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Donald W. Winnicott's Transitional Phenomena and the Re-Emergence of the Self in David Foster Wallace's *The Broom of the System* and *Infinite Jest*

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To Himself

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Introduction

Born in 1962, David Foster Wallace was raised and educated in the context of postmodernism, towards which the author developed an ambivalent relationship of both inheritance and independence. While Wallace himself would admit a relevant influence on his own writing impressed by postmodernist writers such as Don DeLillo or Thomas Pynchon (to name but a few), he also struggled throughout his short life as a writer to overcome the impasse in which he thought postmodernism had entered. The complex result of Wallace's experimentation was difficult to label, and it opened the way to a wide critical discussion about whether it should be considered as an example of postmodernism tout court or something beyond postmodernism which is yet to be unanimously labeled, something to which I will refer by the broad term "post-postmodernism."

The controversies of Wallace's work are caused by his use of postmodern narrative techniques such as irony and metafiction in an effort to overcome postmodernism itself. Of course it was Wallace himself who called the attention to his separateness from the postmodern tradition in the first place in programmatic pieces of non-fiction such as "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" and the well-known interview conducted by Larry McCaffery, "An Interview with David Foster Wallace."[1] Nonetheless, Wallace's use of postmodern techniques appears contradictory considering his several declarations of intent about the need for new generations to overcome postmodern cynicism and self-referentiality.

Wallace's 1990 essay "E Unibus Pluram" is considered to be the author's main declaration of independence from postmodernism, containing the theoretical foundations upon which the writer would create, and then publish in 1996, his masterpiece *Infinite Jest*. Wallace's critique in "E Unibus Pluram" is not directed to

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[1] By referring to *Infinite Jest*'s reception, *Andersen* comments on Wallace's effort to be fully acknowledged as an author experimenting on new forms of literature independent from his postmodern predecessors: «Wallace's frustration is fully understandable. He has just published a masterpiece of 1,100 pages, which among many other agendas attempts to run rings around Pynchon and the other postmodernists, and in the majority of the reviews, he still has to suffer endless comparisons with the very patriarch he is trying to dethrone» ("Judging by the Cover" 270).

postmodernism per se, which he admired as a revolutionary literary and cultural movement, but to its extension into a time and space where postmodernism had become a pose instead of a subversive tool. His reflections affect mainly young writers who, from the Eighties on, are still trying to make use of postmodern techniques in a new environment without dealing with the massive impingement of television into the psyche of contemporary Americans:

> The reason why today's Image-Fiction[2] isn't the rescue from a passive, addictive TV-psychology that it tries so hard to be is that most Image-Fiction writers render their material with the same tone of irony and self-consciousness that their ancestors, the literary insurgents of Beat and postmodernism, used so effectively to rebel against their own world and context. […] The fact is that for at least ten years now, television has been ingeniously absorbing, homogenizing, and re-presenting the very same cynical postmodern aesthetic that was once the best alternative to the appeal of Low, over-easy, mass-marketed narrative. ("E Unibus Pluram" 52)

Wallace's preoccupation was that late postmodernism, like television, was ultimately draining the human self by means of self-conscious and ironical detachment. Wallace's reflection, I argue, was mainly directed to himself and to his aspiration to renovate postmodernism, since at the time most of his contemporary American writers were committed to either minimalism or realism.[3]

For Wallace television is not the cause of cultural decline and psychical detriment in itself, but it is a powerful tool in the hands of a society that has been established on individualism and inclination to succumb to individual desires, in a constant need to be "pampered" and to eschew hard work and suffering.[4] While

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[2] In this essay Wallace uses the terms "Image-Fiction", "post-postmodernism", and "Hyperrealism" as synonyms.

[3] See, for example, Jay McInerney's reaction to Wallace's enthusiasm for postmodernism: «The older McInerney was surprised to find Wallace so obsessed with postmodernism; for him and his peers it had largely ceased to matter» (Max, *Every Love Story* 95). D.T. Max also retraces Wallace's issues with finding his place at Arizona University as MFA student due to the fact that, while most of the students in America were disciples of minimalism, «[…] most of the teachers at Arizona were not fans of postmodernism, which they associated with a different era and condition and a preciousness that stories in the true America grain should not possess, but they also did not like minimalism, which smelled trendy to them» (60).

[4] The term "pampered" was significantly introduced by Wallace in the article "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again" (1995) where he makes fun of an infantile form of dissatisfaction that makes Americans perfect victims of advertising and consumerism.

television, taken as an effective representative of corporative society, is lifted from the burden of morality, the same cannot be said about literature that, according to Wallace's metaphor, is supposed to play a pseudo-parental role:

> The postmodern founders' patricidal work was great, but patricide produces orphans, and no amount of revelry can make up for the fact that writers my age have been literally orphans throughout our formative years. We're kind of wishing some parents would come back. And of course we're uneasy about the fact that we wish they'd come back – I mean, what's wrong with us? Are we total pussies? Is there something about authority and limits we actually *need*? And then the uneasiest feeling of all, as we start gradually to realize that parents in fact aren't ever coming back – which means *we're* going to have to be the parents (Wallace, "An Expanded Interview" 52).

The comparison between television and postmodern art serves the purpose of illuminating the fact that the valuable role of cynicism and self-reflexivity has completed its job, and that in contemporary times there is a need for something different. While in the Sixties irony and metafiction were useful to subvert a rigid socio-political order, in the Nineties (at the time when Wallace reflects upon these issues) there is a call for pseudo-parental authority to set limits for the younger generation to overcome.

In Wallace's view, contemporary art must set those limits, which are not to be considered as castrating or alienating for the individual but rather as an incentive for the individual to transcend them. The limits imposed by what Wallace defines "good art" are instantiated by a certain degree of hostility of the text towards the reader, an intended level of hiddenness and complexity that forces the reader to face and overcome his[5] own solipsistic condition (denied by television) through active participation, and transcend the limits of his self in order to empathize with other human consciousnesses:

> […] what you're going to be doing is paradoxical. You're at once allowing the reader to sort of escape self by achieving some sort of identification with

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[5] Since my study is based on Winnicott's treatment of the self in relation to the mother/environment, I need to adopt a generalizing use of masculine pronouns and adjectives when a person's gender is not defined, in order to avoid confusion.

another human psyche – the writer's, or some character's, etc. – and you're *also* trying to antagonize the reader's intuition that she is a self, that she is alone and going to die alone.[6] You're trying somehow both to deny and affirm that the writer is over here with his agenda while the reader's over there with her agenda, distinct. This paradox is what makes good fiction sort of magical, I think. The paradox can't be resolved, but it can somehow be mediated – "re-mediated" […]. (Wallace, "An Expanded Interview" 32-33)

The paradoxical position of the author in relation to the reader, as imagined by Wallace, consists in a dialogue between two consciousness, or two selves, who acknowledge their condition of being separated but not necessarily solipsistic. Television, motivated by economical goals, (or "bad art", motivated by the need to please the reader) denies the frustrating loneliness of the self by pampering him with costless pleasure, deceiving the viewer with a delusional freedom from limits that hides a fundamentally univocal and narcissistic relation:

I, the pseudo-voyeur, am indeed "behind the scenes", primed to get the in-joke. But it is not I the spy who have crept inside television's boundaries. It is vice versa. Television, even the mundane little businesses of its production, have become my – our – own interior. And we seem a jaded, weary, but willing and above all *knowledgeable* Audience. (Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram" 32)

On the contrary, for Wallace, "good art" implies a two-way relation between the author and the reader, obtained by the paradoxical position of the author as pseudo-parent who sets limits that are necessary for the reader's self to develop as both separated and yet somehow connected with others.

The paradoxical condition of the author, together with a renovated exploration of the inner self, and the controversial use of postmodern technical devices such as irony and metafiction in order to overcome the solipsistic trap of postmodern self-reflexivity raised a complex debate among Wallace's critics about the actual success of his theoretical declarations of intents as exposed in "E Unibus Pluram" and "An Expanded Interview" with Larry McCaffery. Wallace's theoretical preoccupation regarding the

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[6] By the term "antagonize," Wallace here means "dramatize," "aggravate."

relationship between the author and the reader, and between the self and the other as represented in the text, aims to escape the sense of an inner void characterizing postmodern art and young American generations. Wallace's fiction though seems to exacerbate the lack of self that he criticizes, while the widespread irony, complexity and openness of his narrative provide no clear solutions to the issues he theoretically seeks to overcome. So, while the shared understanding of Wallace's theoretical statements confirms the author's intent to force the boundaries of postmodernism into some new form of literature, scholars have contrasting opinions when it comes to analyze Wallace's textual achievements.

Most of the critics recognize in Wallace's fiction the actual proposal of a way to escape postmodern self-reflexivity and solipsism, for example by means of ethical writing (den Dulk), biomedical subjectivity (Freudenthal), narrative psychology (Timmer); or at least the possibility of the existence of an escape to be actualized by the reader through New Sincerity (Kelly), negation of Lacanian ruinous models of the self (Boswell), through narrative refraction (Hering), generative failures (Hayes-Brady, even though she speaks of relief more than solution), or bodily gestalt (Burn). On the contrary, Holland explicitly contends that Wallace's fiction ultimately results in a diagnosis of problems but not as the cure, going as far as to conclude that Wallace eventually failed his mission. A third group of scholars dwell on the paradoxical nature of Wallace's fiction, invoking to its call to a process of deconstruction/reconstruction (Aubry), performativity (Cioffi), cathexis (Bolger) and self-projection (Staes).[7]

Although in line with the generally shared opinion about Wallace's effort to overcome the postmodern disease of solipsism and self-reflexivity, my study leaves aside the matter of diagnosis and cure, and it proposes a reading inspired by Donald. W. Winnicott assumptions about relational analysis: «Doctors seem to have to *treat* and *cure* every symptom. But in psychology this is a snare and delusion. One must be able to note symptoms without trying to cure them because every symptom has its value to

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[7] The debate gravitating around Wallace's overcoming of postmodernism concerns mainly *Infinite Jest* because *The Broom of the System* is mostly considered a juvenile work where the author had not developed a mature and clear position. Furthermore, the studies about *The Broom of the System* are rather inorganic and little developed, and they tend to confirm a general reading of the novel through Wittgenstein's philosophy. However, a complete state of the art concerning the existing studies on *The Broom of the System* and *Infinite Jest* is provided in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3.

the patient, and very frequently the patient is better left with his symptom» ("Ocular Psychoneurosis" 86). I think this idea is equally relevant in the case of a fiction writer who proposes, as Wallace did, to deal with the most human aspects of literature: not to cure the reader from his psychological issues, but to propose the experiencing of a text as an opportunity for *transitional phenomena* through which the reader can renegotiate the limits of his own self.

What I propose in this study is a reading of Wallace's first two novels through the lens of Winnicott's theory of *transitional phenomena*. Winnicott was an English pediatrician and psychoanalyst active between 1931 and 1971. He was an orthodox Freudian psychoanalyst and a member of the "Independent Group" of the British Psychoanalytical Society. His theories about the human psyche are still very relevant in the field of psychotherapy, but they have not been as well received in the world of literary criticism. Winnicott's psychoanalytic studies, in fact, were developed during the years of philosophical and literary poststructuralism and postmodernism, but his interest did not match the Derridean or Lacanian focus on language and the displacement of the self. Winnicott considered, instead, language to be a tool of a self that is emotionally mature and healthily located in the body. This may be, at least partially, the reason why Winnicott's theories have not been considered in the analysis of postmodern literature.[8]

I contend that, in a study about Wallace's attempt to overcome postmodernism, Winnicott can be profitably rediscovered as he offered an original perspective of the paradoxical condition of the human self that fits with Wallace's exploration of the relation between self and other, individual and society, author and reader, in the attempt to overcome the dichotomy between materialistic objectivism and essentialist subjectivism.[9] Winnicott, in fact, understood the human condition as a paradox of the

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[8] The only two applications of Winnicottian theories to literary analysis I have found have been published by Peter L. Rudnytsky and Gabriele Schwab. Rudnytsky edited a collection of articles written by various scholars entitled *Transitional Objects and Potential Spaces: Literary Uses of D.W. Winnicott*, while Schwab, in the book *Subjects without Selves: Transitional Texts in Modern Fiction*, focused on the fate of the self in modern literature. There has been an attempt by Chiara Scarlato to make use of Winnicott's theories for a short analysis of *Infinite Jest* in the essay "Trasformazioni del desiderio. Dal volto materno al linguaggio letterario:" her approach, though, is limited to the mirror stage and it is embedded in Lacan's vision of language and desire.

[9] Dowling and Bell insist on the relevance of the reemergence of the self, even though in contradictory ways, in Wallace's revision of postmodern art: «While *Infinite Jest* conducts a rigorous, comic, outrageous interrogation of personal identity, it affirms – surprisingly – some basic elements or attributes of identity. [His] insistence upon or hope for meaningful selfhood is one important way in which David Foster Wallace differs from and corrects his post-modernist predecessors, John Barth, Thomas Pynchon,

self being both separated and interrelated to the environment. The relationship of the self with the other, for Winnicott, is not posited as an alienating process, but rather as a necessary and positive factor for the development of the self. Arts assume an essential function in Winnicott's vision of emotional development, because they represent a privileged instance of *transitional phenomena*, that is, those processes where the boundaries between the self and the other are renegotiated in order to assure a healthy and satisfactory location of the self within the environment.

Wallace must have encountered Winnicott's theories at some point of his writing career and self-help readings. We know that Wallace was familiar with Winnicott's concept of *transitional objects* thanks to the notes he took on his personal copy of *Coming to Our Senses: Body and Spirit in the Hidden History of the West* by Morris Berman, available in the Archive at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, Austin. It is also proven, as Stephen Burn asserts in the essay "'Webs of Nerves Pulsing and Firing:' *Infinite Jest* and the Science of Mind," that Wallace read and draw inspiration from Ronald D. Laing's *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*, a book whose author asked Winnicott to read before publication and that mentions Winnicott's theories about the *false self* and mind-body splitting.

These are just some elements evidencing Wallace's likely knowledge of Winnicott's theories about *transitional phenomena*, the splitting of the self, and the eventual development of a *false self* located in the mind, theories that are explained in details in Chapter 1 of this study. But more importantly, I think that from Wallace's fiction and non-fiction it is possible to detect a preoccupation with psychological issues that undermines the otherwise firm philosophical considerations concerning ethical choice exposed in his work. Wallace's vision of the self rejects the existence of an autonomous self in favor of a process of self-becoming, as he writes in an essay on teaching Kafka to young American students: «[…] we've taught them that a self is something you just *have*. No wonder they cannot appreciate the really central Kafka joke: that the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle. That our endless and impossible journey

and Don DeLillo. In *Infinite Jest* there indeed appears to be, provisionally and potentially, a *there* there, some enduring tendencies or qualities we are tempted to consider the bedrock self, or at least the inchoate stuff of personal identity» (*A Reader's Companion* 210).

toward home is in fact our home» ("Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness" 64-65). But at the same time, I think that the negation of an inner self, separated from its environment, does not necessarily equate a negation of a *true self* that is, however, always in the process of becoming.

Wallace's criticism about the idea of an autonomous self and self-absorption is most famously expressed in the commencement speech given at Kenyon College in 2005 and then published as an essay entitled *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life*. But in the very same occasion, Wallace advocates for liberal education to "the choice of what to think about," and he explains it in these terms:

> The exact same experience can mean two totally different things to two different people, given those people's two different belief templates and two different ways of constructing meaning from experience. Because we prize tolerance and diversity of belief, nowhere in our liberal arts analysis do we want to claim that one guy's interpretation is true and the other guy's is false or bad. Which is fine, except we also never end up talking about just where these individual templates and beliefs come from, meaning, where they come from *inside* the two guys. As if a person's most basic orientation toward the world and the meaning of his experience were somehow automatically hard-wired, like height or shoe-size, or absorbed from the culture, like language. As if how we construct meaning were not actually a matter of personal, intentional choice, of conscious decision. (*This Is Water* 24-28)

Here Wallace calls for a consciousness that is neither autonomous and enclosed in a pure self, nor automatically absorbed from the environment, and he names it "intentional choice". This kind of consciousness implies subjective interpretation of objective states of things, without surrendering to the «[…] hardwired default setting, which is to be deeply and literally self-centered, and to see and interpret everything through this lens of self» (Wallace, *This Is Water* 44).

What Wallace criticizes, then, is not the idea of an inner self per se (he explicitly refers to the "*inside*" where "individual templates and beliefs come from"), but rather the concept of the self as an egocentric entity that often, in the life of his contemporary young Americans, would prevail over a healthy exchange between the self and the

other. By rejecting a vision of the self as a static egocentric predisposition, Wallace, in fact, allows the possibility of the self to consist both of an inner world and of an outer dimension of experiencing, the two not being mutually exclusive but rather dialoguing. And when he calls for "intentional choice" within the dialogue between the inside and outside, he does not refer to intellectual consciousness:

> Given the academic setting here, an obvious question is how much of this work of adjusting our default setting involves actual knowledge or intellect. The answer, not surprisingly, is that it depends on what kind of knowledge we're talking about. Probably the most dangerous thing about an academic education, at least in my own case, is that it enables my tendency to over-intellectualize stuff, to get lost in abstract thinking instead of simply paying attention to what's going on in front of me. Instead of paying attention to what's going on *inside* me. As I'm sure you guys know by now, it is extremely difficult to stay alert and attentive instead of getting hypnotized by the constant monologue inside your own head. […] Think of the old cliché about the mind being "an excellent servant but a terrible master." […] It is not the least bit coincidental that adults who commit suicide with firearms nearly always shoot themselves in… the *head*. (Wallace, *This Is Water* 46-50; 56; 58)

Wallace's account for "intentional choice" depending on a kind of consciousness that is not intellectual is not an easy knot to disentangle. This matter continues to be raised in Wallace's fiction in the form of eternal struggle between healthy, moderate consciousness and too much consciousness leading to brainy loops, thus implying that the consciousness he advocates is rather a spiritual or, as I argue, a psychical kind: «[…] an outstanding reason for choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship […] is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. […] Worship your intellect, being seen as smart – you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out» (Wallace, *This Is Water* 102; 110).

This is a critique of postmodern emphasis on "cleveritis", as Wallace names it,[10] i.e. the identification of consciousness with the mind at the expenses of the psychical and spiritual dimension. But it is also Wallace's critique to himself, to his personal idiosyncrasies and psychological issues as a self and as an author. My interest in this

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[10] Quoted from Wallace, "An Expanded Interview" 29.

study is not to psychoanalyze Wallace as a person through a reading of his fiction,[11] but rather to observe how he delineates his characters psychologically, especially in the context of family dynamics, and how those characters' relations are mirrored in the relation between author and reader through specific features of the text. Nonetheless, I think there is something relevant about Wallace's biography, that is his actual preoccupation with the development of the self in real life, a preoccupation that is persistently represented in his fiction, although fragmented into multiple perspectives rather than embodied by one single privileged character that can be identified as Wallace himself.[12]

Few of Wallace's critics have approached the emergence of the self in fiction as a psychological matter, namely Marshall Boswell with a negation of Lacan's poststructuralist model of the self; Stephen Burn with Laing's existential study on the divided self; Mary K. Holland with Christopher Lasch's use of Freud's concept of secondary narcissism; Alexander Resar with Kristeva's critique of the mapping of subjectivity; Nicoline Timmer with an exploration of the self through the lens of narrative psychology. Those critics take Wallace's fiction as a literary diagnosis of generalized psychosis in American society and, making exception for Holland, they

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[11] About the use of psychological criticism, commenting Edwin Williamsons' *Borges: A Life*, Wallace argues: «It works well on Kafka […] because Kafka's fictions are expressionist, projective, and personal; they make artistic sense only as manifestations of Kafka's psyche. But Borges's stories are very different. They are designed primarily as metaphysical arguments; they are dense, self-enclosed, with their own deviant logics. Above all, they are meant to be impersonal, to transcend individual consciousness […]» ("Borges on the Couch" 287-288). Even if Wallace fiction has a controversial approach to metaphysics and they declaredly seek to overcome self-enclosure, they do share with Borges's stories an attempt to be somehow universal by transcending the limits of the self. This feature makes psychological criticism, in the sense of inferring aspects of the author's psyche from his fiction, a disadvantageous operation in the case of Wallace's literature. But then, talking about *Infinite Jest*, Wallace told Lipsky: «[…] the big thing [of good fiction] seems to be sort of leapin' over that wall of self, and portraying inner experience» (Lipsky, *Although of Course* 289).

[12] For instance, one prominent feature that emerges from D.T. Max's biography is Wallace's early obsession with the way he came across first as a person and then as an author, an obsession characterized by a growing paradox of self-awareness. See, for example: «[…] in a family that prided itself on openness, Wallace never felt safe disclosing himself. He worried […] that to know him too well would be to dislike him. […] He felt a fake, a victim […] of "imposter syndrome." He believed his parents expected great things from him and worried he was not capable» (Max, *Every Love Story* 8). And then, later, in a passage from a letter by Wallace to his editor Michael Pietsch: «Brains and wit and technical tightrope-calisthenics are powerful tools in fiction, but I believe that when they're used primarily to keep the reader at arm's length they're being abused – they are functioning as defense mechanisms. […] I do not wish to be a hidden person, or a hidden writer: it is lonely» (Max, *Every Love Story* 172).

tend to agree that the text provide the reader with the possibility of an escape, a cure from the psychotic condition generated by society.[13]

Other critics reflect on the paradoxical condition of the self from literary and philosophical perspectives, mostly insisting on the relational development of the self and the negation of the autonomous self. Scholars such as den Dulk, Hayes-Brady, Hayles, and Kelly especially value the interconnection between the self and the other and the break of rigid boundaries of the self; others assume more extreme positions, as in the case of Freudenthal, who completely rejects interiority in favor of biomedical subjectivity, and, oppositely, Redgate, who recovers a renewed conception of Carthesian essential self.[14]

In this study I take into account Wallace's first two novels, *The Broom of the System* (1987) and *Infinite Jest* (1996), in order to analyze how they convey the author's preoccupation with the concept of self and to propose an original reading of the possible dynamics embedded in the relationship between the author and the reader as actually resulting from the two texts. I consider novels rather than short stories because novels better explore the development of the self in relation to familial dynamics, and they mirror it in the condition of the individual in relation to society, examining the role of art in the development of the self within society. Many of Wallace's short stories also approach similar topics but, given their narrative form, they tend to be less structured in terms of family and societal relationships, only providing sketchy contexts. I also leave *The Pale King* out of this study for similar reasons, being the novel posthumous and ultimately unanalyzable in terms of intended macro-structural relations. Furthermore, *The Pale King* does hint fragmentarily at family dynamics and generational issues but its main concern is the ethical charge of the individual as citizen rather than a psychological insight of the self troubled with ontological crisis.

I try to cast a different light on *The Broom of the System*, which so far has attracted little scholarly attention and has only been approached in terms of philosophical theories (especially concerning Wittgenstein). Instead I remark on Wallace's early interest in the distortions and maturation of the self as both separated and interconnected to its environment, a self consisting in a psychical entity

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[13] I briefly introduce and comment their studies in Chapter 3.
[14] Again, their work is taken in exam in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 of this study.

differentiated, although connected, both from the body and the mind. And if *The Broom of the System* is a juvenile work, in the sense that Wallace had not yet formulated the original credos and idiosyncrasies that he would develop later on, concurring with personal and authorial deconstructions and reconstructions, *Infinite Jest* brings the exploration of the self into a further and more inherently psychological dimension.

Scholarly studies about *Infinite Jest* are as virtually infinite as the novel itself. I focus on those critics who have approached Wallace's exploration of the self as a useful, if not necessary, feature in the attempt to fill the human void left by postmodern art. *Infinite Jest* revisits and develops most of the issues already presented in *The Broom of the System* concerning the split of the self, the identification of the self with the mind, and the sense of some characters of being empty inside; it exacerbates the character's infantile condition and their relation with their parents, rendering a stronger comparison between familial and societal dynamics; it adjusts *The Broom of the System*'s fear of incommunicability with the characters' right not to communicate in order to protect their selves. Furthermore, *Infinite Jest* consciously posits itself as *transitional object*, one simultaneously presented as objective reality but subjectively cathected by the reader. It contributes to the redefinition of the role of the author's self without the pretension of going back to a traditional, romantic concept of pure self unaffected by its environment, and it provides the reader with the benefit of creative agency over a text that presents itself as «mathematically uncontrolled but humanly *contained*» (*Infinite Jest* 82).

In my opinion, a Winnicottian reading of the self and the relationship between author and reader as two separated but interrelating consciousnesses might help decoding some controversial aspects of Wallace's fiction, based on the *essential paradox* (the coexistence of the self both as individual and environment, subjectivity and objectivity) theorized by the English psychoanalyst and embodied in the American writer's work. This analysis hopes to contribute to a revision of the role of Wallace as author about twenty years after the Barthesian death certificate, and to accept (not to resolve) Wallace's creation of paradoxical relations between characters within the complex structure of fiction intended to serve as *transitional phenomena*.

Chapter 1
Donald Woods Winnicott

In this chapter I provide a brief overview of Winnicott's main theories that I think can be profitably used in a critical analysis of David Foster Wallace's first two novels. In fact, Winnicott's vision of the self is based on what he defines *essential paradox*, that is, the paradoxical condition of the self as being both separated from and yet interrelated to the environment. Thus, I believe that Winnicott's concept of *essential paradox* responds to Wallace's preoccupation with the self as exposed in the Introduction to this study, and it helps locating Wallace beyond postmodern deconstructionism.

Furthermore, Winnicott acknowledges a fundamental role of arts and creativity in the development of the self: he sees arts as an opportunity for *transitional phenomena*, that is, experiences of re-negotiation of boundaries between the self and the environment. Therefore, arts intended as *transitional phenomena* can attain Wallace's purpose to create a kind of literature that not only diagnoses contemporary psychoses, but also provide the opportunity for self-healing without suggesting explicit solutions.

Winnicott introduced the idea that it is not possible to talk about an individual in early infancy, but an *environment-individual set-up* must be taken into account instead. In so doing, Winnicott emphasized the individual's dependence on the environment from infancy on, stating that the development of a self is unconceivable without the care of a surrounding environment. At the same time, as contradictory as this may sound, Winnicott posited the existence of primary creativity in the infant, which is potential and can only be realized in favorable environmental conditions.

Considering Winnicott's scarce fame in the field of literary studies, in this chapter I need to explain various concepts in order to convey the significance of the *essential paradox* and *transitional phenomena*. I start with the concepts of creativity, and communication, which are the basis of a life worth living, according to Winnicott; then, I explain the condition of development of a sense of existing and being creative, a condition consisting of a *good enough facilitating environment*; last, I explore possible ego distortions caused by failures of the *facilitating environment*. All these theories will

be later applied in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 in order to analyze Wallace's *The Broom of the System* and *Infinite Jest*.

1.1. Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena

The concepts of *transitional objects* and *transitional phenomena* are probably Winnicott's most well-known theories in both the fields of pediatrics and psychoanalysis. They were developed through direct observation of children during their weaning phase but they proved to be highly influential in the analysis of adults, especially for what concerns the role of cultural life in the emotional development of the individual. In order to talk about *transitional phenomena*, Winnicott coins a set of terms such as *intermediate area of experiencing*, *potential space*, and *essential paradox*: all of them refer to a theoretical dimension located between subjective conception and objective perception of reality, the only place where the individual can be at rest from the task of differentiation between in and out, *me* and *not-me*. Only in this *unintegrated* state can the person search for his own self, for a sense of reality, and for a meaning in both the inner and the outer world. Only from this position can the individual symbolize, live creatively and contribute to society in an on-going relationship with the past and the future.

