arizona Cardinals and who calls his brother Hal with questions about Quebecois separatism. Or it could be Quebecois separatists known as the Wheelchair Assassins, who have outposts in the American Southwest and

who have been seeking to unleash "Infinite Jest," also called the Entertainment, on Americans unable to choose to limit their narcissistic and even addictive consumption habits, the waste of which destroyed Quebec.

What if the question of the sender were undecidable? Not indeterminate: not simply unclear for a lack of evidence, but structurally dependent on that lack, able to be answered only by the exclusion of alternatives as parasitic on the theory one chooses to forward. Readers would be driven to ask questions beyond the *simple* logic that renders Incandenza, Orin, Wheelchair Assassins, and the wraith each as discrete subjects. And indeed through many minor characters, shared locations, and repeated themes, the relations of intersection and force between the people and places that populate *IJ* are not so much revealed as left unconcealed. It is force and not merely coincidence that activates and encircles this multitude of events. Violent is the reading that takes intention to govern *IJ*'s scenes. Responsibility for the Entertainment and its damages flows, away from the auteur and through his wife and sons, his Academy, his traces in the Academy's objects, in his cycle of waste-fuel annularity that destroyed Quebec, through the Wheelchair Assassins and the lesser Canadian terrorists who collude with them, through the Entertainment's actress, ex-film student and Orin's one-time girlfriend Joelle van Dyne, known before a facially destructive acid incident (that may not have happened) as the Prettiest Girl of All Time (or P.G.O.A.T.), through Don Gately, the addict crushing on now-veiled fellow addict Joelle, to whom (Don) the wraith appears, who (possibly) meets Hal Incandenza in a Quebecois cemetery to dig up Hal's father's head: the (possible) location of the Entertainment's master cartridge. Together they are an

(incompletely listed) society of limited responsibility, but which any finalizing determination of individual coherent responsibility would deny. Though perhaps frustrating, in the "end," it's more fun that way. Learning how to pleasure in the failure of the narrative to fully close is what distinguishes readers of *IJ* from those who *have read* it: the frustration, the simultaneous evocation and denial of the possibility of meaning, turns the addictive habit into the humble one. The ambivalence that structures *IJ*'s most central mystery short-circuits any search for resolution and certainty, and/but the same ambivalence produces *IJ*'s field of performative force by articulating the scattered narrative pieces without rendering them as a counter-fictional coherent ideal. *IJ*'s structural ambivalence is both the energy that moves and the channel through which responsibility for the Entertainment flows.

If readers could be certain who was sending out copies of the Entertainment, or even of what exactly was *in* the Entertainment (all accounts of which in the novel are given secondhand and often under duress), the possibility of structural ambivalence on these questions would be closed. Consider that no viewer of the Entertainment (with the possible exception maybe somehow of Hal) has been able to give up their addiction to the film. The Office of Unspecified Services, U.S.O.U.S, is a C.I.A.-like agency that, in the course of conducting tests, forcibly removed two accidental viewers who were rendered subsequently unfit to care for themselves in any way: "eyes wobbling around like some drug-addicted newborn," "[n]o desire or even basic survival-type will for anything other than more viewing" (507), eyes "[e]mpty of intent" (508). U.S.O.U.S. agent Steeply, relating these incidents to Wheelchair Assassin and quadruple-agent/spy Rémy Marathe,

questions what to make of an Entertainment that "somehow addresses desires that total" (508). *IJ*, too, addresses desire that total, by exciting it, aggravating it, but then unlike "Infinite Jest," by refusing ultimately to slake. Both the mystery and the desire depend on the impossibility of a total. Humility is how readers are called to respond: by reading despite, or through, or even *with* the partiality.

## **7. Reading Addiction: Something Like an Ontology of Addiction**

*IJ* is in many senses a novel about addiction and recovery/sobriety. I am tempted to say that *IJ* is a text that is structured by addiction, but to whatever extent that claim is true, *IJ* is also a text held open at the very limit of addiction, not entirely foreclosed on by the totalizing force of addiction, and therefore structured only post-structurally by addiction: something about this text is giving the structure of addiction indigestion. Addiction cannot totally swallow or assimilate to itself that something, that kernel of alterity in the text.