It is not possible to trace the origin of *transitional phenomena* in the individual lifetime: they potentially start from the very beginning, possibly from intrauterine life, but they are activated in «[…] the intermediate area of experience, between the thumb and the teddy bear, between the oral erotism and true object relationship, between primary creative activity and a projection of what has already been introjected, between primary unawareness of indebtedness and the acknowledgement of indebtedness […]» ("Transitional Objects" 230). Keeping in mind that no period has sharp temporal edges in emotional development and one should think, instead, of blurring and overlapping sets of phenomena, Winnicott focused his attention on the study of the relationship and the process between oral erotism and object relationship. The time of activation of this process coincides with the period of transition from a state of absolute dependence to

relative dependence of the child upon the mother,[15] but this represents a matrix for *transitional phenomena* that remain significant throughout adult life.

Here it is important to stress that *transitional phenomena* are to be considered as a never-ending process, not as a state of things. In this process, both inherited qualities and relational issues are taken into account, and they are so entangled that one cannot think of one without the other. Inherited features are potential from the beginning and they cannot be activated and realized if not in relation with the surrounding environment. Thus, *transitional phenomena* are potentially there for the infant to be experienced from intrauterine life, but they only start to have meaning in emotional development as long as there is a strong enough ego to collect and interpret them. An ego can be strong enough only with the necessary ego-support provided by the mother, which represents the first environment for the infant, and it is exactly in *transitional phenomena* that the relationship between individual and environment is continuously renegotiated as time goes by. It is, indeed, an infinite process where no starting or ending point can be detected, and it would be meaningless to postulate one.

The time factor, then, is essential to the very idea of the individual as an autonomous being both related and separated from the environment, and so is space. Winnicott posits a *potential space* of *transitional phenomena* between the infant and the mother, or the individual and the environment, where *integration* and *unintegration* happen. *Transitional phenomena* can be theoretically placed between the individual's inner and external reality, both contributing to the development and the enrichment of the self. At the time when the infant, from his point of view, is not differentiated from the environment, the *intermediate area of experiencing* provides the opportunity for differentiation and *integration* of the person as a physical and psychical unit; later on, the individual can make use of the *potential space* to reshape the boundaries of that unit, in order to moderate the rigidity and defense mechanisms of the ego-organization: «It is

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[15] From now on it is assumed that when the words "mother" and "mothering" are used, they do not necessarily stand for the natural mother. The term "mother" can refer to any kind of person, male or female, relative or not, who takes care of the infant or the child. Winnicott makes this explicit by saying: «The good enough 'mother' (not necessarily the infant's own mother) is one who makes active adaptation to the infant's need, an active adaptation that gradually lessens, according to the infant's growing ability to account for failure of adaptation and to tolerate the results of frustration» ("Transitional Objects" 237-238). Nonetheless, he adds: «Naturally the infant's own mother is more likely to be good enough than some other person, since the active adaptation demands an easy and unresented preoccupation with the one infant; in fact, success in infant care depends on the fact of devotion, not on cleverness or intellectual enlightenment» ("Transitional Objects" 238).

an area which is not challenged, because no claim is made on its behalf except that it shall exist as a resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet inter-related» ("Transitional Objects" 230).

The process of *integration* consists in the differentiation between *me* (individual, inner reality, subjective reality) and *not-me* (environment, external reality, objective reality) from the infant's point of view. During this phase, the baby also grows from a state of mergence and absolute dependence with the mother towards a progressive state of relative dependence. In order to achieve awareness about his own relative separateness from the environment, he may make use of one or more external objects, which represent the first *not-me possession* and it belongs to the *intermediate area of experiencing*. It is important to acknowledge that «[t]he transitional object is *not an internal object* (which is a mental concept) – it is a possession. Yet it is not (for the infant) an external object either» ("Transitional Objects" 237). Were the object perceived as exclusively external, there would be no point for the infant in the relationship with it, because it is only what he "creates" that has meaning for him.

The *transitional object* is the infant's first encounter with the environment, from his point of view. While making use of a *transitional object* the baby gradually realizes that the object is not part of himself nor is it within his area of omnipotence: it exists out of him. But at the same time, the object is cathected, invested of the infant's personal meaning. As such, the *transitional object* is the first material realization of the *potential space*, where inner and outer reality interrelate and start making sense. From the observer's point of view, the use of a *transitional object* is also a first instance of non-verbal symbolization, where the individual draws elements from a preconstituted "language" and cathects it with personal meaning: «I think there is use for a term for the root of symbolism in time, a term that describes the infant's journey from the purely subjective to objectivity: and it seems to me that the transitional object (piece of blanket, etc.) is what we see of this journey of progress towards experiencing» ("Transitional Objects" 234).

While using a *transitional object*, the infant grows from a state of necessary *illusion of omnipotence*, where both internal and external reality are subjectively conceived as part of himself under his own magical control, to a state of *disillusion* and

objective perception of external reality. One must be aware that there cannot be *disillusion* without previous *illusion*, which is the basis of any meaningful relationship between inner and external reality: *illusion* is the premise of cathexis and creative living, and «[…] it is only what you create that has meaning for you» ("Communication Between Infant and Mother" 101). In order for *illusion* to be allowed, the mother's adaptation to the infant's needs must be *good enough* to let the infant believe that external reality corresponds to his own capacity to create the world: «*Of the transitional object it can be said that it is a matter of agreement between us and the baby that we will never ask the question: 'Did you conceive of this or was it presented to you from without?' The important point is that no decision on this point is expected. The question is not to be formulated*» ("Transitional Objects" 239-240).

After a primary state of *illusion* and mergence with the environment, the infant needs to be gradually let go by the mother according to his own progressive needs of independence and ability to deal autonomously with external reality. With the process of *disillusionment*, subjective conception is counterbalanced by objective perception of reality, but the latter does not overcome the former: it is possible, then, to start talking of *apperception*, which does not imply a perfect balance of subjectivity and objectivity, but a satisfying interrelation of the two that can be readjusted if different environmental conditions require it. Going along with *disillusionment*, the function of the *transitional object* is not lost but spread from the actual object, which is gradually decathected, to the broader area of adult *transitional phenomena* consisting in playing and cultural life.

> […] in health the transitional object does not 'go inside' nor does the feeling about it necessarily undergo repression […] It loses meaning, and this is because the transitional phenomena have become diffused, have become spread out over the whole intermediate territory between 'inner psychic reality' and 'the external world as perceived by two persons in common', that is to say, over the whole cultural field ("Transitional Objects" 233).

In order to experience and make use of *transitional objects* and *phenomena* one must allow and tolerate the *essential paradox* of their nature, postulated by Winnicott as the fundamental condition to any kind of creative living. The mother must never challenge the baby's ability to create the world, that is, she must not let the infant know about the

preexistence of the world to the individual before the individual is ready to contribute to the world:

> […] this intermediate area […] has to do with living experience and […] is neither dream nor object-relating. At the same time […] it is neither the one nor the other of these two it is also both. This is the essential paradox, and in my paper on transitional phenomena the most important part (in my opinion) is my claim that we need to *accept the paradox*, not to resolve it. Transitional objects and phenomena are universal and protean ("Playing and Culture" 204).

1.2. Creativity, Playing, and Cultural Experience

The ability to play is an important achievement in the emotional development of the individual, a feature that belongs to the dimension of *transitional phenomena* and takes place in the *intermediate area of experiencing*, possibly making use of *transitional objects*. The *essential paradox* is maintained in playing, since playing involves both personal fantasy and external reality, and yet it does not coincide with any of the two. The *illusion of omnipotence* due to a subjective conception of reality is retained to a certain extent, but it is counterbalanced by the actual manipulation of external phenomena that carry the limits of objective reality causing the gradual frustration necessary to *disillusion*.

Winnicott is not interested in "play" as a thing or a state of things but in "playing" as a process of self-discovery through *transitional objects* and *transitional phenomena*, a set of experiences that can be located in the *potential space* between the individual and the environment. The time and space where playing takes place are "potential" because their existence depends on the success in the infant's transition from mergence, or absolute dependence, towards separation and relative dependence. Only through a *good enough* development from *illusion* to *disillusion* can the baby retain a subjective perception based on personal memories of the mother that will allow symbolic union to be maintained after separation. That is, in order for *transitional objects* to have meaning, the process of *disillusionment* must be gradual:

> The object is a symbol of the union of the baby and the mother (or part of the mother). This symbol can be located. It is at the place in space and time where and when the mother is in transition from being (in the baby's mind) merged in with the infant and alternatively being experienced as an object to be perceived rather than conceived of. The use of an object symbolizes the union of two now separate things, baby and mother, *at the point in time and space of the initiation of their state of separateness* ("The Location of Cultural Experience" 130).

The time factor is crucial and inherent to the constitution of the *potential space*, which is a space that is built through experiencing but, at the same time, it is the only possible space where experiences are meaningful for the individual. This is not to say that there is an actual point in time when the *potential space* is permanently established, but that union in separateness is the necessary condition of symbolization and creative living throughout time. The paradoxical aspect of the *intermediate area of experiencing* is due to its on-going process of creation and development, where cause and effect overlap and continuously interchange. Separation can be achieved only once a reliable union has been experienced, while the awareness of union is perceived only through separation, and the ability to symbolize is built upon this double bind:

> The baby's confidence in the mother's reliability, and therefore in that of other people and things, makes possible a separating-out of the not-me from the me. At the same time, however, it can be said that separation is avoided by the filling in of the potential space with creative playing, with the use of symbols, and with all that eventually adds up to a cultural life ("The Place Where We Live" 147).

Union in separateness is the condition for the self to start being and find its place in society through creativity. Thanks to the mother's reliability the infant can collect memories of her that allow him to retain an imago of her in the inner reality which eventually constitutes the basis for union in separateness. Once union is satisfyingly established in the psychic reality, separation does not represent a threat but a reinforcement of the self as autonomous entity. From this position, the individual can enjoy being both separate and interrelated to the environment. This is, according to Winnicott, «[…] the question of *what life itself is about*» ("The Location of Cultural

Experience" 133), which is not determined by the satisfaction of instinctual drives but by the ability to integrate them into a self creatively living in its environment: «In these highly specialized conditions the individual can come together and exist as a union, not as a defence against anxiety but as an expression of I AM, I am alive, I am myself […] From this position everything is creative» ("Playing: Creative Activity" 76).

Thus, creativity is at the basis of a life that is not just healthy, but worth living, «and we are poor indeed if we are only sane» ("Primitive Emotional Development" 150). The sense of self, of being, the feeling that reality makes sense and that one can rely on his own inner richness depend on the ability to be creative. Creativity is potentially personal and universal but can be realized in creative experience only thanks to a reliable environment, that is also called a *facilitating environment* because of its supporting role in the development of the infant's hereditary potential. Creativity is the motor of the development of self and, in turn, creative living is the expression and communication of the self:

> […] life is worth living or not, according to whether creativity is or is not a part of an individual person's living experience. To be creative a person must exist and have a feeling of existing, not in conscious awareness, but as a basic place to operate from. Creativity is then the doing that arises out of being. It indicates that he who is, is alive […]. Creativity, then, is the retention throughout life of something that belongs properly to infant experience: the ability to create the world ("Living Creatively" 39-40).

In postulating creative living as the *potential space* for the development and the search for self, Winnicott draws a line from child playing to adult cultural experience: they both consist in experiences of *unintegration* where the boundaries between inner and outer reality are renegotiated through the acceptance of the *essential paradox*. In infancy, the self development depends on a successful process of *illusion* and *disillusionment*: at this stage, the infant is growing from *unintegration* to *integration*, and this will eventually lead him to appreciate the separation of his own self from the environment. Throughout life the individual keeps on struggling to maintain his own sense of self, or even to find it for the first time: then, going voluntarily back to *unintegration* in the unchallenged space of playing and cultural life is a technique to redefine the boundaries of one's own self:

It is assumed here that the task of reality-acceptance is never completed, that no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, and that relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience […] which is not challenged (arts, religion, etc.). This intermediate area is in direct continuity with the play area of the small child who is 'lost' in play ("Transitional Objects" 240-241).

It must be clear here that by the term "cultural life" Winnicott does not refer solely to the actual production of artistic objects, but he includes all the processes of self-experiencing involved in a general creative living, an ability that does not require any talent. By using the word "culture", Winnicott means all those adult experiences where *illusion* is retained and is not to be confused with *delusion* because *illusion* can be shared by groups of people, while *delusion* is personal hallucination. Art is one of these possible experiences, together with philosophy, religion and other forms of inherited tradition: «I am thinking of something that is in the common pool of humanity, into which individuals and groups of people may contribute, and from which we may all draw if *we have somewhere to put what we find*» ("The Location of Cultural Experience" 133).

Culture as inherited tradition and as an *illusory experience* that can be shared by groups of people throughout time relates the individual not only to the environment of his own place and time, but also to the past and the future, in a concentric spatial dimension that connects the individual to bigger and bigger communities. Yet, the individual can draw from and contribute to cultural life only if in the development of the self there is room for a *potential space* where he can experience union in separateness and therefore be able to symbolize: «[…] in any cultural field it is *not possible to be original except on a basis of tradition*», Winnicott explains, because «[t]he interplay between originality and the acceptance of tradition as the basis for inventiveness [is] just one more example, and a very exciting one, of the interplay between separateness and union» ("The Location of Cultural Experience" 134).

Winnicott postulates creativity as a universal potential that has to do with the individual approach to external reality: universal since it comes from instinctual drives, potential because it needs to be supported by a *good enough facilitating environment*. In

the event of failure of the environment, the individual might grow a distorted relationship to external reality, one that does not include creativity and is based instead on adaptation and compliance. While creativity confers a sense of self and a feeling that life is worth living, a compliant attitude towards the outer world «[…] carries with it a sense of futility for the individual and is associated with the idea that nothing matters and that life is not worth living» ("Creativity and Its Origins" 87). The individual whose primary *illusion* was insufficient may never develop the capacity to retain internal imagos and symbolize, and he may compensate with an adaptation to external reality, «living uncreatively, as if caught up in the creativity of someone else, or of a machine» ("Creativity and Its Origins" 87).

So if it is true that creativity is potentially universal and it does not only concern the production of actual artistic objects, the opposite is also true, that is, an artist is not necessarily to be considered creative in Winnicottian terms. If a piece of art is produced in absence of a *potential space*, it can be generally acclaimed but still generated out of intellectual compliance. This will eventually leave the artist more unsatisfied the more the artistic object is appreciated by the environment, since mental compliance does not confer a sense of self and reality, but of emptiness and futility instead:

> In the search for the self the person concerned may have produced something valuable in terms of art, but a succesful artist may be universally acclaimed and yet have failed to find the self he or she is looking for. The self is not really to be found in what is made out of products of body or mind, however valuable these constructs may be in terms of beauty, skill, and impact […] The finished creation never heals the underlying lack of sense of self ("Playing: Creative Activity" 73).

1.3. The Right Not to Communicate

If health is conceived as a theoretical state where the *essential paradox* is respected and tolerated, and where the individual exists as a unit of both subjective and objective perception of reality, the need for a compromise between inside and outside must be taken into account. This compromise can be considered as a healthy kind of compliance

where a relatively low degree of adaptation to external reality does not threaten the sense of inner reality. There is for the individual a fundamental preoccupation to preserve the inner self from being infinitely exploited by external reality, the need for an essential isolation of the core self and the right not to communicate and not to be found: «Although healthy persons communicate and enjoy communicating, the other fact is equally true, that *each individual is an isolate, permanently non-communicating, permanently unknown, in fact unfound*» ("Communicating and Not Communicating" 187).

The premise to actual communication is the success of primary *illusion* and of subsequent gradual *disillusion*, both guaranteed by a match between the infant's potential to grow and the mother's reliability in space and time, i.e. primary identification or mergence with the infant and then gradual separation. During the time of absolute dependence of the infant upon the mother, mutuality can be considered as a preliminary form of communication, one that does not need to be explicit since it happens in a state of mergence between the individual and the environment, according to the infant's point of view:

> In so far as the object is subjective, *so far it is unnecessary for communication with it to be explicit*. In so far as the object is objectively perceived, communication is either explicit or dumb […] When [the mother's] *reliability* dominates the scene the infant could be said to communicate by simply going on being […] but this scarcely deserves the epithet communication ("Communicating and Not Communicating" 183).

In order for actual communication to take place, then, the process of object-relating must have started and external reality must be in transition from being subjectively to objectively perceived. In other words, the infant must undertake the process of differentiation between *me* and *not-me* for communication to include an interlocutor.

Once communication has been established, Winnicott posits two opposites of it: a simple not-communicating and/or a not-communicating that is active or reactive. The first case is the simple state of *unintegration* or resting between states of communication, while the second case must be considered in terms of health and pathology. In the pathological individual, non-communication is reactive, because it is a

consequence of the infant's reaction to impingements resulted from the unsuccessful *facilitating environment*. This failure in the *facilitating environment* can cause a split in the person that reflects the split of his own perception of reality, due to the deficient match between the object conceived by the infant and the object presented by the mother: «By one half of the split the infant relates to the presenting object, and for this purpose there develops what I have called a false or compliant self. By the other half of the split the infant relates to a subjective object […] these being scarcely influenced by an objectively perceived world» ("Communicating and Not Communicating" 183).

In these state of things, non-communication is directed towards objectively perceived objects and communication towards subjective objects, since the part of the self that is relating to objective reality is felt to be false and compliant, and there would be no satisfaction for the individual to engage in a communication between *false self* and objective reality. On the contrary, a communication between *true self* and subjective reality is much more profitable since it makes the person feel real:

> There seems to be no doubt that for all its futility from the observer's point of view, the cul-de-sac communication (communication with subjective objects) carries all the sense of real. *Per contra*, such communication with the world as occurs from the false self does not feel real; it is not a true communication because it does not involve the core of the self, that which could be called a true self ("Communicating and Not Communicating" 184).

Active non-communication, instead, is a form of clinical withdrawal that can be found both in cases of slight pathology alternated with states of health and in cases of general health. The same dynamic as in reactive non-communication is involved, i.e. a sense of reality in communication with subjective objects (and thus, non-communication) and compliance in communication with objective objects. It is a kind of temporary split in the self that, nonetheless, involves a withdrawal of the individual that does not communicate in order to recover a sense of real: «[…] silent or secret communication with subjective objects, carrying a sense of real, must periodically take over to restore balance […] There is room for the idea that significant relating and communicating is silent» ("Communicating and Not Communicating" 184).

The right not to communicate, which can thus be a healthy condition for the maturational process, is especially important throughout the age of puberty. The adolescent is psychically a person who is entering the world of the adults but whose sense of self is not satisfactorily established yet, so that he needs to strengthen his own defenses in order to protect the inner self from being exploited: «At adolescence when the individual is undergoing pubertal changes and is not quite ready to become one of the adult community there is a strengthening of the defences against being found, that is to say being found before being there to be found» ("Communicating and Not Communicating" 190). This is a healthy unconscious strategy that allows the adolescent to search for his own identity and to establish a personal way of communicating that is indirect enough such as to avoid the inner self exploitation. For the adolescent, the boundary between compromise and compliance is yet to be fully explored.

If the maturational process goes on without any relevant distortions, the individual can profitably make use of three ways of communicating: «communication that is *for ever silent*, communication that is *explicit*, indirect and pleasurable, and this third or *intermediate* form of communication that slides out of playing into cultural experience of every kind» ("Communicating and Not Communicating" 188). The first is a form of communication with subjective phenomena in a state of *unintegration* of the individual and mergence with the environment: it protects the inner self from the threat of exploitation, i.e. impingements from external reality, and conveys a sense of real. The second is directed towards objective phenomena, it implies a differentiation between *me* and *not-me* and it requires a compromise of the self with the environment in order not to be a compliant gesture: it consists mainly of the use of language. The last one is communication that happens in the *potential space* of *transitional phenomena*, that is the place and time where subjective and objective, inner and outer, *me* and *not-me* are constantly renegotiated and not rigidly stated. This is found in playing and cultural experience, and it consists both of explicit and implicit, communication and non-communication: «[i]t is a sophisticated game of hide-and-seek in which *it is a joy to be hidden but a disaster not to be found* ("Communicating and Not Communicating" 186).

As already stated, cultural experience does not only concern artistic production but a form of creative living that potentially belongs to any individual. Nonetheless,

Winnicott recognizes in the task of the artist a fundamentally paradoxical condition related both to the need to communicate and the right not to do so: «In the artist of all kinds I think one can detect an inherent dilemma, which belongs to the co-existence of two trends, the urgent need to communicate and the still more urgent need not to be found. This might account for the fact that we cannot conceive of an artist's coming to the end of the task that occupies his whole nature» ("Communicating and Not Communicating" 188).

1.4. Emotional Development and the Facilitating Environment

The existence of a *true self* to protect from infinite exploitation depends on a healthy ego-development, or emotional development. Throughout the process of ego-development the infant in health moves towards several important achievements, such as *ego-integration* (i.e. the separation of *me* from *not-me* resulting in the conception of an inner psychic reality), *personalization* (i.e. psychosomatic collusion), and the capacity for *object-relating* and *object-usage* (i.e. the understanding of the other as something both separate from and in relation with the self). The self and the ego are not to be taken for granted from the very beginning of life, but they are postulated as innate potential that needs the support of a *facilitating environment* in order to take shape.

In the analysis of the human psyche, Winnicott brings more into attention the *environment-individual set-up* and the concept of dependence of the infant from the environment, rather than to the intra-psychic dimension of the baby as being an autonomous self. Only after an initial period of mergence between the infant and the mother is it possible for the self to establish as an individual separated yet interrelated from the environment. According to Winnicott's theories, the relationship between the infant and the mother (i.e. two-body relationship) precedes the *integration* of the child as a psychical and physical unit (i.e. one-body relationship) in the process of ego-development. As a consequence of this postulation, the environment and its responsibilities assume a new relevance in the psychoanalytical research for the etiology of emotional development.

The concept of *facilitating environment* links the role of the mother towards the infant with that of the bigger communities to which the individual belongs in a progressive order: the mother, the mother and the father, the family, the community, the society, the world in general. Winnicott addresses to this ever-going extension of the outer reality as «a gradual environmental seeping-in» ("Integrative and Disruptive Factors in Family Life" 40). None of these groups is disconnected from the bigger reality it is part of, but all of them are in a concentric kind of relationship, where each inner reality is relatively depend on its outer reality:

> The existence of a family and the maintenance of a family atmosphere result from the relationship between the parents in the social setting in which they live. What the parents can "contribute in" to the family that they are building up depends a great deal on their general relationship to the wider circle around them, their immediate social setting. One can think of ever-widening circles, each social group depending for what it is like inside on its relationship to another outside social group ("Integrative and Disruptive Factors in Family Life" 41).

At the very beginning, the *environment-individual set-up* is the state of absolute dependence in which the infant and the mother are merged and, even though they appear as two separate units from an external point of view, they are not in psychical terms. It is from this primary state of *unintegration* that, thanks to a *good enough environment*, the ego can gradually move toward *integration*, in developing a sense of existing and being real, an embodied psychical unit, separated but yet interrelated to the world. A *good enough facilitating environment* is a mother who protects the infant from external impingements that the baby is not ready to deal with: in fact, at this point there is no external world for the infant, due to the state of mergence between individual and environment, so that any kind of impingement from the outer world would represent for the baby an interruption to his going-on-being.

> […] the unit is not the individual, the unit is an environment-individual set-up. The centre of gravity of the being does not start off in the individual. It is in the total set-up. By good enough child-care, technique, holding, and general management the shell becomes gradually taken over and the kernel (which has looked all the time like a human baby to us) can begin to be an individual […] The good-enough infant care technique neutralizes the

external persecutions, and prevent the feelings of disintegration and loss of contact between psyche and soma […] The human being now developing an entity from the centre can become localized in the baby's body and so can begin to create an external world at the same time as acquiring a limiting membrane and an inside ("Anxiety Associated with Insecurity" 99).

There is no point, for Winnicott, to talk about concepts like *ego* and *id* before the beginning of the process of *integration*, because the *id-phenomena* are to be «covered and catalogued and experienced and eventually interpreted by ego-functioning» ("Ego Integration" 56), and the *ego* is only potential until it becomes integrated as a unit. And it does not make sense to talk about a *self* at this stage, since this requires a later intellectual function of the infant who will then be able to «look at what others see or feel or hear and what they conceive of when they meet this infant body» ("Ego Integration" 56). In this contest, the role of the mother is to support the baby's ego-development by letting him relate to subjective objects (i.e. allowing an *illusion of omnipotence*), and to mediate the baby's encounter with external reality (i.e. reduce impingements). Where there is no *good enough facilitating environment*, the infant's ego-development never starts or it is severely distorted.

Growing from *unintegration* to *integration*, the ego-development begins its process and the infant starts to exist as a unit, an individual with a psycho-somatic apparatus, and an inside and an outside. At this stage, the *facilitating environment* must keep the baby away from three kinds of unthinkable anxieties: a sense of *disintegration*, which is different from primary *unintegration*, because it implies the existence of a psychic unit to feel the threat; a sense of *depersonalization*, i.e. a lack of unity in the relationship between psyche-soma; and «the feeling that the centre of gravity of consciousness transfers from the kernel to the shell, from the individual to the care, the technique» ("Anxiety Associated with Insecurity" 99).

These anxieties are "unthinkable" because the ego is not integrated enough to interpret them, nor there is an intellectual functioning, yet. If the mother is not *good enough* to keep impingements far by mediating between the infant and the world, these anxieties force the baby to react, interrupting his going-on-being. Reacting is the opposite of being, since it interrupts the *illusion of omnipotence* that is at the basis of any sense of self, sense of real, emotional development and ability to live creatively.

Thus, if the environment fails, the infant engages in his own protection by developing psychotic defenses such as *disintegration* (against a return to an unintegrated state), *depersonalization* (against a loss of psycho-somatic unity), *exploitation of primary narcissism* (against a loss of sense of real), and *autistic states* (against a loss of the ability to relate to objects) ("Fear of Breakdown" 90). It will be noted that each form of anxiety is mirrored by its specific psychotic defense, which is as bad as the relative anxiety but, at least, it has the advantage to be created not by the environment but by the person, and thus it is under the individual omnipotence.

While the infant's encounter with external reality needs to be maximally mediated by the mother at the initial stage of absolute dependence, it is also a necessary feature of ego-development. Going from a state of absolute dependence to independence, the baby learns how to deal with external reality and the mother must let him proceed autonomously according to his own personal time. This corresponds to the transition from *illusion* to *disillusion*, where an objective perception of reality is added to the previous subjective conception of it, and where the encounter with external reality ceases to be an impingement and begins to offer the opportunity for relationship and concern. This means that *ego-integration* has already started and the baby is learning to tolerate the limits imposed by external reality because his ego is strong enough to gather impingements into the area of omnipotence thanks to projection and introjections mechanisms. Also, thanks to a beginning of the intellect, the child starts to be able to deal with the mother's possible failures. At this point, temporary and progressive failures of the *facilitating environment* are necessary for the infant to move towards independence. This process has been outlined by Winnicott in these terms:

> (i) *Absolute Dependence*. In this state the infant has no means of knowing about the maternal care, which is largely a matter of prophylaxis. He cannot gain control over what is well and what is badly done, but is only in a position to gain profit or to suffer disturbance.
> (ii) *Relative Dependence*. Here the infant can become aware of the need for the details of maternal care, and can to a growing extent relate them to personal impulse […]
> (iii) *Towards Independence*. The infant develops means for doing without actual care. This is accomplished through the accumulation of memories of care, the projection of personal needs and the introjection of care details, with the development of confidence in the environment. Here must be added

the element of intellectual understanding with its tremendous implications ("The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship" 46).

In the progressive journey from absolute dependence towards independence, the opposition provided by external reality is fundamental for the infant to have satisfactory experiences that provide opportunities for ego-development. The basis for this dynamic is the innate aggressiveness of the baby that is not purposive aggression but unintentional expression of life force and motility. Winnicott claims that there cannot be intentional aggression where there has not been *integration* yet, because the ego is not organized enough to collect id-impulses, to perceive the other as a whole person and to be aware of the consequences of destructiveness, and to feel anger, guilt or concern about something: «In this era there is not even ruthlessness; it is a pre-ruth era, and if destruction be part of the aim in the id impulse, than destruction is only incidental to id satisfaction. Destruction only becomes an ego responsibility when there is an ego integration and an ego organization sufficient for the existence of anger […]» ("Aggression in Relation to Emotional Development" 210).

Thus aggression expresses not intentional destructiveness but the innate tendency of the human being to life force, motility and drive toward external reality. Making experience of external oppositions to inner aggressiveness helps the infant define the limit between *me* and *not-me*, and it contributes to the making of a sense of self and other: «In health the foetal impulses bring about a discovery of environment, this latter being the opposition that is met through movement. The result here is an early recognition of a *Not-Me* world, and an early establishment of the *Me*» ("Aggression in Relation to Emotional Development" 216). Thus, in a healthy state, external reality is not perceived as an alienating dimension for the individual, but a necessary and positive opposition whose limits can be renegotiated in the *intermediate area* of rest and *unintegration* between *me* and *not-me*, that is the *potential space* of *transitional phenomena*.

Where the environment is not *good enough* to allow a gradual transition from *illusion of omnipotence* to *disillusion*, the baby perceives the external opposition as impingement instead of opportunity for experience. Due to the environment failure, the individual is left with two alternatives: either he withdraws to a resting inner reality

relatively unaffected by external reality, or he sets the kernel of his self in external reality out of an attitude of compliance:

> [In the first case] the environment impinges on the foetus (or baby) and instead of a series of individual experiences there is a series of *reactions to impingement*. Here then develops a withdrawal to rest which alone allows of individual existence [… In the second case], which is extreme, this is exaggerated to such a degree that there is not even a resting place for individual experience, and the result is a failure in the primary narcissistic state [i.e. *unintegrated state*] to evolve an individual. The 'individual' then develops as an extension of the shell rather than of the core, and as an extension of the impinging environment ("Aggression in Relation to Emotional Development" 211-212).

1.5. Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self

Proceeding from the contrast between creative experiences and reactions to impingements in the maturational process of the individual, Winnicott develops a theory of the existence of a *true self* and a *false self*. Compliance is a feature of the *false self* used in defense of the *true self* in the relationship between individual and environment, and it is organized to protect the isolation of the *true self* which must never be communicated. There can be many levels of compliance, going from a healthy degree of compromise between the isolation of the *true self* and socialization to a pathological development of a *false self* that takes over the *true self*. The kind of organization of this defense depends on the degree of success or failure of the *facilitating environment* in respecting the infant's need to go from *illusion of omnipotence* to *disillusion* at his own right time.

The achievement of a self depends on the process of *ego-integration*, since it is built upon the infant's awareness of the separation between *me* and *not-me*, and it requires the beginning of an intellectual functioning in the baby to detect the way in which the mother's face mirrors his own person: «[…] ego offers itself for study long before the word self has relevance. The word self arrives after the child has begun to use the intellect to look at what others see or feel or hear and what they conceive of when they meet this infant body» ("Ego Integration" 56). Nonetheless, the potential for a self

has its origin in *unintegration*, or *formlessness*, that is not only found in the time previous to *integration* for the infant but also in playing and cultural experiences for the adult. Only through the environment's mirroring of the individual's impulsive gestures, the ego can integrate experiences and the sense of self can be achieved. The important aspect of these impulsive gestures is that, though they need to be reflected by external reality, they are conceived by the individual's creativity and his own inner reality:

> [The search for the self] can come only from desultory formless functioning, or perhaps from rudimentary playing, as if in a neutral zone. It is only here, in this unintegrated state of the personality, that that which we describe as creative can appear. This if reflected back, *but only if reflected back*, becomes part of the organized individual personality, and eventually this in summation makes the individual to be, to be found; and eventually enables himself or herself to postulate the existence of the self ("Playing: Creative Activity" 86).

In other words, the mirroring role of the mother is related to the ego-support she provides to the infant. Only by allowing the baby the *illusion of omnipotence* and protecting him from external impingements does the mother allow the child's *ego-integration* to take place, and the id-impulses are not different from external phenomena for the infant until the ego is strong enough to collect and organize them. Thanks to mirroring, the ego receives the individual's id-impulses back and starts discerning them from external phenomena, providing the basis for creativity and sense of self:

> In the area that I am examining the instincts are not yet clearly defined as internal to the infant. The instincts can be as much external as can a clap of thunder or a hit. The infant's ego is building up strength and in consequence is getting towards a state in which id-demands will be felt as part of the self, and not as environmental. When this development occurs, then id-satisfaction becomes a very important strengthener of the ego, or of the True Self ("Ego Distortion" 141).

This is not always the case. The mother may not be in the condition to reflect her infant's gestures, due to a lack of identification with the baby or to distortions in her own maturational process. In fact, being a *good enough mother* does not depend on intellectual understanding of the child's needs or on innate instinct, but on the

maturation of a healthy emotional development. Thus, if the mother's face cannot mirror the infant's self, the baby's creativity may be blocked: he may lose the ability to relate to subjective objects and substitute it with a sterile relation to objective objects. Then both sense of self and sense of reality are jeopardized, because both inner and external reality are devoid of a personal meaning:

> Many babies however do have to have a long experience of not getting back what they are giving. They look and they do not see themselves […] the baby gets settled into the idea that when he or she looks, what is seen is the mother's face. The mother's face is not then a mirror. So perception takes place of apperception, perception takes the place of that which might have been the beginning of a significant exchange to the world, a two-way process in which self-enrichment alternates with the discovery of meaning in the world of seen things ("Mirror-Role of Mother and Family in Child Development" 151).

The break between creative apperception and reactive perception may cause the organization of a compliant self, or a *false self*, since the individual who cannot relate to subjective phenomena is forced to rely on objective reality and surrender to an excessive degree of adaptation to the environment. Winnicott ("Ego Distortion" 142-143) illustrates a range of possibilities in *false self* organization, going from the most severe to the healthiest. At one extreme there is a *false self* that presents itself as the real person in relationships, while the *true self* is hidden; at the other extreme the *false self* represents a social attitude that the *true self* could never keep up by itself, because the latter needs to be preserved from exploitation and annihilation, even in a *good enough environment*. In between there is a gradation of conditions in which the *false self* erects itself in protection of the *true self* from a threatening environment, and it may alternate between looking for situations where the *true self* can be expressed and reorganizing stronger defenses to preserve it from annihilation. If good environmental conditions cannot be found, the ultimate option for the *false self* to defend the *true self* is suicide: «This, of course, involves its own destruction, but at the same time eliminates the need for its continued existence, since its function is the protection of the True Self from insult» ("Ego Distortion" 143).

Thus, some degree of splitting in the human psyche is contemplated both in health and illness. This splitting can be either a positive achievement of a differentiation between inner and outer reality, as a consequence of a satisfying *integration* and emotional development, or a reiterated defense from the threat of annihilation, as a result of the failures of the *facilitating environment* in maintaining the *essential paradox*. One must bear in mind that the *true self* is the location of personal psychic reality, sense of being, aliveness, and creativity, while the *false self* is a setup that can deceive the others but will ultimately make the person feel phoney, not real, and compliant. In this context, the states of *unintegration* provided by playing and cultural experiences offer opportunities to renegotiate the personal boundaries between inner and outer reality established in infancy, but one cannot make use of the *essential paradox* implied in *transitional phenomena* if the splitting is too rigidly set up:

> In the healthy individual who has a compliant aspect of the self but who exists and who is a creative and spontaneous being, there is at the same time a capacity for the use of symbols. In other words health here is closely bound up with the capacity of the individual to live in an area that is intermediate between the dream and the reality, that which is called the cultural life […] By contrast, where there is a high degree of split between the True Self and the False Self which hides the True Self, there is found a poor capacity for using symbols, and a poverty of cultural living ("Ego Distortion" 143).

1.6. Mind and Its Relation to the Psyche-Soma

One common feature of an abnormal *false self* is its location in the mind, resulting in a dissociation between intellectual functioning and psycho-somatic existence of the self. This case represents a double splitting, first between *true self* and *false self*, and then between mind and psyche-soma. It is a very tricky condition for the human being, because of the degree of deception implied in it: the more the person is successful in life because of his own intellect, the more he will feel phoney, futile and not real, because personal achievements are not based on creativity but on compliance, and the *true self* is kept hidden from the process:

When there has taken place this double abnormality, (i) the False Self organized to hide the True Self, and (ii) an attempt on the part of the individual to solve the personal problem by the use of a fine intellect, a clinical picture results which is peculiar in that it very easily deceives. The world may observe academic success of a high degree, and may find it hard to believe in the very real distress on the individual concerned, who feels 'phoney' the more he or she is successful. When such individuals destroy themselves in one way or another, instead of fulfilling promise, this invariably produces a sense of shock in those who have developed high hopes of the individual ("Ego Distortion" 144).

In exposing his theory of mind, Winnicott considers intellectual functioning as a part of the psyche that is related to the soma, but which is not to be localized precisely in the brain or in any part of the body. The brain is still fundamental because there can be no *ego-development* without a functioning brain, but the mind is a function of the ego, not a physical entity. Intellectual functioning is what allows the infant to deal with the mother's failures without being traumatized, and eventually with the distinction between causality and pure chance. This is true both when the mother is *good enough* and when she is not, but in the second case there can be abnormalities in the development of intellectual functioning that may end up concurring with a *false self*.

When Winnicott talks about a *good enough mother*, he does not mean a perfect mother, because he is aware that perfection is not a human feature. A *good enough mother* is a devoted mother who, by identifying with the infant, can provide the ego support he needs. This implies mediating between the infant and the world, so that the *illusion of omnipotence* is maintained and the baby does not suffer an excessive amount of impingements that his own ego is not ready to collect and interpret. At this stage the infant is not even aware of the difference between internal and external phenomena, since he is still living in mergence and absolute dependence with the environment. As the baby's ego grows and goes from absolute dependence to relative dependence, new abilities to catalogue and interpret impingements are developed, and these have to do with intellectual functioning compensating for the mother's failures:

The ordinary good mother is good enough. If she is *good enough* the infant becomes able to allow for her deficiencies by mental activity […] The

mental activity of the infant turns a *good-enough* environment into a perfect environment, that is to say, turns relative failure of adaptation into adaptive success. What releases the mother from her need to be near-perfect is the infant's understanding. In the ordinary course of events the mother tries not to introduce complications beyond those which the infant can understand and allow for; in particular she tries to insulate her baby from coincidences and from other phenomena that must be beyond the infant's ability to comprehend ("Mind and its Relation" 245).

In other words, the mind is the adaptive part of the psyche, and it compensates for the shortage of adaptation coming from the environment to the individual. This is why the intellect is so easily linked with a compliant attitude and the organization of a *false self*. If the environment is *good enough*, the mind develops in healthy terms and leads the individual in a successful process from absolute dependence towards independence, but if the environment is not reliable, the mind overreacts and gets exploited. By overreacting and adapting to the environment, the mind is taking the place of the mother who cannot be trusted and, thus, it is taking care of the psyche-soma, identifying itself as a different entity from the psycho-somatic being:

Certain kinds of failure on the part of the mother, especially erratic behavior, produce over-activity of the mental functioning. Here, in the overgrowth of the mental function reactive to erratic mothering, we see that there can develop an opposition between the mind and the psyche-soma, since in reaction to this abnormal environmental state the thinking of the individual begins to take over and organizing the caring for the psyche-soma, whereas in health it is the function of the environment to do this ("Mind and its Relation" 246).

When a substitution of mothering through mental activity takes place, the mother is ideally made unnecessary, and the mind takes charge of protecting the *true self* from external reality: «It is a case of "Cogito, ergo in mea potestate sum"»[16] ("New Light" 156). Nonetheless, the individual cannot leave the state of dependence from the actual mother, since independence has been achieved through mind exploitation and at the expense of the *true self*. The mind is then felt to be an enemy and needs to be localized in the body, that is in the individual's area of omnipotence, in order to be controlled,

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[16] «I think, therefore I am in control», as opposed to Cartesian «I think, therefore I am».

and it is perceived as an entity in itself, separated from the psyche-soma. The only way to attain a psyche-soma unity would be regression to dependence, when the mind had no reason to exist: «In this case, 'without mind' becomes a desired state» ("Mind and its Relation" 247).

Chapter 2

The Search for the Self

After introducing Winnicott's main theories about *transitional phenomena* and the development of the self, in the second chapter I proceed to analyze Wallace's first novel, *The Broom of the System*, in the view of the above.

In the analysis of the novel, I focus on the dynamics going on between Lenore Beadsman, the protagonist of the novel, and her family, in order to detect the environmental processes that lead Lenore to perceive herself as a two-dimensional character with no inner self. I take the Beadsman family as an instance of surrounding environment in Winnicottian sense, even though the main parental figure here is Lenore's father instead of her mother. It must be remembered, though, that according to Winnicott the original environment for the individual is not necessarily the mother, but it can be any designed care-giver.

In the setting of a *not good enough environment*, I analyze the main characters' relation with themselves, their own bodies, and the others. I argue, drawing from Winnicott, that their frequent feeling of being empty inside and unsatisfied with their net of relationships does not depend on a lack of self but rather on a split of the self and on the identification of their *false self* with the mind. Hence, I contend that Lenore's vicissitudes provide her with a development in the course of the novel, going through a state of *unintegration* that allows her to redefine her own boundaries and sense of self.

The chapter is divided into four sections where I first briefly summarize the plot of *The Broom of the System*; then, I introduce the members of the Beadsman family by focusing on their defense strategies and distorted relationships; after that, I provide a state of the art on the studies already conducted on *The Broom of the System*; finally, I propose my original reading of the novel's treatment of the self according to Winnicott's theories of the self and *transitional phenomena*.

2.1. *The Broom of the System*

Lenore Beadsman is a 24-year-old girl from East Corinth, Ohio,[17] who embarks on a grotesque search for the self following the mysterious disappearance of her great-grandmother who is also called Lenore Beadsman. The young Lenore is seeing a controversial therapist, Dr. Jay, because she suffers from identity issues, feeling like her own life is forced upon herself from the outside, and that her network of relationships is determined by the anxiety of being constantly manipulated by the others.[18] Ironically, most of the characters of *The Broom of the System* are actually trying to manipulate her for different reasons, and the extent to which Lenore is only being paranoid is never completely clarified.

The fact that Lenore is searching for the self is never made explicit in the novel. Narratively, she is looking for her great-grandmother Lenore, whose homonymy can be taken as a hint that the niece is actually looking for her grown up self.[19] Lenore Sr. used to play a fundamental role in the Beadsman family and especially in Lenore Jr.'s upbringing, but then she was confined in a nursing home at Shaker Heights as an old woman. Lenore Sr. has been instructing the young girl about the relevance of words and language in the setting of reality, following Ludwig Wittgenstein's late philosophy in the *Philosophical Investigations*.

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[17] East Corinth exists in Vermont but not in Ohio. The setting of *The Broom of the System* is an imaginary East Corinth founded and managed by the Beadsman family, and it is a symbol of Lenore's managerial and suffocating family: «How much free will does she truly have in an environment almost entirely controlled by her family and Stonecipheco and under circumstances in which her movements are being plotted and controlled by her great-grandmother?» (O'Gara, "An Understanding of One's Place" 99). See also Mark Sheridan, 2015, who hints at the partricidal implications of Lenore's search for the self: «Wallace's fictional East Corinth (Corinth being the place of Oedipus' birth) seems to reprise Pynchon's classical thread, lending further layers of meaning to Lenore's quest to work out the complications in her family and showing us how Wallace conducted conversations across and between texts» (86). Jeffrey Severs points, not very convincingly, to a possible spiritual reference to Paul's epistles to Corinthians: «When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but the face to face» (I Cor. 13:11-12, in Severs, *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books* 43).
[18] «She said she was seeing Dr. Jay chiefly for help with feelings of disorientation and identity-confusion and lack of control, which I could to an extent understand, because I knew her to be the daughter of the proprietor of Stonecipheco Baby Food Products, […] an oppressive and unignorable influence in the life of anyone in any way connected with its helm» (*Broom* 61).
[19] Patrick O'Donnell ("Almost a Novel" 11) gives the case of homonymy the same meaning, «the double-naming clearly suggesting that the quest for [Lenore's] great-grandmother is also a quest for herself».

The disappearance of Lenore Sr. from the nursing home unveils the chaotic and dysfunctional network of relationships characterizing the niece's life and her surrounding environment, symbolized by the technical breakdown of the switchboard where Lenore works as an operator. In fact, Frequent and Vigorous's switchboard is supposed to keep communication going between the inside and the outside of Bombardini Building, but what it is actually doing is mixing up the calls preventing the operators from handling the connections between source and destination, outside and inside.

In most of the other characters' opinion, Lenore Sr.'s teachings are the very basis of her niece's identity crisis and communication breakdown, but this vision is arguable and called into question by the plot development. Lenore Sr.'s intentions by disappearing are never revealed: it is never stated whether she wants to help her young niece by challenging Lenore Jr.'s knowledge of Wittgenstein's later philosophy or if she is moved by the egoistic purpose to get a social function back after her confinement in the nursing home.[20] Maybe both the cases are true and not incompatible. However, the great-grandmother's actions result not only in deeper reflections on *Philosophical Investigations* but also in Lenore Jr.'s confrontation with her own identity issues and dysfunctional relationships.[21]

Coinciding with Lenore Sr.'s disappearance, Lenore Jr. is cast in a series of troubling events concerning her job at Frequent and Vigorous, her family and her father's company, her sentimental relationship with Rick Vigorous, Norman

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[20] In a letter to Lance Olsen, Wallace describes Lenore Sr. as «a hard woman, a cold woman, a querulous and thoroughly selfish woman, one with vast intellectual pretensions and… probably commensurate gifts» (Olsen, "Termite Art" 204). In Olsen's view, Lenore Sr. is motivated by her egoistic desire to have a function and, thus, a meaning (204); Boswell (*Understanding* 33) sees Lenore Sr.'s disappearance as both being egoistic and altruistic, since her search for a social function helps Lenore Jr. remove her homonymous external referent; Hayes-Brady reads Lenore Sr.'s withdrawal as further and actualized Wittgensteinian teaching ("The Book, the Broom and the Ladder" 27) and «an act of generous self-sacrifice» ("I Kept Saying Her Name 13); Mulhall (*The Self and Its Shadows* 298) takes it as an acceptance of authorial impotence rather than exacerbation of omnipotence; O'Donnell ("Almost a Novel" 11) keeps the question unresolved.

[21] The switchboard's breakdown eventually turns out to be caused by Lenore Sr. who, after disappearing, is thought to have moved under the Bombardini Building, among the switchboard's cables. Then, Lenore Sr.'s disappearance and the switchboard breakdown are deeply correlated as trigger events of Lenore Jr.'s search for the self. Hayes-Brady comments upon the meaning of the switchboard's breakdown: «[…] Wallace uses this breakdown in communication to break *open* the closed vocabulary of Lenore's life, exposing her to new and unfamiliar voices and concerns, so that she can locate her "feelings of being [herself]", or her authentic sense of self, and thus function as an autonomous and rounded person, without worrying over her linguistic construction, or the perception of her self-presentation» (*The Unspeakable Failures* 102).

Bombardini's surreal attempts to involve her in his grotesque Project Total Yang, the appearance of Andrew Sealander Lang from the past and her unexpected feelings for him, and her cockatiel Vlad the Impaler's starring in Reverend Sykes's TV program *Partners with God* due to the animal's "miraculous" new speaking abilities. All these events seem to be suspiciously connected to each other and related to Lenore Sr.'s disappearance, but they are not the cause of Lenore Jr.'s identity crisis. The young Lenore has already been going to Dr. Jay's office for an undefined amount of time, because she does not feel real, she cannot make a distinction between narration and reality, and she feels «[…] pressured and coerced into feeling and doing the things [she] feel[s] and do[es]» (*Broom* 116).

Lenore and Rick's relationship is based on telling, and it is aggravating Lenore's confusion about telling and reality. Rick is a writer and an editor, prominently a rational man, incapable of emotional and physical connection. He is possessive and jealous, but also painfully aware of his own limits, so he tries to impose his control on Lenore with his most powerful weapon: words. The reason why Lenore initially trusts Rick more than the other characters is because she thinks that he uses words mostly to tell stories, thus making a clear and honest distinction between telling and reality. As a matter of fact, Rick is constantly trying to manipulate Lenore by mediating her perception of reality through his short stories by which he reinterprets their relationship.

Lenore and Rick first met at Dr. Jay's office, and they continue to see him as therapy patients. Dr. Jay is presented as a bizarre and quite unethical therapist from the first session, and, as the reader realizes later in the novel, he is actually working for Lenore Sr. who is hiding in the network of cables under the Bombardini Building (thus causing the material and symbolic communication breakdown). Despite his arguable techniques, Dr. Jay is actually willing to help Lenore, at least because that is what he has been instructed to do. At the same time, he works to distance Rick from Lenore, because, as an emissary of Lenore Sr., he implies that Rick is noxious to Lenore as he is constantly trying to take control over her.

Norman Bombardini is the physical counterpart of Rick's intellectual strategy to ingest Lenore's self into his own. Norman's Project Total Yang contemplates the idea of eating and growing to infinite size in order to fill the empty space between himself

and the others, so as to avoid loneliness and solipsism: «"An autonomously full universe […] Rather than diminishing Self to entice Other to fill our universe, we may also of course obviously choose to fill the universe with *Self*"» (81). Within the general absurdity of his project, Norman considers the eventuality of leaving a small corner of universe for Lenore to live in, since he has started to have pathological feelings for her.

The great-grandmother's disappearance coincides with other grotesque events starting to take place, such as Lenore Jr.'s cockatiel, Vlad the Impaler, suddenly starts to speak copiously. His new ability to speak must be related to Lenore's Sr. studies on the pineal gland and her likely experiments with Stonecipheco Baby Food Products, but it is taken as a miraculous event by Lenore Jr.'s religious landlady who eventually introduces the cockatiel to the televangelist Reverend Sykes. Vlad ends up co-conducting *Partners with God* together with Sykes, a TV-program where the Reverend promises spectators that they will overcome loneliness and become God's friends in exchange for money donations. Vlad's speeches mix up Lenore's friend Candy's sex talks and religious principles submitted by the TV-program's operators, hilariously matching together and serving Sykes's purpose to sell God's friendship through a TV-screen.

During and because of the search for her great-grandmother, Lenore Jr. must communicate with her dysfunctional family in order to collect information about their last contacts with Lenore Sr.. The young Lenore has to confront her father, a business man who cannot make a clear distinction between the family and the family company and who is trying to make profit of his children's intellectual abilities for the future of the family/company. She visits her sister Clarice, who seems to be unaware of the situation and the family's intricacies, despite her husband Alvin Spaniard working at Stonecipheco. Their brother LaVache at Amherst College is the only one who gives his own opinion about Lenore Sr.'s disappearance, drawing from his philosophy knowledge and intellectual understanding of their great-grandmother's possible plans. Lenore never gets to find her other brother, John, an academic working in Chicago whose temporary unreachability does not seem to worry their father, due to John's frequent mental breakdowns.

Within a complex web of coincidences that are not fully distinguishable from a proper plot organized by Lenore Sr., Andrew Sealander Lang comes up from Lenore Jr.'s past and falls into place in her present life. Lenore first met him as a teenager when he was at college, and she found him repulsive because of his goliardic behavior and physical aggressiveness. Their second encounter takes an unexpected twist, as Andrew ends up taking Rick's place as Lenore's lover by providing her what Rick has always been unable to offer: a real love relationship, where "real" means distinguishable from telling and not confined to the intellectual dimension.[22]

Together with Lenore and Lang's departure from East Corinth and from Rick's narration, at the end of *The Broom of the System* there is a reversal of Lenore's feelings and the recovery of her agency over her own life. The novel is conceived as a "parabola" made of a first stage where Lenore is not able to relate to the other characters, then a long chaotic process where messed up connections force the girl to establish new relationships with the same people as always. In the end, it is not the world around Lenore that has changed, but it is her sense of self and ability to relate to others that has been renovated: «[…] if you get to where you, you know, love a person, everything sort of reverses. It's not that you love the person because of certain things about the person anymore; it's that you love the things about the person because you love the person. It kind of radiates out, instead of in» (*Broom* 287). This new kind of feeling implies a relation of the self to the other as a whole, also concerning the emotional and physical dimension, not just an intellectual attachment as it was in the case of Rick.

By disappearing from East Corinth[23] and from the narration, Lenore not only escapes Rick's intellectual and linguistic manipulation, but on some level she becomes real enough to get free from the author's control. The ending of the novel stands for the

[22] In the essay "By Hirsute Author," Mary K. Holland questions the «[…] unconvincing redemption by Wang-Dang […]» (71), suggesting instead that Lang's physical relationship with Lenore just replaces Rick's linguistic effort of domination and self-definition, according to a Lacanian concept of masculine subject always desiring a feminine object. On the contrary, I start from other assumptions about the development of the self that posits the intellectual and the psychical dimensions on two different levels, as it will be explained later on.

[23] «It is notable, then, that when she leaves her office and the novel, Rick informs us that she has left East Corinth. This is because East Corinth has literally been shaped by the Beadsman family – […] East Corinth is in the shape of Jayne Mansfield's profile. This is indicative both of the Beadsman family's control over Lenore's life and the ability of capitalistic enterprise to shape the landscape» (O'Gara, "An Understanding of One's Place" 106).

existence of a reality beyond language, one which is not possible to describe by words but that can be hinted at through the use of silence. The ending of the novel states a difference between telling and reality and frees Lenore from the feeling of being determined by a pre-established system, thus allowing her to recover her "real" identity and a significant agency over her life.

2.2. "Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders"

The Broom of the System is built upon the opposition between inside and outside as characterizing the relationship between the self and the other. The concept of the other is not treated only as an opposing self, but as a surrounding environment which exists out of the individual's interior self.[24] Wallace proposes a model of concentric open systems that are both separate and interrelated to each other. Starting from an apparent irreconcilability between the individual and the society, *The Broom of the System* ends up calling into question what the very idea of opposition is: the novel gradually illustrates the paradoxical state of separateness and union between the individual and the environment. In the continuous re-negotiation of boundaries between the inside and the outside, Wallace's criticism of American solipsism deals with the individual's fear of being absorbed and annihilated by the environment. Individuals in *The Broom of the System* struggle to engage in significant relationships with outer reality without jeopardizing their own inner self.