But now the need presents itself for something like an ontology of addiction.<sup>23</sup> Ronell argues in *Crack Wars: Literature Addiction Mania* that drug culture is constitutive of all culture, and she articulates a circuit of influence that advantages the foreign bodies known as drugs (whose foreignness, and perhaps even bodyness, is called into question along with the exclusivity of the circuit of influence by Ronell's "narcoanalysis"). Ronell asks repeatedly, in her own marginalia, "What do we hold against the drug addict?" (102). Citing Derrida's "The Rhetoric of Drugs" (cited in *Crack Wars* as "Rhétorique de

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. Ronell in *Crack Wars* (120).

la drogue"), Ronell maintains that the exposedness to the influence of drugs is a condition of possibility for exposedness to any influence at all. But I think a crucial distinction must be drawn between the influence of drugs, even intoxication, and addiction. The difference must be a difference in kind and not only a difference of degree.

In an analysis of television, television-advertising, and irony much-cited in Wallace scholarship, entitled "E Unibus Pluram," Wallace scrutinizes in great detail how an addiction to television avails itself of all possible strategies for sustaining and replicating itself, including even "post-modern" irony with its biting critique of the television habit. Wallace's article is appealed to in scholarship on his work as an exposition of Wallace's own concerns, the sources of his antagonism with solipsism and the manifesto of the intentions taken to govern his work (however successfully or unsuccessfully that work is assessed). But "E Unibus Pluram" lends itself more readily to this project as an ontology of addiction, an incisive reading of addiction's structure that takes for granted the deconstruction of host/parasite and must therefore get beyond a conception of addiction as a bad alterity that saps the health of the self. Does Wallace's reading of addiction really attain to this deconstructive level? Perhaps not at the level of intention or of meaning. But at the level of the performative, "E Unibus Pluram" traces the path of the influence of television through 1) the inception of an addiction, i.e. the substitution of what Wallace treats as "real" life with televisual lives, 2) the promotion of identification between the viewer and the televisual people whose primary lauded quality is inevitably their ability to be watched and watchable without appearing concerned about their watchability, which identification creates in the spectator both desire to become the

identified-with-watchable-people and guilt over the feeding of this identification through spectation, and 3) the elliptically widening spiral that swerves between identificatory desire and spectatorial guilt which itself increases both the desire and the guilt. Wallace argues that the safety valve in this cycle is consumption, and it is configured as such in advance by advertisers (if not quite conspiratorially, then nonetheless effectively). And in tracing this path, "E Unibus Pluram" lays out an ontology of addiction in which the bad desire of addiction is not simply a desire that cannot be controlled by the subject, or a desire that exceeds what is natural, or conventional, or even a desire that exceeds the possibility of its own satisfaction. Addiction is a desire in which use of the substance that is craved itself produces a more intense desire for even more use. It is the indulgence of a pleasure that diminishes other pleasures, and replaces them, endlessly, with a decaying version of itself—i.e. the pleasure derived from use of the substance lessens with continued use even as the desire for more of the same pleasure—an even bigger fix—of the substance increases. So the difference between intoxication and addiction is not merely a matter of degree, or of frequency, or the presence or absence of a desire (for a substance). The difference between intoxication and addiction is about the re-production of a habit whose telos is its own re-production—the telos of a virus—self-identical replication.

Of course, no repetition of a mark, a practice, or a fix is truly self-identical. Every repetition is a repetition-with-alterity. Addiction is a habit that does not attempt to eliminate the alterity (the diminishing pleasure, the increasing desire, the use of greater amounts of a substance) involved in its repetition—how can it?—addiction instead

attempts to elide the alterity for as long as possible (perhaps this is what is called denial—covering up the alterity that corrupts the pleasure of the habit). But the telos of self-identical replication cannot be achieved. In "E Unibus Pluram," Wallace argues that as identificatory desire and spectatorial guilt spiral outward, they debilitate the television addict, and promise that further spectation is a way of finding relief, thus keeping the viewer locked into the addictive circuit. One's Substance always presents more of itself as the cure for its own damaging effects.

*IJ* aligns humility and recovery. Recovery is not about getting off (all) drugs. *IJ* does not even imagine this as a possibility. Everyone is always on something. Even *IJ*'s AAers drink enormous amounts of coffee, smoke cigarettes in their sleep. Recovery is about conceding that your particular addictive drug (Substance) has always got you on it. The recovering addict may not be using, but they are still definitionally exposed to the addictive influence of their Substance. Everyone may be on something, but not every something is an addictive Substance. There are many ways of being on a drug, but *IJ* shows that two ways in stark competition with one another are addiction and recovery.

*IJ*'s AA does not prescribe the moderate use of a Substance for the addict because addiction is *not* the uncontrolled abuse of a Substance (which moderation, i.e., control, might solve). Rather, AA members must admit that they are powerless over their Substance because power is held *by* (or accumulated in) the Substance: that is, addiction itself is the apparatus of control. The subject does not control their own addiction; addiction controls the subject. A "sobriety" of not-being-on-drugs would be an attempt by the subject to restore control to itself by taking control away from addiction. But the

sobriety of recovery operates instead with regard to humility: acknowledging that the subject is not in control (of its Substance or itself) and never will or can be, and proceeding responsively, *kairotically*, One Day at a Time, from there.