Although it is embedded in irony and apparent skepticism,[25] Dr. Jay's membrane theory can be rightfully considered as a focal point in picturing the relationship between

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[24] Patrick O'Donnell ("Almost a Novel" 3-4) defines the relationship between the self and the other in *The Broom of the System* as follows: «The title of the novel is, indeed, indicative of Wallace's concern with "agency" as comprising an interactive and highly mutable ratio of "self" to "other", which for Wallace is homologous to the relation of part to whole (we can consider Wallace's generic sense of the whole as a totality made up of many discursive and rhetorical parts)».
[25] Daniel Grassian (*Hybrid Fictions* 82-84) sees Wallace's treatment of Dr. Jay as a parodic critique of contemporary psychological language, which is interfering in Americans' life and substituting everyday language, ultimately aggravating contemporary communication problems.

the inside and the outside.[26] On a physical level the membrane represents the human skin both keeping the inside separated from the outside and allowing physical contact; psychically it stands for the individual's capacity to keep self and other separated yet interrelated:

> JAY: […] The strong, clean membrane chooses what to suck inside itself and lets all the rest bounce dirtily off […] Like ovums. These membranes withstand the onslaught of the countless Other-set, ceaselessly battering, the Others, their heads coated with filth, their underarms clotted with fungus, they batter, and the secure membrane/ovum waits patiently, strong, aloof, secure, and, yes, occasionally will let an Other in, will suck it in, on the membrane's terms, will suck it in like a sperm, will take it inside itself to renew, to create itself anew. (330-331)

This extract from one of Lenore's sessions with Dr. Jay illustrates the double nature of the membrane and the sense of self. The self is not confined to an intellectual understanding of its boundaries, but it also relies on physical consciousness, and any dysfunction of the membrane provokes both hygiene and identity anxiety, «which are ultimately […] not coherently distinguishable» (137).

Dr. Jay insists on Lenore's inability to handle external inputs and to discern them from her own internal outputs, which is ultimately a consequence of her flabby membrane. Lenore's feeling of being coerced by the outside and constantly in need of a shower is due to the girl's self boundaries and her ability to relate to others:

> JAY: Don't you see that perceiving your own natural desires and inclinations and attractions as somehow being directed at and forced on you from outside, from *Outside*, is a truly classic instance of a malfunction in a hygiene-identity network? That it's exhaustively reducible to and explainable in terms of membrane-theory? That a flabby membrane is unhealthily permeable, lets the Self out to soil the Other-set and the Other-set in to soil the Self? (330)

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[26] When asked by Viking Penguin's editor Gerry Howard to eliminate the membrane theory from the book, Wallace replied with an animated letter where he explained that «while potentially disgusting… [the membrane theory] is deeply important to what I perceive as a big subplot of the book, which is essentially a dialogue between Hegel and Wittgenstein on one hand and Heidegger and a contemporary French thinker-duo named Paul DeMan and Jacques Derrida on the other, said debate having its root in an essential self-other distinction […]» (Max, *Every Love Story* 69). Wallace did not mention, of course, his own fixation with hygiene and showers.

According to Dr. Jay, what is perceived by Lenore as inputs coming from the outside are actually impulses coming from the inside, but the girl's flabby membrane does not allow her to make a proper distinction between herself and the environment, the inside and the outside. The feeling of being unreal and the product of a telling, thus, is related to Lenore's weak sense of self and her inability to perceive the existence of her inner reality.

Since the membrane represents the physical and psychical boundary of the self, it is implied that a flabby membrane is a consequence of a weak self. A weak self does not allow the membrane to make a clear distinction between inside and outside, because it does not acknowledge itself as inner dimension. If the inner dimension is not perceived, it is impossible to establish meaningful relationships and communications, because there is no awareness of an inner reality for a significant exchange to take place. Relationships and communications, then, are replaced by forceful and "dirty" interactions that cannot reach the self:

> JAY: […] The Inside doesn't keep the distinction going. The inside lets the Outside in. And what does it make you do? You *sweat* […] What does the Outside do? It makes you *unclean*. It coats Self with Other. It pokes at the membrane. And if the membrane is what makes you you and the not-you not you, what does that say about you, when the not-you begins to poke through the membrane? […] It makes you *insecure* […] Communications break down […] There are language problems […] The disturbance of your security on your interior side of the Self-Other membrane makes you an erratic and dangerous component of everyone else's Other-set. Your insecurity bleed out into and contaminates the identities and hygiene networks of Others. Which again simply reinforces the idea of the hygiene-identity-distinction membrane being *permeable* – permeable via *uncleanness*, permeable via *misunderstanding* – which are ultimately […] not coherently distinguishable. (136-137)

Paraphrasing Dr. Jay's terms, a healthy membrane represents a satisfying sense of self that is strong enough to relate to the environment without feeling threatened. The fear of being "soiled" or misunderstood by the other depends on a weak sense of self, and it can determine the individual's inability to acknowledge himself as part of the environment and to establish fruitful relationships and communications.

According to Dr. Jay, both Lenore and Rick are trapped inside their own membranes because their membranes are not strong enough.[27] Since a weak membrane makes the individual feel insecure, both Lenore and Rick focus on preserving their selves at the cost of a real connection with the other/environment, as a consequence of a self defense strategies. While Lenore chooses to isolate herself from the environment, especially from her family, Rick tries to entrap Lenore in his inner world, because he is aware of the impossibility for him to overcome the limits of his own rigid self and to engage in a satisfying relationship: «JAY: Why do you think [Rick]'s so possessive? He wants you *in* him. He wants to trap you behind the membrane with him. He knows he can never validly permeate the membrane of an Other, so he desires to bring that Other into him, for all time» (332). In this respect, Norman Bombardini, with his Project TotalYang, corresponds physically to Rick's intellectual aspiration: ingesting Lenore into his own self. Norman obviously represents the embodiment of Lenore's nightmare, since he specifically threatens her own self and her control over her life, besides being physically disgusting. While Rick perceives his self as located in the mind, Mr. Bombardini does the opposite, focusing completely on his physical self and boundaries. Illustrating his bizarre Project Total Young, Norman grotesquely represents Lenore's embodied anxiety: the annihilation of her own self by the other/environment.

Lenore's flabby membrane defines a weak sense of self and a form of hygiene anxiety due to the fact that she has not come to terms with her psychical and bodily existence. She tries to isolate herself both from the outer world by choosing a partner who is not able to penetrate her either physically or emotionally, so that she feels protected from the risk of being absorbed by the environment. Still, Lenore goes through a process of emotional maturation that implies the reconciliation with her body in the physical relationship with Lang and the achievement of what in the novel is

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[27] David Hering notices that the topic of physical entrapment is not reduced to the body membrane but to physical spaces in general, spaces that embody the threat of solipsism: «Wallace's debut novel *The Broom of the System* invokes and partially dramatizes the philosophical distinction between Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and *Philosophical Investigations* [...] through a series of references to physical entrapment. [...] Lenore's *bildungsroman*-style quest for autonomy and freedom from solipsistic entrapment in *The Broom of the System* is spatially dramatized throughout the novel through her escape from physical spaces that restrict movement (dorm rooms, desks, shared apartments, telephone consoles)» ("Form as Strategy" 132). See also Marshall Boswell: «[*The Broom of the System*] also updates Thomas Pynchon's exploration of entropy [...] in such a way that this proposed "open" system emerges as the most viable model by which to combat not only solipsism and loneliness but also the "death of the novel", as outlined by Pynchon's postmodern partner, John Barth» (*Understanding* 22).

defined as a "reversal" of feelings (287), which is the acknowledgment of her own impulses. The development of a stronger sense of self is the basis for Lenore to reinforce her own agency and escape the others' telling, resulting in her disappearance from the last pages of the novel and symbolizing her achievement of a "real" status.

Lenore Sr.'s lessons on Wittgenstein have convinced her niece that there is no extra-linguistic reality, and thus no difference between life and telling. Since «[…] any telling automatically becomes a kind of system, that controls everybody involved» (122), Lenore's life itself feels like involved in a bigger system that makes its own reasons and over which the girl has no control. But according to Wittgenstein communitarian approach to language, the system is not external to the members of a community: it is, instead, constituted by «[…] the rules [of the game that] are agreed upon by more than one person» (Boswell, *Understanding* 26). This implies that every member of a community participate in producing meaning and that, on a psychological level, every member has an agent self which is not controlled by an exterior system but which is part of and contributes to the maintaining and modification of that very system.

In spite of suspecting that her own feelings are forced into her by the outer world, she is dating Rick Vigorous who is indeed the person who is most trying to manipulate her inner world. In the course of the novel, Lenore's life and thoughts are mostly narrated by Rick, who uses his intellectual abilities to compensate for his physical and emotional inadequacy to penetrate Lenore's inner world. Rick's use of words is aimed at re-telling and re-writing his relationship with Lenore[28] and the other characters in the form of short stories, which is ironically Lenore's worst fear: to be determined as a self not from within but from the outside, to be the object of the other's narration instead of being in control of her own life. Lenore clings to Rick as a self-evident manifestation of her own weak self and inability to relate healthily to the environment, she likes him because «"[a]t least, when [Rick] tells [her] stories, it's up-front and clear what's story and what isn't […] It just seems more honest, somehow"» (120). In so doing, Rick constantly keeps reality and telling separated, but he also

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[28] «Rick seeks to position himself as the necessary other to Lenore's self by supplying her with endless narrative. Unable to fulfill Lenore sexually, and thus achieve the meaning he desires as Lenore's lover, Rick seeks to impose a meaning on her with him as a referent, and so to possess her» (Hayes-Brady, "The Book, the Broom and the Ladder" 30).

prevents Lenore from engaging in a real relationship confining her within the two-dimensional space of literature.

Rick's strategies to entrap Lenore in his own self are much more subtle and, in spite of his effort, not physical. He is obsessed with his inability to penetrate Lenore, physically and emotionally, and, in order to keep her under his own control, Rick tries to objectify the girl: «Lenore Beadsman is fucking Andrew Sealander ("Wang-Dang") Lang. It is [... Andy] has taken something I can never have. My object and reference sits outside, punctured and validated by the extension of another» (349). Rick is very self-conscious and aware of the fact that Dr. Jay's theories, as ridiculous as they may sound, are fundamentally pertinent. He knows that his inability to relate to Lenore and the outer reality is leading him not only to isolation but, paradoxically, to a morbid dependence towards the girl:

> *"Think of the Self as at the node of a fan-shaped network of emotions, dispositions, extensions of that feeling and thinking Self. Each line in the protruding network-fan may of course have an external reference and attachment [...] But it need not be so. The line that seeks purchase in and attachment to an exterior Other is necessarily buttressed, supported, held; it thus becomes small, weak, flabby, reliant on Other. Were the exterior reference and attachment to disappear [...]the atrophied line would crumble weakly, might also disappear. The Self would be smaller than before [...] Better to have the lines of the fan stand on their own: self-sufficient, rigid, hard, jutting out into space."* (351)

The only way to sustain a healthy self is in union and separateness from the environment, while Rick cannot do other than oscillate between an actual extreme dependence and an aspired rigid isolation.[29]

What Rick cannot understand, and what Dr. Jay tries to explain to him, is that the relationship between the self and the other must be reciprocal in order to validate both the subjects. Rick can only see Lenore as the object of his life and interests, engaging in a unidirectional dysfunctional affair where the two selves remain

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[29] According to Patrick O'Donnell ("Almost a Novel" 20-21), Rick's metaphor for the self only serves as a tool to prove language's paradoxes and incompleteness; still, he recognizes that Rick's «metaphor has the reader scratching his or her head trying to figure out how it works as a figure that conveys his (Vigorous's) sense of self as both fragile and dominating, both mechanistic and organic, both self-sufficient and utterly dependent upon the "referent" of the other».

fundamentally separated and only coerced to be close, even if this means using handcuffs when Lenore gets free of his narration («[Rick:] "These are our connection, Lenore. I forgive you." [Lenore:] "Handcuffs?"» 440). What is more, Rick sees Lenore as a two-dimensional character devoid of a self and he is afraid that Andy will allow her the three-dimensionality that she needs to feel free and real. As this extract from one of Rick's dream interpretation by Dr. Jay explains:

> JAY: […] initially she is trapped and two-dimensional and unreal… Ah, but then he [… p]enetrates her carefully constructed network with his Self, his self, of which the initials are an elegantly transparent symbol and flag. So Lang in the dream is able to bring *himself* within the very Lenore-membrane he has constructed. He puts himself in her. And what happens, Rick? […] Oh, she becomes real, Rick. She becomes free. She burst out from behind the membrane of two-dimensionality the page represents and becomes real […] she is no longer merely inside a network, she *is* a network. Reality and identity rear their Siamese heads at the junction of Network […] The network that made her real. Only as real is she able to bring herself truly inside an Other. A clean thing is necessarily a reciprocal thing, Rick. (344)

The reference to the two-dimensional character on the page connects Rick's telling about Lenore's life and Wallace's writing about her as a character, thus expanding the idea of environment to the reality out of the novel itself.

When Lenore leaves Rick and East Corinth, she escapes Rick's telling, her father's interests and Wallace's writing. *The Broom of the System* is concluded by Rick's final sentence «I'm a man of my» (467), implying «word», as if the whole novel itself was a product of Rick's narration and effort to manipulate her.[30] In a way, at the end of the novel Lenore achieves a stronger sense of self by depriving Rick of his final word on the narration of her own life. At the same time, by disappearing from the last pages of the novel, it is as if Lenore could attain the status of real person and not just a character of a book. The hinted analogy between Rick's and Wallace's narration does the trick of releasing Lenore both from her sense of being unreal and her actual being unreal, allowing her person to further relationships within outer environments.

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[30] Lee Konstantinou sees Rick as one of Wallace's attempts to create «[…] figurations of authors (and author-like figures) who manipulate readers (or reader-like figures)», responding to a concern of the writer in anticipating reception ("Wallace's 'Bad' Influence" 50).

Andrew Lang Sealander (addressed as Andy, or Lang) is different from Rick in his attitude towards Lenore. To be clear, Lang does not introduce himself as a far better person than Rick: he is quite rough in the beginning of the novel, forcing Clarice and her friends to sign his backside, and his relationship with Melinda Susan Metalman (known as Mindy Metalman, or Melinda-Sue) is rather physical and vulgar. Being vulgar seems to be his "thing", his main feature, and this idea is reinforced by his use of a pronounced Texan accent. After all, in Rick's term Lang is «another inside outsider» (227), that is another person who cannot establish connections and thus is relegated to the outside of communal living even when taking part of it. Lang initially engages with Mindy Metalman after forcing her to sign his backside, which is a symbol of his control on her but also a symptom of him trying to fit in the goliardic traditions of university life. After years of marriage, Lang cannot stand his physical relationship with Mindy anymore, and he is specifically stressed by the fact that his wife's voice is intruding into every aspect of his life (she actually works for multiple channels of communication as the official recorded voice).

In the course of the novel, though, Lang seems to undergo an evolution. He chooses to leave his job with Mandy's father and embark in a new life, one that entails a different kind of relationships. After he meets Lenore again and they start having an affair, Lang develops a good listening ability (something Rick clearly lacks), as opposed to his past intolerance towards his wife's voice. This is part of the reasons that determine Lenore's overture to Lang himself, both emotionally and physically. And Lang's modification of his own way of speaking may be accounted as one distinctive proof of his evolution from linguistically controlled relationships (he, like Rick, used to impress his presence with his signature at Amherst College) to reciprocal and three-dimensional relationships where he does not need to impose his own control on the others in order to feel part of the community:

> [Lenore:] What happened to the way you talk all of a sudden? Why aren't you talking the way you usually do?
> [Lang:] I guess I just don't feel like it about now. I guess maybe we all talk differently with different people. The good old boy stuff is what I grew up on, and the at school I was from Texas and so everybody expected this sort of talking, and so it kind of became my thing at school. At school you more or less got to have a thing. (410)

The "thing" people need to have at school is a symbol of how expectations of the others turn into the self's effort to keep the others and their expectations in control, ending up in damaging relationships and isolating the self from the environment.[31] Lang's maturation consists mainly in overcoming that stage of life where the "thing" was necessary, and now he seems ready to engage in a mature relationship.[32]

Another relevant instance of the environment against which Lenore is to define her own self is her family. The Beadsman family is structured as a company, driven as it is by a functional attitude instead of emotional impulses. Being functional in the sense of being determined by its material and economic purpose turns the family into a deeply dysfunctional environmental nucleus in psychical terms. Together with her sister and two brothers, Lenore is the child of Mr. Stonecipher Beadsman III, «the proprietor of Stonecipheco Baby Food Products, one of Cleveland's very leading […] industries, at any rate certain to be an oppressive and unignorable influence in the life of anyone connected with its helm» (61). The whole Beadsman family has been run by the father as if it was a company, implying strategies and pressures, and preventing emotional attachment. Since a young age, the children were physically separated from their mother, Patrice, because Mr. Beadsman «[…] became convinced somehow that Mrs. Beadsman's mere presence was a harmful thing for the children, and thus the family, and thus the Company […]» (263). At the same time, Mr. Beadsman was « […] constantly giving his three[33] children all sorts of specially developed standardized tests, academic and psychological, to begin the process of determining on whom the mantle of corporate power would someday devolve […]» (263).

Lenore's troubled relationship with her family leads her to a sharp need for clear-cut boundaries between her own self and the outer world. Given the pressure that

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[31] Another instance of this dynamic is given in the following page of the novel, when Lang is talking about his college friend Biff Diggerence whose "thing" used to be pounding walls with his head when he was too drunk instead of vomiting and ended up living segregated in his room: «[…] he started a real tradition with that. Everybody started doin' it. He got to be a sort of legend, by our senior year. I don't think folks even knew he was the one who stayed up in his room all the time. I think they thought he was somebody else" (411).

[32] Patrick O'Donnell would not agree on Lang's maturation: «how long will it take for Lang to conceive of [Lenore's] identity as a limited collection of "holes" or parts bereft of a whole as well?» ("Almost a Novel" 10).

[33] The youngest child, Stonecipher LaVache Beadsman, was not born yet.

she perceives from the outside, Lenore would prefer to keep outer reality clearly distinct from her own inner world, separated by the world's rigid statement of externality, instead of getting involved in the interplay between self and other. She is ready to give up her own agency in order to gain control over her own self, and her inability to play makes her strive for a higher degree of explicit communication «"We need this control thing made explicit. No more games. People tell me what to do and think and say and call them, and I do it. It'll all be simple"» (403). However, this is a defense strategy that eventually reinforces Lenore's feeling of being unreal and coerced by outer reality, out of an attitude of compliance towards the environment.

While Lenore is still living in East Corinth and struggling to maintain her economical and emotional independence from the family company, her brother Stonecipher (also called LaVache, or the Antichrist) has found his own peculiar way not to be compliant towards their father. He keeps physically far from the family/company: he is studying at Amherst College, from where he has cut all communication with the family by telling his father that he does not own a telephone, while in fact he does. LaVache's rejection of his dependence from his father turns into a repellent approach to the environment in general: he likes being called the Antichrist, he looks satanic and his network of relationships at college consists in exploiting his own intellectual qualities giving academic advice to other students in exchange for drugs.

LaVache, the real intellectual prodigy in the family according to Lenore, was physically injured during his premature birth, when his mother, pregnant of him, tried to climb a trellis in order to see her children that were being kept isolated from her in the house. From his birth on, LaVache identified with his wooden leg as a symbol that would keep him distant from his father and the company. LaVache identifies himself with his wooden leg, which is both a creepy symbol of his separateness from the family and his "thing" at Amherst College. In fact, his wooden leg is the tangible consequence of Mr. Beadsman's extreme functional behavior and the family's wreckage. At the same time, the leg is the safe place where LaVache stores drugs, the product of his intellect-based relationships at college and his distinctive feature among the students.

Clarice, Lenore's sister, is lifted from the burden of the family company because she is considered not smart enough, and she is the only one who in turns sets up her own

family, even if it is dysfunctional, too. She is the only child who does not need to cut all connections with the family because the pressure of the company does not weigh on her, and in fact her husband, Alvin Spaniard, works for Stonecipheco Baby Food Products. John, once thought to be the smartest in the family, left for Chicago where he works as an academic and he goes in and out from mental institutions. Lenore is the only child who is considered smart and reliable enough to keep the company going, but she also avoids working at Stonecipheco Baby Food Products because the relationship with her father is one of the main reasons for her weak self: «She felt little enough control over her life as it was. A job at Stonecipheco, or a home with her father and her old governess in Shaker Heights, would only localize and intensify feelings of helplessness, loss of individual efficacy of will» (65).

The family theater at Clarice's place enacts the paradoxical condition of the self being both an individual and a member of the family. Despite being a ridiculous pantomime, the performance explains how considering oneself just as a member of the family deprives the individual of his own self, while identifying oneself with an external object in order to escape the family connections and preserve the individual identity ultimately leaves the person isolated and disoriented. The sense of self is presented as something precariously growing on the interaction between the individual and the family:[34]

> "[…] meaningful dialogue and personal interaction was established, and the family-members began to grow emotionally both as individuals and as members of an emotional network of shared interests and values and emotional commitments, and then the grow and development and dialogue was facilitated by their going and seeing an outside party whose whole life was directed toward helping family-members grow and see themselves clearly both as selves and members, and so come to a fuller and happier sense of self […] They all discovered that they couldn't try to depend for their feelings of being themselves on just the whole family, because they each weren't the whole family […] And they couldn't get their feelings of themselves from things, because they weren't things […] They found out

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[34] O'Gara ("An Understanding of One's Place" 109) comments the paradoxical nature of the self as something eventually provoking a rigid separation between self and other and leading to dynamics of domination: «The difficulty of establishing an autonomous self, while still remaining part of the unit or system in which they exist creates an unsolvable tension, which often translates into crippling self-awareness and the rejection of agency (or, conversely, the attempt to control another's agency, as Rick attempts to control Lenore)».

what they needed to get their feelings of being themselves was from *themselves…*" (172)

In addition to a critique to materialism and consumerism (during the performance, Clarice chooses a credit card as the object to identify with), this gag depicts the danger of identifying with a part of oneself as a fundamentally distinctive feature, as in the case of LaVache with his wooden leg or Lang with his Texan accent. The irony of the argument lies in the fact that in the end the members of the family are told to look for themselves into themselves, which is paradoxical and of little help.

In a broader sense, the theme of the relation between self and other is conveyed by further elements in the novel, such as the creation of the Great Ohio Desert (or G.O.D.)[35] in Ohio, the geographical and cultural ambivalence of the Midwest within the United States, and Reverend Sykes's televangelism. These factors cross with the main narrative about Lenore's search for the self and they expand the concept of other as environment to bigger communities on a national scale. In this sense, Lenore's quest is not confined to a personal issue but it is presented as a shareable, if not universal, matter.[36]

The Great Ohio Desert was conceived in 1972 by Raymond Zusats, the then governor of the state of Ohio, as an artificial material and symbolical «wasteland […] A point of savage reference for the good people of Ohio. A place to fear and love. A blasted region. Something to remind us of what we hewed out of. A place without malls. An Other for Ohio's Self […] Desolation. A place for people to wander alone. To reflect. Away from everything» (54). The governor's main declared preoccupation is

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[35] Boswell, following a Wittgensteinian approach, reads the void of the Desert as a critique of a logocentric view of language:«God is the creator of all things, so all created things ultimately have him as their referent and ground: the Logos, then, is the ultimate referent point for all meaning, the transcendental signified, the broom of the universal system, and logocentrism is the view that linguistic systems have at their center some core, indivisible object of reference of which their meaning is based. In this novel, however, the Logos is a vast void, an emptiness – literally a desert» (*Understanding* 35).

[36] For Jeffrey Severs, both the G.O.D. and Reverend Sykes symbolize a perverse protestant ethic of consumerist self «According to Sykes, one can simultaneously be a hyperconsumerist and a transcendent Christian; he perverts the otherness of divinity to identify it entirely with the acquisitive self, tellingly rendered here in the technological language of the "automatic." […] Sykes thus offers as great a distortion of the path to God as the waste land of the G.O.D. does. These late-twentieth-century forms of civil and religious authority also hold nightmare versions of the Puritans' founding hope to be a new Israel, to be brought out of the desert and into a promised land called America» (*David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books* 56-57).

about Ohio people's temper: he is worried that «the state is getting soft […] Too much development. People are getting complacent. They're forgetting the way this state was historically hewn out of the wilderness» (53). Here the state of Ohio is described as a population that has undergone a process of maturation and civilization pushing against the frontier of wilderness, a topos in the culture and literature of the United States. The idea of wilderness as a limit to be continuously confronted and overcome in order to renovate and maintain a sense of belonging in civilization is at the basis of the governor's project.[37]

The state of Ohio itself is part of the Midwest, an area that in the novel is described as geographically in the middle but culturally on the fringe, a self within the surrounding environment of the United States that asks to be found: «[Mr. Bloemker:] "This area of the country, what are we to say of this area of the country, Ms. Beadsman?" [Lenore:] "Search me"» (142). And the ambivalence of the position of the Midwest within the United States is exacerbated in old Midwesterns' life, according to Mr. Bloemker. Old Midwesterns live in a cultural context that they contributed to shape in the past but which is so rapidly ever-changing that they do not belong in it anymore, so they tend to progressively retire into memory, a "place" that, like Midwest itself, «both is and isn't» (142).

Reverend Sykes brings the theme of the relation between self and other on a virtual level and, as such, he apparently erases the boundary between self and other by substituting it with the television screen: «Friends I want you to come to me and place your hand on my hand, that I hold out to you tonight. Let us all place our hands *together*

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[37] Thinking of Ohio and the Desert in terms of self and other, the relationship between the inside and the outside could be intended as a profitable one, where the limit represented by the Desert/other is necessary for Ohio/self to establish itself as a unity separated yet interrelated to the other/environment. Returning to the wilderness of the Desert, then, is theoretically meant to offer Ohio citizens an opportunity to re-discuss their sense of self, of unity, and their relationship with history and tradition. Though, the governor's project appears to be unreasonable from the very beginning not because of the very concept of it, but due to its artificial conception. The relationship between the self and the other, Ohio and the Desert, is not something that can be imposed or structured by someone a priori. In fact the Desert turns out to be not something truly wild but a handmade park built according to the projection of Ohio's population idea of wilderness. Graham Foster writes: «[…] the desert does not end up fitting with the governor's atavistic ideals […] The G.O.D. is a theme park, a constructed fake designed to placate the American lust for wilderness […] the G.O.D. represents a managed wilderness that is destructive in its nature, a man-made landscape that dominates everything else» ("A Blasted Region" 38-39). In this sense, the Desert does not represent an objective other but a subjective object that does not comply with its limiting function but, instead, maintains Ohio's *illusion of omnipotence* over nature.

in the electronic soil» (465). Sykes conveys a message that is a key point in Wallace's whole literary production, that is the development of a communitarian sense of belonging against loneliness and solipsism: «Use me, friends. Let us play the game together. I promise that no player will feel alone» (466). Nonetheless, the Reverend nullifies the possibility of a true relation between self and other by responding to the logic of television and sponsorship. Sykes is a televangelist making profit from *Partners with God*, a ridiculous TV program where he promises his followers a sense of belonging to his religious community in God's name in exchange for a little donation: as in the case of Dr. Jay, Reverend Sykes's manners are presented as unethical and grotesque but his invitation to a relational interplay and a reciprocal use between subjects is not to be discarded. [38]

As I have shown, Wallace's preoccupation with the boundaries of the self and the relation with the other pervades the whole novel and it is represented through the voice of several, different characters. The theme of the search for the self is approached from several perspectives that include family dynamics, love and friendship, religion, politics and advertising. In the next section of this chapter, I comment on the existing studies on *The Broom of the System* in order to show that they are mostly devoted to philosophical readings of the novel and they completely underestimate the psychological aspects of Wallace's treatment of the self.

2.3. "[A] beautiful argument against solipsism"

The Broom of the System is Wallace's first novel, written in 1985 as his English thesis at Amherst College and published two years later, in 1987. Wallace considered *The Broom of the System* as a "disguised essay" (Wallace, "Looking for a Garde" 12) composed at a

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[38] Daniel Grassian depicts television as a fallacious therapeutic medium that relies on psychological language, one that separates people and impedes real communication: «[…] the use of television as a therapeutic medium works as more of a division between the family members, who do not talk during or after the "therapy" […] Through his depiction of television-oriented family theater, Wallace dramatizes how everyday Americans adopt the language and techniques of modern psychology. In a society where direct communication between people has become increasingly strained, the psychiatrist or psychotherapist takes precedence as a communicative deus ex machina» (*Hybrid Fictions* 82).

time when he was reading a lot of Wittgenstein both for academic and personal reasons. He talked about his first novel as a juvenile piece of fiction in which the philosophical intent was too self-evident,[39] and he probably felt that his literary skills where not mature enough.[40] This may in part explain why most of the critics of *The Broom of the System* focus on Wittgenstein's influence on Wallace's fiction while the psychological aspects of the novel are almost completely left aside.

It is generally acknowledged that *The Broom of the System* is a novel about the search for the self, a theme which is indeed deeply psychological, but that nonetheless has been only treated as a philosophical matter by scholars.[41] Another possible explanation for this critical choice may have been Wallace's inherited postmodern tradition, particularly evident in his first novel where the author is still struggling to free himself from his predecessors' shadow. Postmodern skepticism towards the possibility of a psychological reading of the self seems to be confirmed by Wallace's ironical depiction of Dr. Jay, the therapist in the novel who comes across as unethical and extravagant.

The first relevant study about *The Broom of the System* is "Termite Art, or Wallace's Wittgenstein" (1993), where Lance Olsen opens the way to Wittgensteinian

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[39] Wallace on his first novel: «Think of *The Broom of the System* as the sensitive tale of a sensitive young WASP who's just had this mid-life crisis that's moved him from coldly cerebral analytic math to a coldly cerebral take on fiction and Austin-Wittgenstein-Derridean literary theory, which also shifted his existential dread from a fear that he was just a 98.6° calculating machine to a fear that he was nothing but a linguistic construct. […] And, sufficiently hidden under the sex-change and the gags and theoretical allusions, I got to write my sensitive little self-obsessed bildungsroman» (Wallace, "An Expanded Interview" 41).

[40] Matthew Luter defines *The Broom of the System*, together with *Girl With Curious Hair* (1989), as Wallace's apprentice work where the author is «still figuring out what sort of writer he is going to be. […] *Broom* and *Girl* are […] defined by their influences (both literary and philosophical) and Wallace's careful responses to them. At times, Wallace the apprentice is ecstatically in thrall to those influences, as in the case in his embrace of Thomas Pynchon and Ludwig Wittgenstein in *Broom*» (Luter, "*The Broom of the System*" 67). See also Wallace's reaction to *The Broom of the System*'s success: «The popularity of *Broom* mystifies me. I can't say it's not nice to have people like it, but there's a lot of stuff in that novel I'd like to reel back in and do better. I was like twenty-two when I wrote the first draft of that thing. And I mean a *young* twenty-two. I still thought in terms of distinct problems and univocal solutions» (Wallace, "An Expanded Interview" 32).

[41] Wallace's definition of *The Broom of the System* as "a conversation between Derrida and Wittgenstein" must have reinforced the philosophical approach of scholars to the novel (Lipsky, *Although of Course* 35). Nonetheless, Wallace later declared: «People are often surprised, I think I'm fundamentally a fairly traditional, conservative kind of writer. I tend to think of fiction as being mainly about characters and human beings and inner experience, whereas essays can be much more expository and didactic and more about subjects or ideas. If some people read my fiction and see it as fundamentally about philosophical ideas, what it probably means is that these are pieces where the characters are not as alive and interesting as I meant them to be» ("A Frightening Time in America" Web).

readings of Wallace's writing. In the essay Olsen defines both Wallace and Wittgenstein's consciousness as "termite art" by borrowing the term from the film critic Manny Farber. Accordingly, Wallace's texts are characterized by the termite tendency to keep on eroding their own boundaries, within a «self-involved mode of creation concerned with process over progress, question over solution, complex ambiguity over crystalline explanation» (201). Olsen interprets Wallace's maximalism as an infinite process of meaning-creation, one that does not rely on a positivist illusion of mathematical equation between reality and representation, but which involves with reality in a playful relation: «[Wallace and Wittgenstein] don't play games, aesthetic or philosophical, just to play games […] No: they play games in order to wrestle with very real problems, in order to attempt to work through the world» (201-202). Thus for Olsen meaning is created within language games that do not interfere on reality but constitutes reality themselves. He treats Wallace's fiction as the literary equivalent of philosophical relativism, taking Wittgenstein himself as a relativist, and he assumes that questioning the efficacy of language corresponds to questioning reality and identity as instances of narration (212). This is still a reading of Wallace embedded in postmodernism that focuses on «the multidimensional space of becoming» (207) but does not give credit to any reality beyond language and the role of the environment in the becoming of meaning and identity.

In *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (2003), Marshal Boswell discusses Wallace's step beyond postmodernism relating it to the author's shift from Jacques Derrida's to Wittgenstein's philosophy of language. According to Boswell, the literary use of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* marks Wallace's break with poststructuralism and places him in the area of post-postmodernism, affecting the relationship between the author and the reader:

> Wittgenstein's central argument in his famous posthumous work *The Philosophical Investigations* – a book Wallace praises as "the single most comprehensive and beautiful argument against solipsism that's ever been made" – is that language, as Wallace puts it, is "always … a function of relationships between persons" and is "dependent on human community." This argument, though grounded in many of the same premises that guide Heidegger and Derrida in their deconstructive project, marks a decisive break with poststructuralism and also allows Wallace to use his ironic

method both to disillusion his readers and at the same time to *connect* with them. (*Understanding* 19)

Boswell's Wittgensteinian reading of *The Broom of the System* analyses the philosophical ground on which the young Wallace introduces himself as a writer both inheriting the postmodern tradition and trying to overcome it. Wallace does not dismiss Derrida's relativistic foundation of poststructuralism and postmodernism altogether, but he confronts it with Wittgenstein's relational approach to language use and he finds in the latter a solution to solipsism and John Barth's "death of the novel".

Boswell focuses on the difference between Derrida's language-play and Wittgenstein language-game, where the former «[…] is a dynamic property of language itself» (29) while the latter «[…] must be played by more than one participant» (29). In both cases, the idea of a logocentric language has been dismissed, and the idea of a self/author that is the original and independent agent of a narration is dead, too. The difference between Derrida and Wittgenstein lies in the constitution of meaning and its relation to the community where that meaning is produced:

> [For Derrida language is a chain of signifiers where] meaning is not grounded in a stable outside reality but rather generated by the interaction of the signs themselves, wherein a dizzying (Derrida would say "infinite") number of possible interacting combinations can be detected, brought out, interpreted […] the one thing that is lost is the world itself […] the text in Derrida's vision remains always shut off and alienated, helplessly incapable of saying what it intends or of intending what it says.
>
> Wittgenstein […] might object that language is not a "chain" but rather "as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing." Our primary, even primitive relations to one another give rise to the game of language […] The shared ways of taking expressions represent the rules of the game, and the rules are justified by their results […] language does not displace us from the world but rather takes place "in" that world […]. (*Understanding* 30)

In the shift from Derrida to Wittgenstein, Boswell points out the reintroduction of language and literature into reality and sees the constitution of meaning not in relativistic but relationalist terms, which means that interpretation is open but not infinite, rather depending on the "players' " agreements.

Boswell considers the reading of *The Broom of the System* as a game to be played together by the self and the other, or the author and the reader, and not as a self-supporting process that makes its own rules. About the reading of the Wallace's works, Boswell explains: «[…] reading a David Foster Wallace novel, short story, or essay is tantamount to learning the "rules" of his game, yet once the reader learns those rules his texts succeed in creating a special, surprisingly intimate zone of communication, of subjective interaction […]» (19). Thus the interplay between subject does not only affect the characters within the novel but it spreads out of the text and implies some kind of authorial authority, one that is not isolated but related to the reader's agency.

Clare Hayes-Brady, in "The Book, the Broom and the Ladder: Philosophical Groundings in the Work of David Foster Wallace" (2010), explores Wittgenstein's (together with Paul Ricoeur and Richard Rorty's) relevance in the shaping of Wallace's artistic intent. In so doing, Hayes-Brady justifies Lenore's search for the self by Wittgenstein's meaning-as-use concept:

> Lenore Beadsman's shared name is no coincidence, and in Wittgensteinian terms indicates that the two Lenores occupy a shared philosophical space, meaning that Lenore Jr.'s name, and by extension her meaning, belongs to and is mediated by someone else, namely her great-grandmother. […] By literally disappearing, then, Lenore Sr. abandons her name to the meaningful Lenore (that is, the younger Lenore), who is then free to take it on and mould her autonomous identity. ("The Book, the Broom and the Ladder" 26)

The psychological drive of Lenore's search for the self is left aside again in favor a philosophical justification of the author's intent, and it is reduced to a search for a linguistic and functional identity.

By comparing Lenore's search for a linguistic identity to Stonecipher/Stoney/LaVache/Antichrist's abundant use of nicknames, Hayes-Brady suggests that the brother's acceptance of late Wittgenstein's philosophy about the instability of language has brought him to feel at ease with his own identity: «His plethora of nicknames indicates his absolute comfort in his own identity, and his ability to accept the mutability of language. […] In this sense LaVache represents the later Wittgenstein, who accepted that language is unstable and that it is necessary to move

with it rather than seek to pin it down as Lenore does» (27).[42] From LaVache's enlightening clarifications of Wittgenstein's theories, Hayes-Brady deduces the reason for Wallace's experimentation with polyphony and ambiguity, and its relation to the characters' sense of self and of the world.

In Hayes-Brady's essay, the relevance of games and families in *The Broom of the System* are ascribable to a narrative reproduction of Wittgenstein's references to "language games" and "family resemblances" as introduced in *Philosophical Investigations*: «Wittgenstein's presence is therefore both implicit and explicit in the novel, and his theories are explored in both form and content» (28). This reading surely does justice to Wallace's irony and vivid ability to create vivid fiction around samples of imagery, but it does not account for the playful interaction between the individual and society, other than in linguistic terms.

The actual interdependence between individual and society in the development of a self is once again treated in philosophical terms by Hayes-Brady, through the lens of Paul Ricoeur's series of lectures "Oneself as Another". With Ricoeur, Hayes-Brady explains the double nature or "dual identity" of the individual which is composed by «[t]he *idem* [that] is the part of the individual that relates to other people, the commonalities that give rise to societies, and indeed need for language» and «[t]he *ipse* [that], by contrast, is self-sufficient and self-referencing, the element of character that makes us different from each other» (29):

> This Ricoeurian theme of self-construction is visible in Wallace's later work, where he tends to avoid omniscient narration in favor of dialogue, first-person narration, or internal-monologue-style third person narration, never giving away more than his characters would. As such, he allows his characters the freedom to form their own narrative identities, rather than imposing his authorial will on them. ("The Book, the Broom and the Ladder" 30)

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[42] Elsewhere, Hayes-Brady acknowledges that Stoney's use of nicknames fundamentally aims at emancipating him from the family and business tradition: «[…] nicknames in Wallace's writing often signify comfort and security: for example, Lenore's eldest brother, Stonecipher III, has distanced himself from his family and name by not one, but two name changes […] with the expressed aim of establishing a new identity, although he continues to define himself in opposition to his family. "As the Antichrist", he explains to Lenore, "[. . .] it's gloriously clear where I leave off and others begin," thus rejecting the tradition of "everyone with male genitals in the family [being] called Stonecipher"» (Hayes-Brady, "I kept saying her name" 15).

According to this reading, Lenore's search for the self is described as a gradual balancing of *ipse* and *idem*, consisting in developing the ability to narrate one's own identity and getting free from the other's narration (both Rick and Wallace's narration).

Stephen Mulhall (*The Self and its Shadows*, 2013) also gives a Wittgensteinian reading of the self in *The Broom of the System*, but he reverses Lenore's key assumptions and refutes Boswell's consequent interpretation of Lenore's sense of being unreal, her feeling of lack of control and the consequences of Lenore Sr.'s disappearance. According to Mulhall, Lenore's paranoid feeling and Boswell vision of it depend on two main factors: the first one is a mutually exclusive choice between Wittgenstein's communal language and its referential function, and the second one is the belief that individuals are subdued by linguistic rules of the game (290-291). On the contrary, Mulhall understands *The Broom of the System* as a negation of these factors, a novel oriented towards the elimination of linguistic control and the reintegration of language into reality:

> Wallace's Wittgensteinian Gramma(r) does not veil us from reality but places us within it, as users of the objects to which our words refer; and it does not control our modes of interaction with those objects, but rather creates a space within which each individual can define what is truly fundamental about those objects for himself, constrained only by the limits of his imagination. Nor does the shaping or informing function of our choice of language-game deprive us of direct contact with extralinguistic reality. (*The Self and its Shadows* 292)

The broom of the title is taken as a piece of evidence supporting this reading by being a material object that can be used in imaginative ways, confirming the idea of meaning-as-use and entailing possibilities of individual agency within the set of communal rules of the game.

According to Mulhall, Lenore Sr. decides to withdraw and let her niece learn through the teacher's absence, given Lenore Jr.'s former misinterpretation of her great-grandmother's intentions. So Lenore Sr.'s disappearance confutes the idea of an omnipotent author in the novel and acknowledges the impossibility to control the

reader's interpretation, since language games cannot coerce a real meaning onto individuals:

> Gramma's absence and end may thus amount to an initial incarnation of Wallace's persisting Wittgensteinian conviction that a way can be found out of the writerly dead end of postmodernist metafiction only if one is willing to divest oneself of any ambition towards closure and control [...] The authentic author is not a *deus ex machina*, protected from everyday human failures of attentiveness and honesty by the systematic application of irony, parody, and pastiche; he is a *deus absconditus*, to be found nowhere in particular in the world of his creation because everything in it speaks of him [...] With the early Wallace, absence is the mode of his presence. (*The Self and its Shadows* 299)

The withdrawal of the author here serves the function of letting the reader make her own imaginative interpretation within the set of rules of the game. Those rules cannot be thought as established by the author by himself because this would go against the communal nature of the game itself. In this sense, the self of the author is diffused through the novel and the reader's self is allowed of more agency in the communication taking place in the interplaying space of Wallace's fiction.

In the same year (2013), Patrick O'Donnell wrote about Wallace's technical rendering of *Philosophical Investigations*, focusing on Wittgenstein's assumption that the linguistic relation between parts is always an asymmetrical relation between part and whole: «when it is recognized that the object (or language system, or novel) is comprised of parts, what becomes of its status as a whole? Who determines which parts are essential to the whole, and which are ancillary[...]?» (4). O'Donnell uses this critique to binary logics in order to analyze Wallace's treatment not only of the relation part/whole, but more extendedly to self/other and system/chaos, a kind of asymmetrical relation further distorted by American capitalism of the Eighties (8).

The chaotic or noisy dimension of *The Broom of the System* is labeled by O'Donnell as "granular synthesis", a technique of sampling and overlapping granules of sounds without a hierarchical logic, where text and context are not clearly distinguishable. According to O'Donnell, the same granular synthesis technique is to be found in the relationship between self and other, since Wallace's works are not mainly

about semiotic (as it used to be for Pynchon), but they are more of a contemporary kind of naturalism, «in the sense that he is interested in the affective, environmental relations between objects, animals, humans» (2). Thus, both the several narratives interconnecting in *The Broom of the System* and the net of relationships are determined by coincidences and fatalities rather than by actual plots and manipulations: «[…] relationality itself can only occur through a semi-chaotic system of misunderstandings, passive/aggressive physical and emotional encounters, and projections of fantasies» (14). Accordingly, the self and the author's wholeness is fragmented and leaves space to asymmetrical and recursive relations to the other and the reader, whose individual agency is necessary to reconstitute a wholeness (15).

O'Donnell understands Wallace's use of antinomies not only as a game with the boundaries of language, but also as the expression of the constant struggles of the self to dominate the other in order to reassert itself while actually achieving a destabilizing extreme of individualization (dynamic of which Norman Bombardini is the perfect embodiment): «[t]he linguistic and performative condition of identity in *The Broom of the System* is one in which self-actualization becomes its opposite, its other, an antinomy that speaks to Wallace's sense, "self" is always partial, in process, and (in part) self-destructive» (16). O'Donnell's reflection on antinomic selves hints at their paradoxical condition between individual and society, or part and whole, but seems to suggest that the individual will always end up consuming both herself and the other in the effort to impose the former over the latter, following the logic of domination.

In the essay "David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas" (2014), Adam Kelly confutes the reading of *The Broom of the System* as a novel that engages the reader in a playful communication. While supporting Wallace's later polyphony by the use of Mikhail Bakhtin's theories on dialogism, Kelly argues that *The Broom of the System* is still embedded in monologism: «[…] Wallace's technique in *Broom* actually requires less a creative dialogue with the reader, than the reader simply being willing and able to work out what Wallace is consciously intending with each part of the novel's structure. In other words, readers have only to learn the rules of the (language) game, and apply them» (9). In Kelly's vision of *The Broom of the System*, Wallace's technique is not mature enough to allow him achieve the dialogic nature of the text he was trying to achieve, and the author's efforts confine the reader to a passive interpretation rather than

participation in the constitution of meaning. By taking the closing sentence of the novel as an example of disguised monologism («"I'm a man of my "»), Kelly rejects Boswell's reading of it as an open ending, because the missing word[43] is far too predictable to allow the reader's agency: «This results in what might be termed undecidability without ambiguity, a situation that I would argue likewise fixes the reader's position and negates their agency as a dialogic partner for the text» (21).

Aisling O'Gara explores the relationship between the individual and the environment in the essay "An Understanding of One's Place in the System: An Introduction to *The Broom of the System*" of 2015. In the essay, O'Gara relates Wittgenstein's theories on language and Wallace's exploration of selfhood in his first novel. O'Gara comments on Wittgenstein's vision of language as follows: «[…] language is both individual – as the user of the language must gain knowledge of the correct usage – and communal, as they must understand the system in which language operates» (102). In a similar way, O'Gara explains how the self develops in a continuous tension between the interior and the exterior: «As LaVache explains, you cannot think yourself; selfhood is a paradoxical tension between the Other and the interior […] The connection between selfhood and objects is another aspect of this paradox – objects being both signifiers of personality and simultaneously entirely *Other*» (101). O'Gara acknowledges the paradoxical nature of the self and hints at the relevance of objects in self-distortions, not only for their capitalistic implications but as external references for one's self.

2.4. "A living transaction between humans"

As it has been shown above, *The Broom of the System* is widely acknowledged to be a novel about the search for the self. Lenore is the central character of the book, but at the same time she is not, given her inability to feel her own self and find a place within the

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[43] Mark Sheridan ("Interpret you" 87), on the contrary, sees the missing word as «[…] a failure latent in both human attempts and intent to communicate. The speech act involves a kind of promise, which Rick in this case is unable to keep».

surrounding environment. Given her lack of sense of self, Lenore is doomed to be a product of the other's narration, provided that by "other" we refer to anything and anybody outside herself, inside and outside the text. Here I argue that it is possible to detect a maturation in Lenore's character that depends on a chaotic process initiated by Lenore Sr.'s disappearance, an evolution that allows Lenore to mend her inadequate sense of self and, consequently, to escape the other's narration by gaining control on her life. In order to prove this, I will make use of Winnicott's theories about the individual's emotional development in relation to the surrounding environment.

I argue that Wallace's first novel and Winnicott's psychoanalytical theories fundamentally share one key point, which is the reintroduction of the individual in a surrounding environment in a relation of ontological interdependence. But for Winnicott the self could not contribute to the constitutions of Wittgensteinian "rules of the game" if there was not a personal inner potential to start from. From this assumption it is possible to read further features of Wallace's fiction that develop as consequences of this essential starting point, and that mirror Winnicott's vision of the *essential paradox* of the individual being both separated from and united with the environment. This proves the existence of a *true self* that, no matter how negated seems to be, is a primary preoccupation in Wallace's fiction, starting from the very beginning with *The Broom of the System*. Besides, the application of Winnicott's theories casts a new light on «the idea of art being a living transaction between humans» (Wallace, "An Expanded Interview" 41). For Winnicott only the *true self* can engage in meaningful communication with the other, however indirect it may be, so the self paradoxically stands for both the cause and the consequence of art as *transitional phenomena*.

In *The Broom of the System*, as in Winnicott, the relationship between the self and the other is to be rightfully described as the relationship between the individual and the environment, evolving in a potentially infinite network of concentric intersecting open systems going from two-body relationship to bigger and bigger communities. Both identity and language develop in the dialectical interplay between the individual and the environment, more than from a binary opposition between the self and the other.[44] Here

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[44] «By conceiving of the Self/Other dynamic as an inside/outside dialectic, Wallace links the science of open and closed systems to the themes of identity, community, and signification» (Boswell, *Understanding* 51). In this sense, an open system of communication corresponds to the self intended as

I assume Winnicott's theory of the individual's relationship with the environment in order to comment upon Wallace's description of Lenore's relationship with her family and the surrounding environment at large. Winnicott's original two-body relationship is not to be strictly reduced to Lenore's relationship with her mother, but it is to be extended to a vision of an ever self-renovating relationship between individual and bigger circles of environment.

Wittgenstein's vision of language as a game and the reintroduction of language into every aspect of natural history and the world is compatible with Winnicott's approach to the constitution of the self in relation to the surrounding environment. While Wittgenstein provides a relational philosophical theory on the use of a communitarian language, Winnicott deals with a relational psychoanalytical theory on the constitution and the maintaining of a sense of self. Language for Wittgenstein and the self for Winnicott are not founded on a rigid ontological truth, but they are not even determined by a self-referential system which excludes the reality of the individual; both the philosopher and the psychoanalyst, instead, propose a playful relationship between the individual and the world/environment, as a continuous process where both the parts are involved and where the boundaries between the self and the other, the individual and the environment, the language and the world are continuously renegotiated.

In *The Broom of the System*, Dr. Jay represents the link between Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, brought about by Lenore Sr., and psychology.[45] In fact, in the second part of the novel the reader realizes that Dr. Jay is actually being instructed by Lenore Sr. about the kind of therapy to apply to Lenore Jr. and Rick. Through the unethical and ambiguous Dr. Jay, Wallace finds a way to connect the reflections on the very existence of a self and the possibility to express it to the other through language.[46]

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psychical and physical entity limited by a porous membrane, one that protects the inner self without completely enclosing and alienating it from the outer reality.

[45] O'Donnell already pointed to the compatibility of Dr. Jay's psychotherapy and Wittgenstein's late philosophy, but he is not interested in the possible sources of Dr. Jay's theories: «Dr. Jay […] has been directed to analyze Lenore by her great-grandmother according to a certain invented method that accords with the Wittgensteinian language-training that the younger woman has experienced at the hands of the philosopher-elder» ("Almost a Novel" 11).

[46] Conversely, according to Daniel Grassian, Dr. Jay's function in the novel is to work as a parody of psychology and his role between Rick and Lenore is voluntarily confusing and not helping (*Hybrid Fictions* 83). That is, psychology is completely dismissed in the process of the search for the self of the young post-postmodern generation.

Not accidentally, Dr. Jay has to deal with two characters who suffer from a weak sense of self and who are trying to defend themselves by isolating (Lenore) and by manipulating the other's self through the use of language (Rick).

The thorough research done by scholars on the late Wittgenstein's influence on Wallace's fiction unintentionally connects the idea of a communal approach to communication to the one of *transitional phenomena* where the self is constituted by the interplay between self and environment. Those researches though, as pointed out above, focus on the philosophical approach to the constitution of the self without explicating the psychological aspect of it, thus leaving out significant implications on the constitution of meaning between selves, and between author and reader. By introducing Dr. Jay's theories in the novel, Wallace integrates the philosophical value of *The Broom of the System* with an insight that recover a concept of the self as psychical issue.[47] I think it makes sense to consider Wallace's effort to convey meaning not only through philosophical language, as explicit as it may be in his first novel, but also through psychological language, which remains consistent even in his following works. In this sense, it seems to me that Winnicott's vision of psychology as the study of human nature[48] and not just of the human mind[49] parallels Wallace's emphasis on literature as exploration in humanity after postmodern cerebralism and abstraction.[50]

Wallace mocks the scholarly abstraction of the debate on the author as cause or effect of the text commenting on L. Hix's Ph.D. dissertation *Morte d'Author: An Autopsy*: «It's finally hard for me to predict just whom, besides professional critics and hardcore theory-wienies, 226 dense pages on whether the author lives is really going to interest. For those of us civilians who know in our gut that writing is an act of communication between one human being and another, the whole question seems sort of arcane» (Wallace, "Greatly Exaggerated" 144). Wallace's position about the state of health of the author points towards a more pragmatic understanding of meaning as the

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[47] «Lenore's struggle to establish a coherent sense of self provides a frame work in which Wallace explores Wittgenstein's philosophy, along with themes that would occupy him for the rest of his career: the construction of the self; self-consciousness and the Other; artificial landscapes; entertainment; the effects of capitalism upon traditional conceptions of both the self and society» (O'Gara, "An Understanding of One's Place" 97-98).
[48] «The task is the study of human nature» (Winnicott, *Human Nature* 1).
[49] «Human nature is not a matter of mind and body – it is a matter of inter-related psyche and soma, with the mind as a flourishing on the edge of psycho-somatic functioning» (Winnicott, *Human Nature* 26).
[50] «Fiction's about what it is to be a fucking *human being*» (Wallace, "An Expanded Interview" 26).

product of the interplay between two selves. This is not to say that a text is to be considered as the expression of its author's self, or vice versa that the reader's interpretation is totally subjective and generated by her own self, but that the meaning of the text is constituted in the *potential space* between the two.

As a matter of fact, Wallace opposes the postmodern vision of language «as not a tool but an environment» ("Greatly Exaggerated" 140) by broadening the reach of the term "environment". By considering the author and the reader as human beings who actually write and read a text, Wallace reintroduces a context around that text. Thus, language does not represent the environment on its own, although it keeps on playing a fundamental role in the preservation of the environment itself.[51]

There is a double achievement to be reached from the interplay between the author as a self and the reader as the other who is in turn considered to be another self constituting the environment: a potential overcoming of both solipsism and the exhaustion of literature. In the interplay as *transitional phenomena*, the feeling of separation and interrelation between the self and the other depends on the apperception of the self that coexists both as individual and as environment for the others. In the never ending negotiating process between the individual and the environment, the self and the text as an act of communication between two selves are determined by rules of the game that are not external to the inner reality of the individual, but that are constituted by the interplay between all the selves involved in the game.