## **8. Humility and Recovery: Why AA is Different than Demerol**

If this is the kind of addiction that structures *IJ*, then the opening at addiction's limit is the place of sobriety/recovery. The very fact that addiction swerves between increasingly greater extremes of desire and destruction render it unable to re-produce the habit with perfect self-identity, and the proliferation of alterity disrupts addiction's ability to totally foreclose on the addict. It might get close—this may be what is called hitting bottom—but reaching this point, the closest one can come to total addiction without being destroyed by it—is the very possibility of beginning recovery and getting sober. Sobriety is not the freedom from narcotizing influence: as Ronell demonstrates in *Crack Wars*, the influence of drugs is an influence we are all exposed to. But this does not destroy sobriety as a category. Rather than talk of sobriety as being free from influence, I argue that recovery names a kind of combination of sobriety (from the use of your Substance) and being-on-drugs—being always exposed to the possibility of influence. Drawing this distinction between "sobriety" in the strictest sense and recovery from addiction allows me to distinguish between addiction and humility as two kinds of habits. Humility is still a kind of habit—but whose telos (if it can still be called that) is not the erasure, elision, or elimination of alterity, but is the facilitation the flow of difference—to rupture addiction—to destructure when addictive structuration blocks the way.

It is a widely held belief that AA is just another Substance—another kind of addiction, and that what it offers is a way to get off alcohol or drugs by getting on something else—God, or perhaps truer to AA's own terms, a Higher Power, i.e. God as you understand it, or perhaps AA meetings themselves, to restrict the discussion to the addict's observable behaviors. My instinct was to hold out some kind of distinction between the habit one might form for AA and the habit of addiction. What I realized through the analysis of my own experience reading *IJ* is that while they are not the same, what they share is repetition, practice, or *becoming a habit*—not insignificant, but not identical, and so not seamlessly substituted, one for the other, without introducing some radical alterity.

Addiction is a kind of habit, one that attempts to structure habit itself, and attempts to foreclose on the addict. What AA offers—at least, the version of it, or the kernel of it, that *IJ* explodes and operationalizes—is recovery as another kind of habit, based not on chasing after the self-identical fix, nor on re-mastering the addiction by taking back control, but based instead on relinquishing the possibility of control, adopting, in other words, a habit of humility. *IJ*'s Don Gately leaves his shoes and keys way under his bed at night so that in the morning, he has to get down on his knees to reach them again. Much may indeed be said about the way that this and other bodily routines actually construct and produce belief—but in Gately's case, as he is advised by multiple AAers, it matters less that he feel himself to really believe than that he act as if he believes regardless of how he feels, or how he believes himself to believe (466-468). What Gately primarily needs out of believing in and praying to a Higher Power is not the

belief itself, nor the symbolic guarantee that his Higher Power can or even will do anything to help him (which he doesn't at first believe)—in fact, precisely *not* those things—but the *habitual* practice of the belief, which helps enable him to stay sober (that is, off narcotics, alcohol, and weed). The habits keep Gately sober through a practice of humility: by kneeling to pray, Gately enacts the AA admission that "My Best Thinking Got Me Here" (351; 1026 Note 135), that is, that your own autonomous judgment and belief is already compromised, and that it can be rehabilitated by surrendering your judgment to a program that works—that is effective—in spite of your every certainty to the contrary.

In this writing, I kept wanting to make humility into addiction's opposite, but if both are habits—both may even be kinds of drugs: any habit puts us under its influence ("force of habit")—then the opposites can be deconstructed into a relation. Addiction, the structure that attempts to foreclose, is always already exposed to or even infected with the possibility of its opposite—humility. What *IJ* uses AA to both do and illustrate is that by exploiting the force of habit—never stronger than in a habit of addiction—humility can rupture addiction at the limit of addiction's ability to foreclose on the addict. After hitting bottom, it is possible for the addict to Come In. If being-on-drugs is the parasite on "sobriety" in the typical sense, humility is the parasite on addiction, and the possibility of recovery that combines sobriety with being-on-drugs—even AAers know, as they chain smoke cigarettes, put on another pot of coffee, that we're always on *something*—what matters is what your drug does to you. Humility is the destructuring structuration, the best prescription for when structuration tries to knock off difference, because humility

facilitates the flow of difference, privileges alterity over the self-same, and so fundamentally never finishes with you, rendering all identity provisional and exposed to the possibility of continual revision. For both the reader and the addict, at the heart of our addiction is an undecidable opening, a moment in which humility exceeds addiction's devouring, where alterity is at play and readers are constituted and called on an affective level to respond. Like Gately, all we have to hang onto when that call comes are our habits. Are we addicts, or can we take reading/recovery One Day at a Time?