Lenore has come to see herself and life as something not different from a story made of words, a telling that «creates and limits and defines» (*Broom* 122). Lenore's weak sense of self, the idea that herself is generated by a linguistic system upon which she has no control makes her feel like she is being used by the system. Comparing herself to a character in one of Rick's stories, Lenore comments:

> The lady's life is the story, and if the story says, "The fat pretty woman was convinced her life was real," then she is. Except what she doesn't know is that her life isn't hers. It's there for a reason […] The fat lady's not really real, and to the extent that she's real she's just used, and if she thinks she's

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[51] On the relevance of the environment in language signification, see also Thomas Tracey, "The Formative Years: DFW' Philosophical Influences and *The Broom of the System*" (2014).

real and not being used, it's only because the system that educes her and uses her makes her by definition feel real and non-educed and non-used. (122)

Lenore's feeling of being unreal and not in control of her own life and her suspect of being manipulated by the outside without the inability to validate her own will are explainable in terms of distorted emotional development and dysfunctional relationship with the surrounding environment. Lenore's mistake is to think about the self as something either completely absorbed by the system or, else, totally isolated and thus external to the system. In both cases, she cannot avoid being objectified, exploited, and used by the environment.

Lenore perceives some kind of coercion coming from outside affecting her feelings and agency, but she rejects the possibility of a plot: what she denounces is a loss of control over her own interior life, not just over the object reality involving her: «No, not a plot thing, definitely not a plot thing […] No, she simply felt – at time, mind you, not all the time, but at sharp and distinct intuitive moments – as if she had no real existence, except for what she said and did and perceived and et cetera, and that these were, it seemed at such times, not really under her control» (66).

Following Winnicott's theories, Lenore's lack of a sense of self must not be read as a symptom of the absence of a *true self*, but of the predominance of a *false self* that keeps alive only by reacting to external stimulus, feeling phoney and not real. Lenore's *true self* still exists but cannot communicate with the outside because it needs to be protected from the impinging environment while waiting for better conditions to renegotiate its relationship with the outside. In the meantime, the *false self* is relating to the environment, giving up Lenore's agency in order to maintain her *true self* isolation.

Wallace provides the reader with the roots of Lenore's distorted emotional development by insisting on her dysfunctional relationships with the environment, especially with a family whose dynamics gravitate around a lack of emotional support and a functional interest on the children's mind abilities. In Winnicott's language, the Beadsman family represents the kind of impinging environment that spoils the children's *true self* leading them to rely on their *false self*, which is pathologically dependent on their use of the mind and constantly in need of outer input in order to feel

real. This is true for the two brothers and especially for Lenore, who, according to LaVache, is the one selected by Mr. Beadsman to represent the company in the future:

> Evil in the form of Dad […] is trying to fuck with your life in all kinds of ways I bet you don't even know about, or want to know about […] The same way Dad's tried to fuck with my life, everybody's. Just as he was fucked with in his turn, by fools in old-style hats and coats. […] That's a poem.[52] Anyway, you've borne that brunt. John was off to Chicago […] by the time he would have been any use to Dad or Lenore; I've had a limb and a thing to fall back on; Clarice was clearly inappropriate in terms of disposition – we needn't discuss all that. But so you're it. You are the family, Lenore. And in Dad's case, go ahead and substitute 'Company' in the obvious place in the above sentence. (249)

The children's selves are validated by their father only in a functional way and because of their intellectual abilities. This functionalist relationship together with the lack of emotional support cause them to identify with their mind in order to compensate for the failures of the family's emotional support.

LaVache's relationship with the family and his fellow students oscillates between dependence and contrived independence. In trying to assert his own self as autonomous from the family, he keeps relying on his intellectual abilities, which are ultimately the very reasons of him feeling spoiled by his father. The tool he is using is the same feature that he is trying to fight against, namely his mind. LaVache cannot find a healthy way to preserve his self while relating to the environment, because both his persona and his relationships are based on a *false self* located in the mind, which he is trying to fight by identifying in his most material and not function-driven item, his wooden leg: «"It's my thing […] Everybody here has a thing. You have to have a thing here. My thing is being the Antichrist, more or less being a waste-product and supporting my leg. A tragically wasted intellect. So to speak. You can't be thingless, Lenore. Mr. Vigorous notwithstanding"» (239). In fact, LaVache's identification with

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[52] «The "poem" in question here is [Philip] Larkin's "This Be The Verse" from his 1974 volume *High Windows*, which begins with these lines: "They fuck you up, your mum and dad. / The may not mean to, but they do." […] the quotation also provides a key to understanding the inter-generational strife and confusion that lies at the heart of the novel. *The Broom of the System*, indeed, is a novel that, for all of its comedy and playfulness, explores the darker sides of interpersonal and familial relationships, and this is flagged as a particular concern here in Wallace's allusion to Larkin» (Coleman, "On David Foster Wallace" 8).

his leg is just the symptom of his reliance on the mind and inability to establish emotional connections. He is "someone" in the campus only by virtue of his intellectual abilities and his satanic appearance, because he would not be able to find his place in the community otherwise.

Lenore's *false self* is not as stigmatized as LaVache's, but she is in a similar position of self-imposed independence from the family and she also relies uniquely on her mind in order to establish relationships, discarding any physical and emotional connections. She feels uneasy about her own and other characters' bodies, she especially has a pathological fixation for other people's feet and her own perspiration, that intensifies in moments of stress and of which she is extremely conscious. The novel itself starts with Lenore's consideration about feet: «Most really pretty girls have pretty ugly feet, and so does Mindy Metalman, Lenore notices, all of a sudden» (3). At the time of the novel's inception Lenore is a teenager and the experience at her sister Clarice's campus marks Lenore's first significant exchange with the adult world and the beginning of her adult existential problems, related to her sudden realization about people's bodies' hideousness.

Dr. Jay's bizarre membrane theory connects the dots between Lenore's lacking sense of self and her obsession with perspiration, claiming that identity anxiety and hygiene anxiety are fundamentally the same (*Broom* 120). As Dr. Jay explains, the membrane's strength determines the confidence of the individual in her own sense of self and her capacity to relate to the other. This is to say, in Winnicottian terms[53], that a healthy self is localized in the body, and that the skin represents the physical boundary of an individual that perceives herself as a psyche-soma unit, hence the overlapping of hygiene and identity anxiety in case of ego distortions. Thus Lenore and LaVache represent cases of *false self* located in the mind, which means they live a double split, one between the *true self* and the *false self*, and the other between the mind as a compensating function of the psyche and the body. The consequence of this state of things is that they prefer to be wasted intellects than to keep on being exploited because

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[53] Dr. Jay never mentions Winnicott. Instead, he refers to Olaf Blentner, the pioneer of the membrane theory and a product of Jay's imagination conceived in order to dissimulate the fact that he is secretly following Lenore Sr.'s instructions. Nonetheless Winnicott's mentioning of the skin as a limiting membrane of the self located in the body seems to fit well into Dr. Jay's apparently made up theories.

of their mind abilities, because their intellectual success would not be coming from their *true self* but from an adaptation of their *false self* to the environment.

Lenore's relationship with Rick in a way is her "thing", as LaVache points out, because it is what keeps her *false self* connected to the environment out of an attitude of compliance. Lenore and Rick's relation is entirely abstract, it does not involve neither emotional nor physical contact, providing the girl with a reassuring form of dependence to her intellectual self. Like LaVache's leg, Rick keeps Lenore separate from her family (she prefers working for him rather than for her father, and he is so possessive that he is even jealous of her family) but at the same time he allows just an intellectual engagement, the same kind of relationship that Lenore has with her family and makes her feel exploited and unreal. As a "man of letters", being himself an intellectual that perceives his own self as localized in the mind,[54] Rick represents the dead end of a closed system of communication that alienates itself from the world and, thus, is not able to engage in the emotional interplay of *transitional phenomena* that is required in order to establish a proper relationship with Lenore. He describes Lenore in terms of a game to be played, a game that he is not able to play and that consequently causes him to seek for omnipotent control on her:

> My inability to be truly inside of and surrounded by Lenore Beadsman arouses in me the purely natural reactive desire to have her inside of and contained by me. I am possessive. I want to own her, sometimes […] Lenore has the quality of a sort of game about her […] Lenore soundlessly

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[54] Rick's need to compensate his weak sense of self through the act of writing stories and rewriting his life and relationship with Lenore is explained by Wallace's comment on David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*: «The need to indite, inscribe […] springs from the doubly-bound panic felt by most persons who spend a lot of time up in their own personal heads. On one side – the side a philosopher's call 'radically skeptical' or 'solipsistic' – there's the feeling that one's head is, in some sense, the whole world, when the imagination becomes not just a more congenial but a realer environment than the Big Exterior of life on earth […] The need to get the words & voices not only *out* – outside the 16-inch diameter of bone that both births & imprisons them – but also *down*, trusting them neither to the insubstantial country of the mind nor to the transient venue of cords & air & ear, seems […] a necessary affirmation of an Outside, some Exterior one's written record can not only communicate with but *inhabit* […] It's what an abstractor like [Ronald] Laing calls 'ontological insecurity' – why we sign our stuff, impose it on friends […] 'I EXIST,' is the impulse that throbs under most voluntary writing» (Wallace, *The Empty Plenum* 221-222). Nonetheless, Wallace confutes the idea of writing as validating one's self: «[Bertrand] Russel pointed out that the *Cogito*'s 'I think and therefore am' is […] invalid: the truth of 'I think' entails only the existence of *thinking*, as the truth of 'I write' yields only the existence of text» (*The Empty Plenum*, 222-223). Rick's writing, or telling, seems to be more a case of Winnicottian's "Cogito, ergo in mea potestate sum", i.e. "I think therefore I am in control". The aim of Rick's writing is not a strengthening of his self but an intellectual effort to respond to an environment to which he cannot feel emotionally interrelated.

invites one to play a game consisting of involved attempts to find out the game's own rules […] The rules of the game are Lenore, and to play is to be played. (72)

The problem here is that Rick does not perceive the game as something to be played together, a game which rules are to be agreed upon by the two together. Rick sees Lenore as a game in herself, one he will never be part of, because this is the way he conceives himself in the first place. Rick is the personification of an obsolete self-referential kind of literature that estranges itself from the world, as Derrida would describe it.

There is one of Rick's stories that has been given no attention by scholars but that acknowledges the existence of the inner self and makes use of Winnicottian language. It is the story of a theoretical dentist (read Rick) who falls in love with a psychologist's companion, a woman who needs constant sex to overcome her paranoid feelings of being two-dimensional due to her relationship with the environment and her weak sense of self (note the many references to Lenore). The dentist and the woman get married and live happily together until the dentist has an accident from which he results deaf, dumb, blind, paralyzed and insensate, «[b]ut not, and now I repeat *not*, entirely incommunicado» (429). The dentist can now only communicate by performing Morse code with his upper lip, and the blond psychologist (i.e. a combination of Lang, whose blondness is often remarked in the novel, and Dr. Jay) takes advantage of the woman's sexual needs after pretending he is an expert in Morse code.

The story relates to Rick's inner self being entrapped in his own inefficacious body, an isolated self whose only mean of communication is a language that he cannot share with anybody. The fact that Rick uses the term "incommunicado" to refer to his inner self might be a reference to Winnicott, who is well-known to have introduced the concept of the *true incommunicado self* in the essay "Communicating and Not Communicating Leading to a Study of Certain Opposites" (1963). With this story Rick blames Dr. Jay and Lang of depriving him of his only form of communication and of the love of his life. In fact the story is told in the G.O.D., when Lenore is already determined to leave Rick because she has already engaged in the chaotic process that will lead her to escape his narration and her own feeling of being two-dimensional,

while Rick keeps trying to hold her inside his postmodern vision of language as environment: «[Lenore:] "I really want to talk to you." [Rick:] "I sense that, Lenore, believe me. Let's do it within the context provided"» (428).

While Rick is jealously fingering Dr. Jay and Lang for his loss, the one who is (passively) working for Lenore's emancipation is her great-grandmother. Lenore Sr.'s disappearance sets the premises for the niece's search of the self, going initially through a temporary state of chaos which is necessary to reestablish a stronger self and a new agency towards the surrounding environment. Following Winnicott, it is as if the young Lenore is going through a state of *unintegration* where the boundaries between the inside and the outside are temporarily blurred in order to be reintegrated in a healthier way. By combining Wittgenstein's philosophical theories and Dr. Jay's psychotherapeutic contribution, Lenore Sr. sets the conditions for her niece to confront the environment and fix its past failures: «JAY: […] your grandmother's separation from and silence toward you paradoxically evokes in you a feeling of greater closeness to and communication with the rest of your family» (*Broom* 326). Assuming Dr. Jay's point of view, one can interpret Frequent and Vigorous's switchboard dysfunctions as a symbol of Lenore's relational dysfunctions: similarly to the girl's flabby membrane, it does not keep the inside and the outside properly separated, causing a connection and communication breakdown. Also, the switchboard is described as something bodily, especially towards the end of the novel, when Lenore is reconnecting to her sense of self as something localized in the body: «"The upshot here is that your particular line tunnel looks like it's kind of decided it's a real freakin' human being or something […] Your tunnel's like I said supposed to be around like sixty-some degrees. And instead our test cable shows it's a perfect ninety-eight point six […]"» (457). Since telephones are failing, Lenore engages in live communication with her family, and that opens the way to Lenore's renovated use of language.

Following Lenore Sr.'s instructions, and thus Wallace's reading of Wittgenstein's philosophy, Dr. Jay underlines that life is not just words, as Lenore Jr. believes, but «[…] using words» (120). This crucial difference displaces the sense of being and agency from the outer reality to the inner reality, which nonetheless, if considered in Winnicottian terms, is not a static entity but a dynamic and dialogic dimension which is continuously changing and changed by the environment. In fact

using words, according to Winnicott, is an ability of the self, the ability to symbolize, which is a linguistic instance of *transitional phenomena* where the self takes part of the environment and the pre-existing tradition and cathects them with personal original meaning.[55] Thus, the idea of using words implies the existence of a self relating to the environment and not being used by it. In fact, this corresponds to Lenore's renovated agency, her spontaneous acts of communication with the members of her family, her request to Rick to talk about their real relationship and not just about short stories, and finally her physical and emotional engagement with Lang.

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[55] The idea of language as *transitional phenomena* is very much in accord with the pragmatist reading of *The Broom of the System* as exposed by Thomas Tracey: «"Pragmatism," […] Mounce notes, "elucidates doubt of belief by relating it to the one who inquires… how the world appears will depend partly on how it is but partly also on the position from which one observes it"» ("The Formative Years" 162).

Chapter 3
A Game of Hide and Seek

As we have seen, Wallace's first novel carries on a complex reflection about the development of the self in relation to its surrounding environment, not only according to philosophical explorations of the self but also conveying a psychological preoccupation with it. In *The Broom of the System* Wallace is already engaged in considerations about the split of the self into bodily and intellectual dimension, and the sense of vacuity resulting from that split. The environment provided by the Beadsman family plays a major role in the establishment of distorted relationships between Lenore's self and the others, and the chaotic set of events triggered by the grandmother's disappearance constitutes an opportunity of *unintegration* for Lenore and ultimately allows her to redefine her sense of self in relation to different and broader environments.

With *Infinite Jest*, his second novel, Wallace resumes similar features to those introduced in *The Broom of the System* and he deepens the psychological focus on the characters. The Incandenza family and the tennis academy founded by Jim Incandenza dominates approximately fifty per cent of the novel, and its relating distortions are spread throughout the whole text. The apparent inner void of the main characters is explainable, again, in terms of distorted emotional development, and the spilt of the self is even more dramatized than it was in *The Broom of the System*. Along with this feature, new considerations concerning the right not to communicate emerge as a fundamental feature characterizing Hal Incandenza, the psychological center of the novel. The role of not-communicating in *Infinite Jest* belongs to the realm of *unintegration* as it was in the case of Wallace's first novel, but here there is a stronger structural correspondence between Hal's withdrawal into himself and the chaotic and unresolved form of the novel functioning as *transitional phenomena*.

Similarly to the second chapter, this section of my study is divided into four parts: first, a brief contextualization of the novel *Infinite Jest*; then, an analysis of the Incandenza family members; after that, a survey of the scholarly treatment of the re-emergence of the self in Wallace post-postmodern engagement; and finally, my

proposal of a Winnicottian analysis of *Infinite Jest* with a particular focus on the split of the self and *transitional phenomena*.

The complex structure and the notorious length of *Infinite Jest* purposely discourage the reader from the temptation to summarize the novel. There are, of course, Wallace's fans and critics who embarked on this brave attempt in order to simplify the reader's task of approaching such a demanding text, and they have been useful for this study, too.[56] I will not provide a thorough summary of *Infinite Jest* as I did with *The Broom of the System*, I will only give a brief sketch of the novel's main narrative threads that serve to introduce the main characters, institutions and relationships between individuals and environment that will be further discussed later.

Nonetheless, the novel's chaotic and unresolved structure calls for a subjective effort to recompose the plot starting from the objective information and gaps provided by the text. Wallace's well-known and broad critique to passive "spectation,"[57] which is also one of the main topics in *Infinite Jest*, implies that being an active reader requires an ability to select what is important in a text among the massive amount of information to which the reader is exposed.[58] Thus, Wallace's maximalist style has been read quite unanimously as an overt challenge to the reader's active engagement, and a decisive step forward in this sense has been detected from *The Broom of the System* to *Infinite Jest*. Here I argue that there is space for a Winnicottian analysis of the relationship between both the author and the text, and the text and the reader, making of the text a kind of *transitional object* that is infused with the author's subjectivity but which also represents an objective reality for the reader to cathect.

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[56] See, for example, Stephen Burn's *David Foster Wallace's* Infinite Jest: *A Reader's Guide*; Dowling and Bell's *A Reader's Companion to* Infinite Jest; and Carlisle's *Elegant Complexity: A Study of David Foster Wallace's* Infinite Jest. On *Infinite Jest*'s plot and characters, together with many other information concerning the novel and the author, can also be found in blogs and websites such as "The Howling Fantods" and "Infinite Summer."

[57] In "E Unibus Pluram" Wallace introduces the concept of "spectation" as a passive, addictive activity that threatens to encage and objectify the viewer's self by impinging on his psyche for the sake of advertising: «[…] the deep message of television w/r/t these ads looks to be that [the spectator's] ontological status as just one in a reactive watching mass is at some basic level shaky, contingent, and that true actualization of self would ultimately consist in [the spectator's] becoming one of the images that are the *objects* of this great herd-like watching» (56).

[58] See, for example, Gately commenting on his addict ex-girlfriend's ability to relate a story: «Like most incredibly passive people, the girl had a terrible time ever separating details from what was really important to a story, is why she rarely ever got asked anything» (*Infinite Jest* 927).

3.1. *Infinite Jest*

Published in 1996, *Infinite Jest* is set in a symbolical future, chronologically and socially close to the time when Wallace was actually writing the novel. In this undetermined future, years are not referred to by numerical order anymore, but they are named after sponsoring corporations, so that most of the events take place during "The Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment" (Y.D.A.U.).

After the election of U.S. President John Gentle, a former television actor obsessed with personal and national hygiene,[59] North American borders are reconfigured into the Organization of North American Nations (O.N.A.N.),[60] which comprises the United States, Canada, and Mexico, with the United States subtly orchestrating the policies of the Organization. The most significant instance of the unbalanced nature of O.N.A.N. is the "concession" of New England to Canada, an ex U.S. region that, together with an area of South-Eastern Canada, becomes a literal waste land called Great Concavity (or Great Convexity, from Canada's perspective). Within this spot, U.S. waste is disposed through a self-alimenting process called Annular Fusion which is so effective that it is destroying the ecosystem of the Great Concavity.

Following the Reconfiguration of North American borders, the Québécois independence group known as Les Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents (A.F.R.)[61] radicalize into anti-U.S. violent reactionarism. The A.F.R. ultimate goal is to lead the U.S. to self-destruction by the implosion of the U.S. culture of individualistic passive pleasure. To that end, the A.F.R. need to find the redistributable master copy of a circulating cartridge entitled *Infinite Jest*, a film so entertaining that is told to annihilate its viewers active reception and reduce them to passive catatonia and eventually to death by too much pleasure. The ideological dynamics of the geo-political fight between the A.F.R. and the U.S. are mainly reported during the encounters between Hugh Steeply, an agent of the United States Office of Unspecified Services (U.S.O.U.S.), and Rémy

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[59] Here Lenore Beadsman's hygiene anxiety is developed and extended to national and political matters.
[60] The acronym O.N.A.N. overtly makes fun of the self-directed nature of U.S. concept of pleasure.
[61] The Wheelchair Assassins, in English.

Marathe, a member of the A.F.R. that is supposed to pretend to cooperate with Steeply for the benefit of Québec but is actually betraying his own nation for private reasons.

Within this geo-political context, the novel zooms in on two main institutions set in Enfield, a fictitious town in Boston, Massachusetts:[62] Enfield Tennis Academy (E.T.A.) and Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House, the former being on the top and the latter at the foot of the same hill. E.T.A was founded by the deceased James O. Incandenza (Jim), and now is run by his wife Avril and her half-brother Charles Tavis (C.T.), with whom she is suspected to have an incestuous relationship. Incandenza's three children are or have been raised within the academy, together with other prodigious teenage tennis players from the U.S. and Canada, according to the physically exhausting and self-forgetting philosophy originally established by Jim. Ennet House was symbolically founded by the "Guy That Didn't Even Use His First Name" (*Infinite Jest* 274), reflecting the House's regulation based of community life and, similar to E.T.A.'s prescriptions but with different purposes, it relies on the importance of the residents' daily routine and fight against egocentric tendencies. The two institutions have a lot in common, starting from the space they occupy, to analogous philosophies in almost specular conditions, and their stories happen to often intersect for various reasons concerning the issue of addiction, be it about drugs or entertainment.

The novel relates the stories (or fragments of stories) of dozens of major and minor characters gravitating around E.T.A. and Ennet House. The novelistic structure of the chaotic and non-chronological presentation of these micro-narratives depends mainly on the role played by Jim who, although is already dead by the time when most of the events take place (Y.D.A.U.), still keeps on symbolically and literally haunting the life of the other characters, especially of his own family. In fact, Jim used to work for the U.S. Government and developed Annular Fusion as a talented optical physician, then he left scientific research to found E.T.A. (as a child, he was a promising tennis player, too) and he engaged in an artistic career as a movie director, his main bequest being *Infinite Jest*, the movie. In addition to being the unaware motor of geo-political,

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[62] Some of the places mentioned in *Infinite Jest* are real and some are not. For an exhaustive mapping of the real areas where the novel is set and of the ones that inspired the fictitious ones, see the website https://www.infiniteboston.com/post/28833684321/enfield-allston-brighton.

familial and individual processes during his life and after his death, Jim returns as a ghost near the end of the novel and communicates with Don Gately, ex drug-addict and almost-heroic operator of Ennet House.

In the next section of this chapter I will proceed with an analysis of the members of the Incandenza family and of E.T.A. as a prosecution of the family environment. The Incandenzas, like the Beadsmans in *The Broom of the System*, are the prototype of a generalized environment that Wallace identifies with American contemporary society where individuals live in a paradoxical condition between autonomy and dependence. I focus on the Incandenza family as an instance of a *not good enough environment*, its role in the development of individuals and its symbolic analogies with the parental role of the U.S. government and society at large. I am interested both in the members of the Incandenza family and the family as a whole, and I take some of the family's features to be at the roots of its members' emotional distortions and of E.T.A. students' psychological growing. The family itself is connected in turn to North-American geopolitical dynamics, thus providing an instance of indiscernible connection between the individual and the society, a connection also stated by Professor Thode's course at E.T.A. named "The Personal Is the Political Is the Psychopathological: The Politics of Contemporary Psychopathological Double-Binds" (*Infinite Jest* 307).[63] Thus, I analyze the developmental process and distortions of the Incandenza family according to those Winnicott's theories exposed in Chapter 1 in order to cast a new light on the psychological relevance of the self in the American society as depicted in *Infinite Jest*.

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[63] Being part of a family, as depicted in Wallace's fiction, implies being part of a community which affects and is affected by the individual. Commenting on the cooperation of macro- and micro-narration of *Infinite Jest*, Burn explains that «[…] the overall movement of Wallace's novel is constantly to encourage the reader to locate the local in the larger perspectives. [...] one of the way Wallace does this is by placing his characters in a longer evolutionary perspective, showing how the apparently individual is just one link in an extended hereditary chain. But *Infinite Jest* also demonstrates how the individual action takes place within more complex systems, beyond their comprehension» (*A Reader's Guide* 57).

3.2. "This is the way to have Mom be proud of me"

E.T.A.

One of the focal point of *Infinite Jest* (the novel) is represented by E.T.A. and, by extension, by the Incandenza family. The academy is an excellent sport institution but it is founded upon emotional distortions generated through at least three generations in the history of the Incandenza family, distortions that are perpetuated through E.T.A.'s training philosophies. Specifically, «[t]he whole Tavis/Schtitt program is supposedly a progression toward self-forgetting» (635).[64] Dealing with adolescent students, the main preoccupation of E.T.A.'s administrative team is to protect the kids from their own talent, because talent casts a light on emerging tennis players that can be dangerous for them. E.T.A.'s Head Coach and Athletic Director, Gerhardt Schtitt, applies an allegedly brilliant strategy of self-transcendence through pain on the students that should be functional to their resistance to the Show (i.e. fame and entertainment business). Aubrey deLint, one of E.T.A.'s prorectors, explains Schtitt's policy as follows: «These kids […] they're here to get lost in something bigger than them. […] Fuck's with a junior's head, talent. They pay top dollar to come here and go back to being little fish and to get savaged and feel small and see and develop. To forget themselves as objects of attention for a few years and see what they can do when the eyes are off them» (660). The fundamental idea here is that the player's self is considered as an entity to transcend and forget because it is susceptible to distortions due to public attention. E.T.A.'s preoccupation is understandable but it gets to extreme solutions and it is never clear whether it is motivated by sincere care for the kids or by the fear that the students could eventually lose their mind and decline the level of athletic performance.

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[64]Stephen Burn (*A Reader's Guide* 49-50) considers Schtitt's materialistic program at E.T.A. to be in line with Incandenza's anti-Cartesian philosophy. I agree with Burn's opinion about the divergence between Incandenzas' materialistic philosophy and Wallace's vision of a more traditional selfhood that is not Cartesian but however rejects materialism. I am not sure, though, that Schtitt is the promulgator of such a materialistic policy at E.T.A.: he actually refers to the "world inside" (*Infinite Jest* 459) and, as we will see, his concept of tennis implies a challenge with one's own self, a fight in which the limits of the self play a major role.

DeLint's explanation of E.T.A.'s training philosophy as conceived by Schtitt revolves around metaphors about being seen and being transformed in statues, because becoming a star in the tennis Show means being the target of petrifying public attention: «In the Show they'll get all they want of being made into statues to be looked at and poked at and discussed, and then some. […] The point here for the best kids is to inculcate their sense that it's never about being seen. It's never. If they can get that inculcated, the Show won't fuck them up, Schtitt thinks» (661). Thus E.T.A.'s training philosophy is based on the idea that junior players must get used to being looked at without concern for the other's gaze, without being petrified by public attention that is not focused on them as persons but only as tennis prodigies and entertainers. In fact, the topos of Medusa's gaze together with frightening mirrors and lens are recurring themes in Jim Incandenza's life and cinematic career, themes that are translated into the academy's philosophy as founded by Jim himself.

The origin of Jim's, and thus E.T.A.'s, obsession with Medusa's petrifying gaze is to be found in the relationship between father and son perpetuated through the history of the Incandenza family, starting at least from Jim's father and grandfather and getting to Jim's three children. In a section of the novel where a ten-year old Jim is instructed by his drunk father on controversial topics concerning persons as pure bodies, the roots of the obsession with being seen is found in the need of a son to be seen by his father. Talking about the only occasion when Jim's long-shadow-casting grandfather attended one of Jim's father tennis match, the latter says: «And was I nervous, young sir J.O.I.? With the one and only Himself there in all his wooden glory there, watching, half in and out the light, expressionless? I was not. I was in my body. My body and I were one» (165).

As a matter of fact, the older man's gaze and judgment on his son undermines the result of the match and symbolically determines the decline of his tennis career. The ambiguous relationship of Jim's father with his body and his own father expresses the tension between the need to be acknowledged as a self and the effort to identify with the body in order to escape the negation of that acknowledgment: «[…] I knew myself as a body and was fully inside my little child's body out there, Jim, I was in my big right arm and scarless legs, safely ensconced […]» (165). One cannot identify himself as a body and live inside his body at the same time, because being inside a body implies

being an entity that recognizes his body to be separated from itself. In fact, in the same monologue Jim's father admits that he cared a lot about his father's gaze and he cares about seeing what is inside Jim's body: «[my father] never acknowledged I even existed as I was, not as I do you, Jim, not as I take care to bend over backwards way, *way* out of my way to let you know I *see* you recognize you am aware of you as a body care about what might go on behind that big flat face bent over a homemade prism» (163). And also: «I'm so scared, Jim. I'm so scared of dying without ever being really *seen*» (168).

E.T.A.'s philosophy, as originally inspired by Jim's upbringing, seems to be founded on the concern with the students' psychological health and obsession with their bodily dimension, but it ultimately proves to be not only ineffective but actually damaging.[65] The relationship of the kids to their own body is at least controversial: «[…] E.T.A. is mostly a comparatively unsexual place, maybe almost surprisingly so, considering the constant roar and gurgle here of adolescent glands, the emphasis on physicality, the fears of mediocrity, the back-and-forth struggles with ego, the loneliness and close proximity» (636). Adolescence is acknowledged to be the fundamental period in life when a person starts to come to deal with his own transforming body and gradually enters into the adult world, struggling with the growing pressures of the external world threatening the self, and E.T.A. is concerned with this stage and the task of defending the students from excessive pressures that the kids would not be psychologically ready to confront. That is why the students are submitted to draining physical training that is supposed to prevent them from too much thinking too early, as it is explained by Troeltsch, one of the eldest players at E.T.A., to younger kids at the academy:

> Boys, what it is is I'll tell you it's repetition. […] at you boys's age it's reps for their own sake, putting results on the back burner, why they never give anybody the boot for insufficient progress under fourteen, it's repetitive movements and motions for their own sake, over and over until the accretive weight of the reps sinks the movements themselves down under your like consciousness into the more there regions […]. The machine-language of the muscles. Until you can do it without thinking about it, play. […] Wait

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[65] By perpetuating a materialistic program of self-forgetting, E.T.A. actually configures itself as a privileged path towards addiction to substances (Burn, *A Reader's Guide* 69; 71).

until it soaks into the hardware and then see the way this frees up your head. […] wait till fourteen of fifteen. […] This is the crucial plateau where character starts to matter. Focus, self-consciousness, the chattering head, the cackling voices, the choking-issue, fear versus whatever isn't fear, self-image, doubts, reluctances, little tight-lipped cold footed men inside your mind, cackling about fear and doubt, chinks in the mental armor. Now these start to matter. Thirteen at the earliest. Staff looks at a range of thirteen to fifteen. Also the age of manhood rituals in various cultures. Think about it. Until then, repetition. Until then you might as well be machines, here, is there view. (117-118)

Troeltsch emphasizes the importance of repetition within the physical dimension of E.T.A.'s training philosophy, the transcending of the self by the automation of movements aimed at preserving what he calls "the character" of the young players until they are able to control it themselves.[66]

Hal goes beyond Troeltsch vision of mechanization and grasps the further implications of E.T.A.'s exhausting training, claiming that «[t]he point, […] is that it's not about the physical anymore, men. The physical stuff's just pro forma. It's the heads they're working on here, boys» (113). Each of E.T.A.'s eldest students has a different perception of the academy's philosophy, and the novel remains very ambiguous about the real purpose of the training policies, which are apparently obscure even to most of the staff working for the Incandenza family, and as unreachable as the academy's founder's mind and intentions.

What seems to be reliable and commonly, though secretly, acknowledged is the frequent psychological decline and general tendency to drug addiction affecting E.T.A. students either despite of or as a result of the tracked path conceived at the academy. The staff is aware of the threat represented by the pressure of the Show to adolescent students, and according to deLint, talking as a spokesman for the academy, that is exactly what E.T.A. tries to avoid:

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[66] Katherine Hayles sees E.T.A.'s repetitive training philosophy as a critique to liberal market and a way to restructure a kind of liberal selfhood not founded upon illusory autonomy: [t]he young star may believe he represents the pinnacle of autonomous selfhood, but in fact he is enmeshed in a system in which his stardom produces the conditions that make it increasingly difficult for him to remain a star, at the same time encouraging his addiction to stardom. The solution, Schtitt believes, is to use the recursive loops connecting players to each other to smash the illusion of autonomous selfhood» ("The Illusion of Autonomy" 694).

The young players, they have the advantage in psyche, also. […] the formidable mental edge that their psyches are still not yet adult in all ways – therefore, so, they do not feel the anxiety and pressure in the way it is felt by adult players. […] But it is soon you start to see the burning out which the place like ours is hoping to prevent. […] The head swells to the size of a balloon, why not? […] Winning two and three upset matches, feeling suddenly so loved so many talking to you as if there is love. But always the same, then. For then you awaken to the fact that you are loved for winning only. The two and three wins created you, for people. It is not that the wins made them recognize something that existed unrecognized before these upset wins. The from-nonplace winning *created* you. […] Pressure such as one could not imagine, now that to maintain you must win. Now that winning is the *expected*. […] Hence the suicides. The burn-out. The drugs, the self-indulging, the spoilage. […] Therefore the terrible pressure here. They are being tempered. Oven-toughened. (676-677)

From deLint's explanation emerges the awareness of the kids' need to be acknowledged as existing before success arrives, and not to feel as they were created by success itself. Hence, Schtitt's concern with «[…] teaching them to see the ball out of a place inside that can't be chewed» (661). Because, according again to deLint's version, there are two possible consequences of obtaining success before finding that place inside oneself: one is suicide, as a result of the realization that «[…] attaining the goal does not complete or redeem you […]», and that «[…] what you had thought would have the meaning does not have the meaning when you get it, and you are impaled by shock» (680); the other option is what at E.T.A. is called the "Syndrome of the Endless Party", which consists in keeping on surviving on the surface of the celebrity, that "from-nonplace winning" which creates the player instead of being created by him, a possibility that ultimately leads to drugs and substances (681).

Despite E.T.A.'s awareness and its parental role in relation to the students (since most of them are virtually abandoned by their families to the academy), the academy lacks effective psychological care of the kids. Dr. Dolores Rusk, E.T.A.'s designated psychologist, appears to be overly theoretical and totally inappropriate to adolescents' need to be listened to, as it emerges from this passage taken from a therapeutic session with Ortho Stice, one of the students obsessed with the fear of lifting weights:

On the level of objects and a projective infantile omnipotence where you experience magical thinking about your thoughts and the behavior of

objects' relation to your narcissistic wishes, the counterphobia presents as the delusion of some special agency or control to compensate for some repressed wounded inner trauma having to do with absence of control. [...] In for instance with an analytic model, the types of traumas counterphobic reactions cover are always pre-Oedipal, at which stage object's cathexis is Oedipal and symbolic. For example small children's dolls and Action-Figurines.[67] (550)

The dialogue between Dr. Rusk and Ortho Stice during the therapeutic session is absolutely uneven and ultimately useless.[68] The position of the therapist at E.T.A. is parodied as it already was in the case of Dr. Jay in the *Broom of the System*, but on a different basis: while Dr. Jay appeared as a ridiculous character, here the function of Dr. Rusk is questioned in virtue of her detached professionalism and theoretical extremism. Both the therapists, though, are depicted as fundamentally uninterested in their patients' issues, working only for the sake of a mission assigned by someone else. As Dr. Jay secretly worked for Lenore Sr., here Dr. Rusk responds to the functionalist logics of E.T.A., logics that may have been concerned with the students' psychological health when they were conceived by Jim but that have been distorted under the management of C.T. As a result, the kids cannot count on the psychological support provided by the academy staff and they can only partially rely on the counseling groups called "Big Buddies" consisting of periodic gatherings of younger and elder students:

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[67] Although Dr. Rusk's speech seems to have much in common with Winnicott's object relations theory, the analytic model she refers to seems to fit more the traditional Freudian approach, where cathexis is determined by instinctual drives rather than by the potential tendency towards the outer worlds as it is suggested by Winnicott. In fact, part of the text's satire on Dr. Rusk's analytic approach comes from its obsession with Oedipal complex that, while it is fundamental for Freud, it does not represent a relevant feature for infants before the three-body relationship according to Winnicott, as we have already seen. Hence, Ortho Stice's annoyed and naïve reply to Dr. Rusk's interpretation: «I ain't omnipotent and I don't want to X no Goddamn Barbiedoll» (*Infinite Jest* 550).

[68] About the critique to therapeutic culture in *Infinite Jest*, see Kiki Benzon: «Pointed against the chorus of despairing, alienated figures are the (by-and-large ineffectual) therapists: the doctor who cannot understand Kate's depression, Enfield's overly-academicised Dr. Rusk, the grief counselor whom Hal tricks into "therapeutic approval" by using the accepted language of the industry, and the (marginally more successful) cultish brainwash doctrinaires of Alcoholic Anonymous» ("Darkness Legible" 193). Redgate, on the contrary, supports a more positive view, thought still fallimentary, of psychotherapy in Wallace's work: «The therapists in Wallace's stories are not one-dimensional but in there, trying to peer through the wall and failing. The patients on the other side are suffering for real, and want to be helped. Therapy is not an evil in Wallace's work, it simply throws a spotlight on how universally difficult it is for one soul to ever know another» (*Wallace and I* 137).

> […] C.T. makes his administrative assistant Lateral Alice Moore drive the prorectors bats trying to ferret out data on littler kids' psychic states, so he can forecast probable burnouts and attritive defections, so he'll know how many slots he and Admissions'll have to offer Incomings for the next term. Big Buddies are in a tricky position, requested to keep the prorectors generally informed about who among their charges seems shaky in terms of resolve, capacity for suffering and stress, physical punishment, homesickness, deep fatigue, but at the same time wanting to remain a trustworthy confidential shoulder and wing for their Little Buddies' most private and delicate issues. (99)

The most valuable resource provided by Big Buddies consists in the communitarian and sympathetic function due to the kids' shared experiences and conditions rather than to their assigned mission.

Together with Big Buddies, the only other precious supportive character at E.T.A. is Lyle, the obscure guru that has been at the academy since the time it was founded by Jim and who keeps on being appreciated by the students, in spite of his disquieting character, because he is a great listener: «Like all good listeners, he as a way of attending that is at once intense and assuasive: the supplicant feels both nakedly revealed and sheltered, somehow, from all possible judgment. It's like he's working as hard as you. You both of you, briefly, feel unalone» (388). Lyle's past close relationship with Jim is never really clarified, but he is the only one at E.T.A. who keeps on preserving an uninterested concern, although controversial, for the students (he gives cryptic advice in exchange for the kids' sweat to lick).

Lyle's way of explaining E.T.A.'s philosophy to the students consists of a metaphor between fame and pulling weights, setting a connection between the pressure caused by the others' expectations and the sense of being entrapped that is also a major theme of Jim's filmography together with the topos of Medusa's gaze: «There is much fear in fame. Terrible and heavy fear to be pulled and held, carried. Perhaps they want only to keep it off until you weigh enough to pull it toward yourself. […] Fame is not the exit from any cage» (389). E.T.A.'s training philosophy and Lyle's interpretation of it delineate two particular features that constitute a fundamental difference between a healthy and a distorted relationship between the individual and the others. We are talking about the ontological security of the individual in relation to his environment

and the consequent perception of the others' expectations, two features that are to be considered in the analysis of the main characters of the Incandenza family in order to deal with the apparent negation of their inner self.

HAROLD JAMES INCANDENZA (HAL)

In attempting an analysis of the Incandenza family, I consider Hal before everybody else because he is the one around whom the whole issue of the inner self is mostly explored. Hal, the youngest child of the Incandenza family, a talented tennis player and a prodigious mind raised at E.T.A., shares with their father an extraordinary ability to manipulate languages (the verbal language in his case, scientific and artistic languages in Jim's) together with a deep dissatisfaction in communicating that eventually leads both of them to psychological decline. Although, according to his brother Orin, Hal is «[…] the one supposedly nonbats family-member […]» (245), from the narration he is actually revealed to be the one struggling the most with his own emotional life, as also confirmed by deLint's opinion on his tennis performance: «Hal looks just as perfectly dead out there, but he's more vulnerable in terms of, like, emotionally» (682).

Hal is particularly tricky to analyze (not only by the reader but by the other characters as well, included professional therapists) because his inner self seems to be denied by the overall narration but, in fact, he is one of the characters whose insights are reported more often, both by himself and by other characters, and there is much focus on his emotional conditions that are expressed from alternating perspectives.[69] The most obvious example of Hal's controversial character is the fact that the opening scene of the book, which is chronologically the last episode, introduces the kid as a muted entity

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[69] Den Dulk notices that there is a shift in perspective in the narrations about Hal starting from the moment when Hal confesses his fears to his brother Mario: «Shortly after his confession to Mario, Hal starts to narrate from a first person perspective and, chronologically speaking, keeps up doing so. Up to that moment, Hal's perspective has always been rendered in the third-person, or Hal has been described from the third-person perspective of other characters. We can regard the fact that Hal starts narrating in the first-person as a sign of the fact that Hal starts to develop a self» ("Good Faith and Sincerity" 216). I tend to think, instead, that the gradual revelation of Hal's perspective coincides with the abstinence from drugs and the loss of secrecy that eventually lead him to face his sense of being empty inside.

encaged in a body that he cannot control, while from then on he is mostly described as the opposite, that is an empty body gifted with extraordinary language ability.[70]

In the opening scene, during an interview for the admission at Arizona University, Hal is inexplicably unable to speak, while thanks to the internal point of view in the narration the reader knows that the kid is thinking straight and has intellectual abilities incredibly superior to any guy of his age.[71] During the interview, facing the shocked reaction of three Deans of the university who can only hear incomprehensible sounds coming from Hal's mouth, the kid keeps repeating: «I am in here» (3; 13), suggesting an inner self entrapped in his body; «I have an intricate story. Experiences and feelings. I'm complex» (11), anticipating the rest of the story narrated in the book as a huge flashback telling about the unclear reasons for his actual condition; and «I am not what you see and hear» (13), which undermines the

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[70] In a 1995 letter by Jonathan Franzen in response to a copy of *Infinite Jest* manuscript, the suggested reasons for Hal's communication problem are: «[…] 1.) extrapolation of the problem he was having in the lockerrom when we last see him in YDAU, 2.) later ingestion of DMZ, or [conceivably] 3.) exposure to the lethal Entertainment» (Burn, "Webs of Nerves" 60). Alexander Resar reads Hal's transformation in the ability to communicate through the lens of Kristeva's categories of semiotic and symbolic: «*Infinite Jest*'s depiction of Hal's subjectivity […] performs the dialectic between absolute symbolic mastery absent affective content and the all-encompassing submersion into the semiotic drives and processes that foreclose symbolic exchange. The location of these poles, these final boundaries of the semiotic and symbolic within which subjectivity forms, at the beginning and conclusion of the text renders Hal's navigation of subjectivity throughout the text the very mapping of the dialectic, which occurs between those oppositional, but co-constitutive, forces» ("Signifying Everything" 159). Mary K. Holland sees Hal's muteness as a sign of infantilization and regress to narcissism in order to eschew adulthood: «His prodigious linguistic gifts – which the novel offers […] as one potential avenue for salvation in a culture collapsing into solipsism – clearly have been destroyed by the drug […]. Without that gift, his one defense against the worldly stimulations to which he cannot respond is "[a] neutral and affectless silence", essentially the pain of mimicking disaffection without the salve of expressed irony» ("The Art's Heart's Purpose" 235). Elizabeth Freudenthal simply sees it as the direct consequence of Hal's radical interiority: «Hal is paralyzed by a radical interiority, likely catalyzed by his ingestion of the designer drug DMZ. […] The episode depicts in stark relief the pain of a tendency towards isolated introspection, ratiocination, and introversion» ("Anti-Interiority" 203). I think, as I will explain later, that Hal's muteness is rather a case of Winnicottian non-communicating that can either express severe psychosis or a moment of *unintegration*.

[71] I question den Dulk's evaluation of the opening scene where he states that «[…] Hal, at that moment seen from his own first-person perspective, seems quite normal» ("Good Faith and Sincerity" 215). Hal's prodigious intellectual abilities are not normal for a kid of his age. More in general, I see the ambiguity of the opening scene and the possibility of a double reading (is Hal mute or are the Deans "deaf"?), but I think that is a representation of the extreme split between Hal's inner self and the world outside more than an unfathomed improvement of Hal's condition, as den Dulk suggests instead: «This contradiction leaves it up to the reader to decide what kind of state Hal is in, here, at the end of the story line. Judging by the reactions from the people around him, there is something wrong with Hal […]. However […] Hal, compared with how he is in the rest of the novel, is actually getting better. Interpreting this will depend partly on how one judges Hal's surroundings, the cultural context described in the novel; for it is this context that determines the perception of Hal as suffering from some sort of fundamental defect» ("Good Faith and Sincerity" 215).

interpretation of himself as a character devoid of an inner self, despite the many features pointing towards that direction.

Hal's complexity is sharpened by his inexplicable obsession with the secrecy of his drug addiction:

> Hal has no idea why this is, or whence, this obsession with the secrecy of it. He broods on it abstractly sometimes, when high: this No-One-Must-Know thing. It's not fear per se, fear of discovery. Beyond that it all gets too abstract and twined up to lead to anything, Hal's brooding. Like most North Americans of his generation, Hal tends to know way less about why he feels certain ways about the objects and pursuits he's devoted to than he does about the objects and pursuits themselves. It's hard to say for sure whether this is even exceptionally bad, this tendency. (54)

Beyond illustrating Hal's obsession with secrecy as a general attitude of North America's younger generation,[72] the boy's thoughts about this topic reveal the importance of the relation between subject and object, more than the significance of the objects for themselves,[73] casting a new light on the discourse about objects brought about throughout the whole novel, starting from the section about Jim and his father. This web of connections reinforces the general idea expressed throughout *Infinite Jest* that drug addiction depends on an internal void which in turn is linked to the individual personal and familiar story, and that need for secrecy does not concern only drug consumption but also the emotional distortions that are the basis for drug consumption.

In fact, one possible reason for Hal's psychological decline, starting approximately with Eschaton disaster, is Hal's fear of losing his secrecy.[74] Following

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[72] In *Infinite Jest*, North American young generations are often characterized by love for secrecy symbolized by their «[…] fetish for getting down in the enclosed fundaments underneath things – tunnels, caves, ventilator-shafts, the horrific areas beneath wooden porches […]» (666) and their general tendency to make use of drugs: «Recreational drugs are more or less traditional at any U.S. secondary school, maybe because of the unprecedented tensions: post-latency and puberty and angst and impending adulthood, etc.» (52-53).

[73] Hal's reflection about the relation between subjects and objects is unknowingly informed by Jim's researches: «The studying was not so much how one sees a thing, but this relation between oneself and what one sees. He translated this numerously across different fields, M. Schtitt tells» (*Infinite Jest* 682).

[74] The relevance of desecretation has been pointed out by Burn who connects the day 8th of November, Eschaton day, with the day when Roentgen discovered x rays in 1895: «[…] Wallace has organized the chronology of his novel so that a number of key revelatory events in *Infinite Jest* cluster around November 8. The anniversary of the date when Roentgen saw inside himself is the date in the novel

the day when some of the younger students under the responsibility of Hal and his peers get to the hospital after an Eschaton physical dispute, Hal and his friend Michael Pemulis are requested to submit strict urine analysis that force them to stop taking drugs.[75] During a confession to his brother Mario, Hal seems to define himself a liar (784),[76] and the reason he adduces for regretting his secrecy is not the fear of being discovered as a drug addict and expelled from the academy, but a much deeper anxiety that has to do with the way he is perceived by his family, especially by his mother: «The hideous thing is how brightly it'd come out, if I flunk a urine. E.T.A.'ll be publicly hurt. Hence Himself's memory, hence Himself.[77] […] And it'd *kill* the Moms. Not so much the Hope.[78] The *secrecy* of it. That I hid it from her. That she'll feel I had to hide it from her» (784). Hal's relationship with Jim's memory, thus with what is left of Jim himself, and with Avril determines the boy's need of secrecy and the decline following the fear of the revelation of that secrecy, and he is aware that his preoccupation will be the cause of his psychological decline:

> I feel a hole. It's going to be a huge hole, in a month. A way more than Hal-sized hole. […] And the hole's going to get a little bigger every day until I fly apart in different directions. I'll fly apart in midair. I'll fly apart in the Lung, or at Tucson at 200 degrees in front of all these people who knew Himself and think I'm different. Whom I've lied to, and liked it. It'll all come out anyway, clean pee or no. (785)

Hal's deepest fear is that the people who know him, and especially Avril, might realize that he suffers from the same sense of internal void that affected Jim and ultimately led

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when, at E.T.A., the masks start to come off and the hidden interiors are revealed» ("A Paradigm for the Life of Consciousness" 53-54).

[75] Hal's detoxification and reveal cause not only his psychological but also his agonistic decline since, as already reported, he is a very emotional player: «It's now a whole new Hal, a Hal who does not get high, or hide, a Hal who in 29 days is going to hand his own personal urine over to authority figures with a wide smile and exemplary posture and not a secretive thought in his head. No one except Pemulis and Axford know it's a whole new and chemical-free Hal who should by all rights have lost to a 16-year-old out there in public on what ended up a gorgeous NNE autumn day» (*Infinite Jest* 635).

[76] It is not completely clear whether Hal refers to himself or to his mother when he talks about one liar in the family: the first hypothesis might be true, because the statement is contained in a dialogue with Mario where Hal is regretting his own lies in the perspective of the possible collapse of his secrecy (*Infinite Jest* 782-785). Nonetheless, the ambiguity is voluntarily maintained, and it could be a sign of Hal's hidden awareness of his mother's unreliability.

[77] Hal and his brother Orin often refer to their father as "Himself" and to their mother as "the Moms".

[78] "Hope" or "Bob Hope" is a slang for marijuana.

him to commit suicide, an ontological insecurity that Hal has been trying to hide during his whole life by complying to others' language. Hiding a secret is better than hiding a void.

In this sense, Hal's prodigious but unsatisfactory ability in making use of language is a significant symptom of his distorted relationship with and complacent attitude towards Avril, a member of the Militant Grammarians of Massachusetts whose pride for her son's precocious linguistic achievements are uncomfortably concealed:

> Hal Incandenza had been thought for a while as a toddler to have some sort of Attention Deficit Disorder […], but thanks to the diagnostic savvy of Brandeis's Child Development Center the damage assessments were not only retracted but reversed way out to the other side of the Damaged-to-Gifted continuum, and for much of the glabrous part of his childhood Hal'd been classified as somewhere between "Borderline Gifted" and "Gifted" – thought part of this high cerebral rank was because B.C.D.C.'s diagnostic tests weren't quite so keen when it came to distinguishing between raw neural gifts and the young Hal's monomaniacally obsessive interest and effort, as if Hal were trying as if his very life were in the balance to please some person or persons, even though no one had ever even hinted that his life depended on seeming gifted or precocious or even exceptionally pleasing […]. (76n. 998-999)

Here two important points emerge from the description of the assessment of Hal's linguistic abilities: the fact that the distinction between being damaged and being gifted is not easy to make and that what is considered to be a neural feature might in fact be a psychological issue determined by Hal's complacent relationship with his mother. Thus, a connection is established between Hal's excess of cerebralism and his ontological insecurity as a result of the relationship with his mother. Furthermore, Hal's pleasure (or need, as it will result) in taking drugs is explicitly linked to the satisfaction of making Avril proud of him, and thus, again, to his addiction as a consequence of a sense of being empty inside, "a huge hole:"

> […] when he'd extracted what was desired from memory and faultlessy pronounced it before certain persons, he'd felt almost that same pale sweet aura that an LSD afterglow conferred, some milky corona, like almost a halo of approved grace, made all the milkier by the faultless nonchalance of

a Moms who made it clear that his value was not contingent on winning first
or even second prize, ever. (76n. 999)

Hal's ontological insecurity, his tendency to drug addiction, his relationship with his mother, and his cerebralism are deeply connected but the order of causation among them is not always clear because these issues are not strictly one-directional, they are rather interdependent.[79]

Because of the interdependence between psychological issues and drugs, Hal's emotional decline is particularly tricky to decipher: his psychological condition seems to worsen when he stops taking drugs, while one would expect the opposite reaction, that is a gradual improvement. This phenomenon is explicable in terms of the "paradox of Substance", that is that «[…] once you are sufficiently enslaved by a Substance to need to quit the Substance in order to save your life, the enslaving Substance has become so deeply important to you that you will all but lose your mind when it is taken away from you. Or […] you will find yourself beginning to pray to be allowed literally to lose your mind […]»[80] (201). It is implied that drugs deceitfully compensate for psychological distortions for a while, but they eventually lead to breakdown (or suicide, as in the case of Jim). There are three slightly different interpretations of this process concerning Hal, as expressed by Avril, Mario and Pemulis: the three of them see Hal's decline from different perspectives and expose it with different languages but they do grasp the essential point.

Avril uses a language borrowed from Dr. Dolores Rusk that she defines as existentialist but which is actually taken from Ronald D. Laing's *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*:[81]

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[79] The connection between Hal's use of drugs and the stratification of his self into different layers is noticed by Burns as well, who claims that «Wallace's favored term for a joint – "duBois" – can be read, for instance, as evoking W.E.B. DuBois notion of "double consciousness," a link that's strengthened by the shared centrality of certain key words – particularly *veil* – in both texts» ("Webs of Nervs" 72).

[80] Note that the enslaving Substance is also referred to as «[…] *tecano gusano*, which apparently connotes some kind of interior psychic worm that cannot be sated or killed» (*Infinite Jest* 200), «[t]hat over 50% of persons with a Substance addiction suffer from some other recognized form of psychiatric disorder, too» (202), and «[t]hat it is statistically easier for low-IQ people to kick an addiction than it is for high-IQ people» (203).

[81] Although Laing is often associated with anti-psychiatry, Jamie Redgate clarifies that «[…] there is not any sense in Wallace's work that madness is liberating or epiphanic» (*Wallace and I* 130).