## **9. Conclusion: Reading *Infinite Jest* as a Rhetoric of Humility**

My reading of *Infinite Jest* has been a route to the habit of humility, an exercise in reading through frustration and disappointment but also through curiosity, rapture, and pleasure. Reading *through* such resonant feelings means not only carrying on through the pages of a text despite the intensity (and at other times, the boredom) but also incorporating those resonances into the act of reading itself, becoming altered by an influence that I cannot fully fix or control. To *read* is always, then, to read again, since the text that tempts you most will also always elude the finality of your mastery. Like a drug, *IJ* exploited my inclination to dependency, but it kept me from becoming an addict by absorbing my habit so completely that its addictive structuration was deconstructed, instead: humbling me by the routine re-production of my own failure to resolve (either *IJ* or myself) into a stable self-identity. The pleasure of reading *IJ*, for me, is not the pleasure of having understood. It is *not* a dependence that grows without limit,

diminishing every other pleasure, aggravating a singular desire for more of itself. It is a pleasure opening onto another register of pleasures: the pleasures of humility, of reading again, of discovering my own stupidity in the coruscation of another, of being called into the flow of difference rather than complicit in its arrest.

As a performative utterance, *IJ*'s rhetorical effect is the production of a habit of humility through a channel that looks and feels strikingly like a habit of addiction. It exploits what in "The Rhetoric of Drugs" Derrida calls "this indestructible logic of parasitism" (234), that is, the relation of exclusion, trace, and incorporation that (de)structures the binaries of good/bad, sober/being-on-drugs, even humility/addiction—these terms are always already infected with the possibility of their opposites. Derrida argues, "The bad *pharmakon* can always parasitize the good *pharmakon*, bad repetition can always parasitize good repetition... Like any good parasite, it is at once inside and outside—the outside *feeding* on the inside." In *IJ*, Joelle van Dyne's addiction is described as the "ultimate annular fusion" (222), a cycle that feeds on its own waste, its own desolation. Addiction is both a cage she's inside of and a cage inside of her, at once inside and outside: "What looks like the cage's exit is actually the bars of the cage... The entrance says *EXIT*. There isn't an exit. It is the cage that has entered *her*, somehow" (222). And/but at precisely this moment, which is the possibility that her addiction will foreclose on her and cost Joelle her life, addiction's parasitic obliteration of the boundaries that separate Joelle from her Substance—"It no longer delimits and fills the hole. It no longer delimits the hole" (222)—exposes the possibility of another kind of habit altogether, a habit of humility. Humility takes the corruption of the boundaries, the

failure of delimitation, and the vulnerability or exposedness to the influence (of drugs) for granted, in fact, for the condition of the possibility to respond, to keep reading, to carry on.

## **10. Coda: Grieving the Death of the Author**

There seems to be a shared difficulty between Wallace scholars, critics, and fans when it comes to talking or writing about what Wallace's work *does*. Most people want to talk about what his work *means*, and they want to judge his work's success or failure according to the standards of what David Foster Wallace intended. Such an approach to Wallace's work is barred to me. Not only do I think it a counter-fictional endeavor dependent on the exclusion of other equally fictional and potentially fruitful possibilities, but I find it does a kind of violence to DFW's work to reduce it from a saying—in the case of *IJ*, one that takes nearly 1100 pages in its saying—to a said. On grieving the death of this author, I want to acknowledge that I never knew DFW the human person in his lifetime: and yet, somehow, I still feel his loss. Though I would not presume to say it was *him* that I lost, I did along with all his other readers (in all the senses of "readers") lose the possibility of what other work he might have taken responsibility for. I am grateful to him for *Infinite Jest*, as a performative utterance that he was willing to sign for. Maybe our greatest grief is in the withdrawal.

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## Vita

Kendall Joy Gerdes was raised in Tucson, Arizona. After graduating from Sahuaro High School with honors in Policy Debate in 2005, she attended Arizona State University in Tempe, Arizona. At Arizona State University, she served as Co-Director of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Queer Coalition. She received the degree of Bachelor of Arts from Arizona State University and graduated magna cum laude in May 2009. In the summer of 2009, she started reading *Infinite Jest*. In August, 2009, she entered the Graduate School at the University of Texas at Austin. She keeps on reading *Infinite Jest*.

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