> There are, apparently, persons who are deeply afraid of their emotions, particularly the painful ones. Grief, regret, sadness. Sadness especially, perhaps. Dolores describes these persons as afraid of obliteration, emotional engulfment. As if something truly and thoroughly felt would have no end or bottom. Would become infinite and engulf them. […] This mean they are afraid to live. They are imprisoned in something, I think. Frozen inside, emotionally. Why is this. No one knows […]. Dolores believes it derives from childhood trauma, but I suspect not always. There may be some persons who are born imprisoned. The irony, of course, being that the very imprisonment that prohibits sadness's expression must itself feel intensely sad and painful. […] These persons may strike someone who's sensitive as somehow just not quite right. Not quite there. Blank. Distant. Muted. Distant. *Spacey* was an American term we grew up with. Wooden. Deadened. Disconnected. Distant. Or they may drink alcohol or take other drugs. The drugs both blunt the real sadness and allow some skewed version of the sadness some sort of expression […]. (765-767)

What Avril sees in her youngest son's behavior is a natural tendency to repress his feelings which results in an existential "cage" (using Jim's symbolism) and entraps him in the "paradox of Substance". Although Avril refers to Dr. Rusk's language, I think of Laing especially because of her use of the term "engulfment", which is a form of anxiety and a defense strategy of isolation deriving from ontological insecurity that undermines the individual's relationships with the others, and specifically: «[e]ngulfment is felt as a risk in being understood (thus grasped, comprehended), in being loved, or even simply in being seen» (Laing, *The Divided Self* 44).[82] This reasonably explains Hal's fallacy in communication and the fact that he becomes muted once he stops taking drugs, as a consequence of overwhelming feelings. That is to say, Avril does not perceive her son as an empty person, but rather as a "divided self" whose core is trapped in the inside and can only relate to others thanks to the help of drugs, as it probably was for Jim himself, who keeps on being connected to Hal's issues and the topic of the cage.[83]

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[82] Burn also recognizes Avril's reference to Laing, but he justifies her inability to intervene on Hal's condition with the following consideration: «That Avril can so precisely diagnose Hal's condition but not cure it, is consistent both with the novel's antiteleological spirit, and with the larger sense in Wallace's work that knowing a disorder etiology may nevertheless offer little hope of alleviating the symptoms» ("Webs of Nerves" 75). I think, instead, that Avril's intellectual effort does not cope with Hal's emotional needs.

[83] Avril sees something inside Hal but she is obnubilated by her own narcissistic distortions, and she distances herself from this awareness through the use of language. The fact that Avril thinks to see Hal's inner world scares the boy whose «[…] troubles with his Moms is the fact that Avril Incandenza believes

Avril's opinion on Hal's late condition is further complicated by Mario's reply, who thinks that the "chemical-free" version of his brother is not a defense strategy but actually a more authentic state: «[…] what if it's that they're almost like even *more* themselves than normal? Than they were before? If it's not that he's blank or dead. If he's himself even more than before a sad thing happened. What if that happens and you still think he's sad, inside, somewhere?» (768). In other words, Mario interprets Hal's usual behavior as a defense strategy and he reads his younger brother's decline as a moment of release from that strategy. Still Mario's thoughts do not deny the hypothesis of a split in Hal's character, who thinks instead of being empty inside.

Pemulis's idea about Hal's recent depression seems to be quite in line with Avril's conception of the "paradox of Substance". He thinks that there is a part of Hal, in Hal's words «[t]he part that's dependent or incomplete […]» (321n. 1066), is going to die if he gives up drugs: «You lose your mind, Inc.[84] You die inside» (321n. 1065). Pemulis's vision again connects Hal's decline with his father's suicide, an event that happened after Jim had apparently quit drinking. The logic of this version is that there is a part of the personality that suffers an ontological lack and tends to addiction to fill that hole: once the substances were removed, Hal and Jim would have started to feel absorbed by that hole, falling into a depressive state.

Avril, Mario and Pemulis convey three different perspectives on the same psychological process: the three interpretations of Hal's condition are equally valuable but partial, thus none of them is to be discarded, but rather complemented with Hal's vision of his own psychical state:

> Hal himself hasn't had a bona fine intensity-of-interior-life-type emotion since he was tiny; he finds terms like *joie* and *value* to be like so many variables in rarified equations, and he can manipulate them well enough to satisfy everyone but himself that he's in there, inside his own hull, as a human being […]. Hal, who's empty but not dumb, theorizes privately that what passes for hip cynical transcendence of sentiment is really some kind of fear of being really human, since to be really human (at least as he

she knows him inside and out as a human being, and an internally worthy one at that, when in fact inside Hal there's pretty much nothing at all, he knows. His Moms Avril hears her own echoes inside him and thinks what she hears is him, and this makes Hal feel the one thing he feels to the limit, lately: he is lonely» (*Infinite Jest* 694).

[84] "Inc." is one of Hal's nicknames.

conceptualizes it) is probably to be unavoidably sentimental and naïve and goo-prone and generally pathetic, is to be in some basic interior way forever infantile, some sort of not-quite-right-looking infant dragging itself anaclitically around the map, with big wet eyes and froggy-soft skin, huge skull, gooey drool. One of the really American things about Hal, probably, is the way he despises what it is he's really lonely for: this hideous internal self, incontinent of sentiment and need, that pules and writhes just under the hip empty mask, anhedonia. (694-695)

Here an external narrator reports Hal cerebral lucubration on the reasons for his own lack of authentic feelings. The acknowledgment of the split between interior and exterior life is confirmed despite the sense of lack of feelings.[85] It is not the interior life that is denied, but rather the ability to satisfy the emotional entity enclosed in Hal's cerebral skull, because of the focus on complying with others' expectations.[86] Conversely, Hal's ideal of a truly human being is extreme and reminds his brother Mario with his pathetic physical and emotional appearance, as if being human implies being without any filters, like an infant. By characterizing the distaste for the internal

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[85] Burn contends that, within the philosophical debate «[…] between Descartes's dualism ('para-mechanical' hypothesis) and Hobbes's materialism (mechanical hypothesis)"[…], it is appropriate that as Hal seeks a counternarrative to a mechanical hypothesis, he turns to his reading, and this leads him (via Shakespeare) to […] René Descartes» ("The Machine-Language of the Muscles" 46). Thus, Hal is looking for an inner self essentially cerebral and separated from his body, but this search will eventually lead Hal to ontological insecurity and psychological decline: «For all his precocity as a reader, however, Hal finds little support in Descartes's foundation. […] As the end of the novel approaches, Hal can find only emptiness not just in theological belief, but in any kind of belief […]» ("The Machine-Language of the Muscles" 47). I believe, instead, that Hal has worked hard his own life to develop his mind but that is not enough for him to perceive his inner self. The mind and the self need to be treated as two different things and not reduced to one single reality opposed to the body.

[86] The most striking example of Hal's need to comply with the others' expectations, aside from his relationship with Avril, is his experience with a grief-therapist after Jim's suicide, when Hal is requested to express his sadness and instead of focusing on his own feelings the kid is obsessed with the therapist's perception of Hal as a patient: «He was my worst nightmare. Talk about self-consciousness and fear. Here was a top-rank authority figure and I was failing to supply what he wanted. He made it manifestly clear I wasn't delivering the goods. I'd never failed to deliver the goods before» (*Infinite Jest* 253). After Lyle's suggestion to empathize with the grief-therapist, Hal ends up studying and learning a professional grief-language in order to satisfy the doctor, thus avoiding any emotional participation and relying on his intellectual and linguistic abilities, as he is used to doing with his mother. Boswell sees Hal's reaction to the grief therapist as a critique to Lacan's theories of language and the self: «[…] Hal's problems stem, in part anyway, from his amorphous yet poignant recognition of the Lacanian problem. Hal's interior is founded, he feels, on an absence, a lack, and his sense of self is compromised in all cases by the tyranny of language, that alienating yet also defining means of self-actualization» (*Understanding* 151). Timmer rather focuses on the performative nature of Hal's environment, to which the boy would be forced to adapt: «Hal uses this way of talking about himself only to give the impression of dealing appropriately with his feelings, to give the illusion that he acts in accord with what is 'normal' or expected in his culture. It is in that sense that the therapeutic narrative is a normative cultural narrative in this storyworld. The way Hal in the anecdote about his grief therapy is more preoccupied with performing (delivering 'the emotional goods') than with actually figuring out how he really feels about things, is telling». (*Do You Feel It Too?* 144).

self as a typical American feature, Hal extends the extremization of two opposite poles of behavior to the whole contemporary nation: on the one hand there would be a pathetic self that strives to be cuddled, and on the other hand there develops an anhedonic and cerebral pose wore as a mask that seek to repress the pathetic interior self in order to «[…] be admired and accepted and included and so Unalone» (694). These conflicting poles concern Hal as an individual, the American younger generation in general and the arts of the millennial U.S.A., and in Hal's mind there is never a compromise to be found between the two extremes.[87]

Relative to Hal's conception of the binary opposition between being an authentic self without any filters and being a complacent person in search for praise, one can take Mario and Orin as expressions of these two extreme poles between which Hal tries to posit himself as nobody, as an empty person.[88] In fact, Mario is the purest character in the novel, one that tends to be treated as an infant by the others because of his naïveté, while Orin acts only to be liked by others.[89] Nonetheless, Orin's strategies imply adapting pathologically to others, while Hal not only rejects his interior self but also his

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[87] The apparent irreconcilability between the two extremes postulated by Hal is discussed by Marshall Boswell as the opposition between cynicism and naïveté that Wallace tries to overcome in his fiction: «Wallace's work, in its attempt to prove that cynicism and naïveté are mutually compatible, treats the culture's hip fear of sentiment with the same sort of ironic self-awareness with which sophisticates in the culture portray "gooey" sentimentality; the result is that hip irony is itself ironized in such a way that the *opposite* of hip irony – that is, gooey sentiment – can emerge as the work's indirectly intended mode. […] He employs cynicism […] to recover a learned form of heartfelt naïveté, his work's ultimate mode and what the work "really means," a mode that Wallace equates with the "really human"» (*Understanding* 17). See also Aubry: «If *Infinite Jest* is structured around what appears to be a strict dichotomy, Wallace invites the reader to transcend this dichotomy so as to make the two sides work together. […] Self-consciousness and irony are a problem for Wallace only insofar as they colonize the mind or the culture with such totality that they completely exclude other more emotive, less culturally privileged forms of expression, such as the kind promoted by AA» ("Selfless Cravings" 218).
[88] Recurring to Laing's anti-psychiatric theories, Burn also justifies Hal's isolation and self-draining by analyzing the boy's complacent attitude towards his mother: «[…] Hal's narrative closely follows Laing's description: early in his life, Hal's primary ontological security is exchanged for outer compliance as young Hal seems to be "trying as if his very life was in the balance to please some person or persons." Within what the novel calls a "schizogenic…family", Avril has engulfed Hal's identity, as she's "got Hal's skull lashed tight to hers." Under pressure of engulfment, Hal has already flirted with the possibility that he might "be no one" […], and his sense of his own unreality grows during the novel's final stages as he increasingly seeks isolation» ("Webs of Nerves" 75).
[89] There is a self-evident analogy between Hal's polarization of Mario and Orin's behaviors and two opposing possibilities for writers both dismissed by Wallace in favor of a more balanced and complex role of the author: «[…] an author needs to demonstrate some sort of skill or merit so that the reader will trust her. […] But there's an unignorable line between demonstrating skill and charm to gain trust for the story vs. simple showing off. It can become an exercise in trying to get the reader to like and admire you instead of an exercise in creative art» (Wallace, "An Expanded Interview" 25).

tendency to comply with others' expectations, thus finding in muteness and withdrawal a way to eschew both the features.

MARIO INCANDENZA

Mario Incandenza is a grotesque character, both funny and extremely touching because of his physical fragility and emotional strength. A baby born prematurely and by surprise, maybe the product of an incestuous relationship between Avril and her half-brother Tavis, Mario is loved by anybody in the family and at E.T.A. except for his oldest brother Orin. Mario is simultaneously marginalized and well-liked by the other characters in virtue of his physical damage, features that both cause repulsion and compassion towards him. «Certain people find people like Mario Incandenza irritating or even think they're outright bats, dead inside in some essential way» (156), but this must be mainly Orin's point of view,[90] since there is no other character who seems to dislike Mario's company, except for Tavis whose sympathy for the boy might be influenced by the doubts on the paternity, hence Tavis's "weird attracto-repulsive gestalt" (316). Conversely, according to Hal most of the people like Mario specifically because of his physical issues and suspect that he is dead inside, while the boy is emotionally richer than anybody else in the novel:

> Mario is basically a born listener. One of the positives to being visibly damaged is that people can sometimes forget you're there, even when they're interfacing with you. You almost get to eavesdrop. It's almost like they're like: If nobody's really in there, there's nothing to be shy about. […] and, listening, the beaming and bradykinetic boy gets to forge an interpersonal connection he knows only he can truly feel, here. (80)

Mario's presence confers emotional depth on the whole novel without sounding pathetic because his grotesque body and behavior balance his sincerity with dramatic irony. The other characters look at Mario with compassion because they assume from his exterior

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[90] Orin's execration for Mario is not clearly accounted for, but it might have something to do with Orin's obsession with appearances, destabilized by Mario's disinterest for his physical problems, and with Mario's special relationship with their father, something that Orin tried but never attained to reach.

appearance that he lacks of self-awareness, an impression that is intensified by the fact that the boy suffers from a physical dysfunction called "Familial Dysautonomia", «[…] a neurological deficit whereby he can't feel physical pain very well» (589). The truth is that Mario's self-perception and his openness towards the outer world are more complex than they might seem at first.[91]

Hal admires Mario and idealizes him because of the older brother's sincerity and emotional strength, features that Hal attributes to Mario's very physical disabilities:

> [Mario's] younger and way more externally impressive brother Hal almost idealizes Mario, secretly. God-type issues aside, Mario is a (semi-) walking miracle, Hal believes. People who're somehow burned at birth, withered or ablated way past anything like what might be fair, they either curl up in their fire, or else they rise. He calls him Booboo but fears his opinion more than probably anybody except their Moms's. (316)

The connection established between physical disabilities and emotional strength is not directly causational but rather depends on the others' expectations. For instance, the fact that Mario is physically damaged and mentally "slow" implies that he does not feel competition with the other kids at E.T.A.,[92] since he is the only Incandenza child who

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[91] Den Dulk sees Mario's Familial Dysautonomia as a distintive sign of the boy's open and empathic attitude: «This neurological deficit […] seems an unmistakable reference to Wittgenstein's so-called "private language arguments," which focus repeatedly on the misguided conviction that the meaning of the utterance "I am in pain" is determined by an individual's private sample (a memory, a mental image) of pain. Mario simply *cannot* base his conception of what pain is on a private sample of pain, because he feels no pain and thus cannot gaze inside and say "this is pain." Mario is immune to the self-reflective mistake of regarding inner processes as objects that an individual possesses and that only that individual can access as a part of an immanent, inner process. Most other characters in *Infinite Jest* are subject to this illusion» ("Good Faith and Sincerity" 212).

[92] The connection between physical disabilities and emotional strength, as related to external pressures, is very common in Wallace's fiction. Another example of this topic concerns Ted Schacht, a kid at E.T.A. who strikes his peers as one of the rare adolescents who does not need drugs and does not have psychological fallouts, since his tennis career has already been prejudiced by a physical injury: «[…] since the knee injury broke and remade [Schacht] at sixteen he's learned to go his own interior way and let others go theirs. Like most very large men, he's getting comfortable early with the fact that his place in the world is very small and his real impact on other persons even smaller – which is a big reason he can sometimes forget to finish his portion of a given substance, so interested does he become in the way he's already started to feel. He's one of these people who don't need much, much less much more» (*Infinite Jest* 268). Given Hal's obsession with the others' expectation and his simultaneous effort to hide it, his reaction to Schacht's lack of agonistic ambitions is controversial: «Hal Incandenza, who's probably as asymmetrically hobbled on the care-too-much side as Schacht is on the not-enough, privately puts Schacht's laissez-faire down to some interior decline, some doom-gray surrender of his childhood's promise to adult gray mediocrity, and fears it; but […] Hal in a weird and deeper internal way almost somehow admires and envies the fact that Schacht's stoically committed himself to the oral professions

cannot play tennis, and he is not submitted to the same disguised intellectual pressure by Avril as his brothers are. It is not by chance that Mario is also the only one of the Incandenza children who has never thought of taking drugs, because his physical damage has indirectly protected him from psychological abuse and emotional distortions.

Thus Mario is not dead inside, he is rather a very rich person, free from the obsession with the others' expectations, and this freedom from filters and defense strategies allows him to establish healthy relationships with others. Mario used to be very close to Jim when he was alive, even if Mario was probably not even his biological child, without suffering the conflicts that worried Orin and Hal in respect to their father,[93] and he inherited Jim's dedication to cinema direction, a hobby that confers Mario an active participation at E.T.A.. Mario understands Avril's preoccupation with his physical and intellectual disabilities despite her efforts to hide it, and so he does not feel the same overwhelming expectations as Hal and Orin do. Mario is not resentful of Orin's disdain, he «[takes] citizens' kindness and cruelty the same way, with a kind of extra-inclined half-bow that mocked his own canted posture without pity or cringe» (316). He has a privileged relationship with Hal, he worries for him and loves him, and Hal reciprocates, finding in Mario the most authentic person he knows: «And maybe that's the key. Maybe then whatever's said to you is so completely believed by you that, what, it becomes sort of true in transit. Flies through the air toward you and reverses its spin and hits you true, however mendaciously it comes off the other person's stick», says Hal to his brother (773).

Mario likes "real stuff", meaning "real people that are not afraid of talking about serious things without irony, things like pain or God. He likes Ennet's House because people there «[…] are crying and making noise and getting less unhappy, and once he heard somebody say *God* with a straight face and nobody looked at them or looked down or smiled in any sort of way where you could tell they were worried inside»

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and stopped dreaming of getting to the Show after graduation – an air of something other than failure about Schacht's not caring enough, something you can't quite define, the way you can't quite remember a word that you know you know, inside […]» (269-270).

[93] Jim was not able to establish a proper communication with his other two children because, from Jim's point of view, Hal was mute and Orin long-winded when it came to their father.

(591). For the same reason he loves Madame Psychosis's radio show that, contrary to E.T.A.'s students, talks about:

> […] stuff about heartbreak and people you loved dying and U.S. woe, stuff that was real. It is increasingly hard to find valid art that is about stuff that is real in this way. The older Mario gets, the more confused he gets about the fact that everyone at E.T.A. over the age of about Kent Blott finds stuff that's really real uncomfortable and they get embarrassed. It's like there's some rule that real stuff can only get mentioned if everybody rolls their eyes or laughs in a way that isn't happy. (592)

Mario's complaint about young people's general skepticism is fundamentally the same expressed by Hal, who nevertheless can reach this acknowledgment only in a theoretical way and is not able to subvert it. Mario, instead, feels a deep engagement in what is emotional and spiritual, and he prays every night, but skeptics take Mario's talking with God as something more similar to a form of art rather than a psychotic delusion: «The Moms revealed that if you're not crazy then speaking to someone who isn't there is termed *apostrophe* and is valid art» (592).

Despite this overall appreciation for Mario and Hal's idealization of his brother as a pure and real person, the boy's naivety and absence of filters convey a general preoccupation, even to the reader. Mario's character is particularly moving because of the conflicting feelings he inspires in the others, alternating a sense of admiration for his authenticity and empathy with his constant exposure to dangers from which he is not able to protect himself. Mario's character works in the context of the academy, but his dysfunction called "Familial Dysautonomia" can be taken as a hint to the fact that his lack of defense strategies must be compensated for by the protective environment where he has been raised. Even the story of Barry Loach, the tennis trainer brought at E.T.A. by Mario himself, instills the doubt about the kid's commendable openness to the others might be in fact a double-edged sword. Unaware of the fact that Barry Loach was conducting a social experiment on people's empathy, Mario is the only one who purely goes and touches the man in the street without doubting the stranger's intentions:

> […] Mario, being alone and only fourteen and largely clueless about anti-stem defensive strategies outside T-stations, had had no one worldly or adult

along with him there to explain to him why the request of men with outstretched hands for a simple handshake or High Five shouldn't automatically be honored and granted, and Mario had extended his clawlike hand and touched and heartily shaken Loach's own fuliginous hand […]. (971)

Since Barry Loach's episode turned out to have a happy ending and the man was hired at E.T.A. thanks to Mario's altruism, the external narrator reporting the story maintains an ambiguous position towards the kid's lack of defense strategies, implying that out of the academy and the family Mario has no protection. Mario is like a child, not because he has regressed to infantile narcissism, but because he has never developed to an adult stage.[94]

ORIN INCANDENZA

Orin, the eldest of the three Incandenza children, occupies the opposite position to the confronting extremes posited by Hal. If Mario is a pure, authentic self that comes across straight to the others, without any defense strategies to protect him, Orin represents the reversal of Mario's condition, that is a person whose inner life is completely eclipsed by his own obsession with complying with the others' expectations.[95]

Orin used to be a student at E.T.A., but he left his tennis career to become a football punter for the Arizona Cardinals. After Jim's death, Orin lost any contact with his family and the academy, except for Hal who keeps on being a telephonic reference

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[94] In *The Pale King*, the difference between being a child and being childish is explained by Meredith Rand who is reporting her husband's thoughts: «He said there is a particular kind of stage of life where you get cut off from the, like, unself-conscious happiness and magic of childhood […] but later in life and puberty it's possible to leave that childhood freedom and completeness behind but still remain totally immature. Immature in the sense of waiting or wanting some magical daddy or rescuer to see you and really know and understand you and care as much about you as a child's parents do, and save you. Save you from yourself. […] *My* core problem […] was the neat little trap I'd made for myself to ensure that I never really had to grow up and so I could stay immature and waiting forever for somebody to save me […], so I could always be angry and I could always get to go around thinking that my real problem was that no one could see or love the real me […]» (*The Pale King* 498).
[95] From a letter by Marlon K. Bain to Helen Steeply: «Orin Incandenza is the *least open man* I know. Spend a little time with Orin's Uncle Charles a.k.a. "Gretel the Cross-Sectioned Dairy Cow" Tavis if you want to see a real openness in motion, and you will see that genuine pathological openness is about as seductive as Tourette's syndrome» (*Infinite Jest* 269n. 1048). Tavis's unattractive openness reminds Mario's pureness, establishing a further link between Tavis and his likely defected biological son.

for his eldest brother. Orin is depicted as a pathological liar and serial womanizer, with a particular predilection for mothers. His addiction to women and sex is his primary incentive in life, and it apparently causes him to develop what his ex friend Marlon K. Bain defines as "*sincerity with a motive*," that is «[…] a purposive social falsehood, […] a pose of poselessness» consisting in a «[…] pick-up Strategy that involved an opening like "Tell me what sort of man you prefer, and then I'll affect the demeanor of that man"» (269n. 1048).

Always according to Marlon Bain, Orin's pathologic condition is a product of his relationship with his parents, to whom he developed conflicted feelings of dependence: «He studied for almost eighteen years at the feet of the most consummate mind-fucker I have ever met, and even now he remains so flummoxed he thinks the way to escape that person's influence is through renunciation and hatred of that person. Defining yourself in opposition to something is still being anaclitic on that thing, isn't it?» (269n. 1048). Bain remains ambiguous about who the "mind-fucker" would be, but he later goes on writing about the emotional distortions suffered by the Incandenza children caused by certain types of parental abuses, more like emotional rather than physical abuses, as opposed to the cases of many children at E.T.A. like, for example, Michael Pemulis. And in the description of those parental emotional abuses, Avril seems to play a major role, despite her being the unsuspected perfect mother as opposed to the alcoholic and suicidal father.

Orin's pathological relationship with women is determined by his mother's behavior and determines his own adult life. Orin is aware of the sneaky influence carried out by Avril on her children, and he tries to avoid its psychological consequences but he is entrapped in a controversial relation of dependence on and rejection of his mother.[96] Orin seems to look always for a new woman in order to reverse his position from being a passive object to being an active subject, to feel unique for someone rather than to be in a reciprocal relationship. Despite Orin's pick-up

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[96] Orin's paradoxical relation of rejection and dependence from women is the same indicated by Wallace talking about some kind of egocentric writers, including himself: «[…] if the artist is excessively dependent on simply being *liked*, so that her true end isn't in the work but in a certain audience's good opinion, she is going to develop a terrific hostility to that audience, simply because she has given all her power away to them. It's the familiar love-hate syndrome of seduction […]. But I often think I can see it in myself and in other young writers, this desperate desire to please coupled with a kind of hostility to the reader» (Wallace, "An Expanded Interview" 25).

strategies and his use of women for egoistic purposes, the fact that he refers to women as "Subjects" betrays his fear of being interiorly obliterated by the encounter with the other:

> (This is why, maybe, one Subject is never enough, why hand after hand must descend to pull him back from the endless fall. For where there for him just one, now, special and only, the One would be not he or she but what was between them, the obliterating trinity of You and I into We. Orin felt that once and has never recovered, and will never again.)
>
> And about contempt, it is about a kind of hatred, too, along with the hope and need. Because he needs them, needs her, because he needs her he fears and so hates her a little, hates all of them, a hatred that comes out disguised as a contempt he disguises in the tender attention with which he does the thing with her buttons, touches the blouse as if it too were part of her, and him. As if it could feel. (566-567)

Orin's appearance as a perfect lover is in fact a mask for his falsehood and pick-up strategies, but it hides an ontological insecurity, a fear of endless fall that makes him keep on searching for always another "Subject" to objectify, in order to avoid obliteration by a relation between I and You.[97] He might have experienced a real relationship once, with Joelle Van Dyne (or Madame Psychosis), but maybe his fear of obliteration was the reason for their separation, rather than his jealousy of Joelle's closeness with Jim or her facial disfigurement, as other characters suspect instead.

In the end, even Orin's relationship with Joelle seems to be, at least partially, influenced by some ethereal connection or resemblance between Joelle's and Avril's beauty.[98] The reason Orin hates all women is the way they make him feel, like someone

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[97] Boswell judges Orin's use of the word "Subject" a deliberate reference to Lacan: «Orin Incandenza […] has also internalized Lacan, so much that he uses Lacan's ideas to justify his pathological need to seduce woman after woman, all of whom he ironically refers to as "Subjects". […] The Subject position in Lacan is always, in a sense, an Object position, since the Subject is always already a signifier of a deferred signified» (*Understanding* 152).

[98] This is somehow suggested by the fact that Jim used Joelle as an actress to play the role of Death incarnate in *Infinite Jest*, the movie, while Joelle in turns sees Avril as the perfect incarnation of Death: «[…] Madame Psychosis had confessed to Molly Notkin that the widow struck her as very possibly Death incarnate – her constant smile the rictal smile of some kind of thanatoptic figure – and that it had struck Madame Psychosis as bizarre that it was she, Madame Psychosis, whom the Auteur kept casting as various feminine instantiations of Death when he had the real thing right under his nose […]» (*Infinite Jest* 790).

who needs something that is ultimately going to destroy him. Like drugs.[99] And as it is for Hal, addiction seems to find its place in that void left by the lack of sense of self, which is correlated to the relationship to the mother, the family and others in general. In particular, for Orin and Hal, this lack of sense of self seems to be caused by Avril's expectations of them, which Orin recognizes in Hal but tries to eschew for himself:

> She's got to keep Hal's skull lashed tight to hers without being so overt about it that Hallie has any idea what's going on, to keep him from trying to pull his skull away. The kid's still obsessed with her approval. He lives for applause from exactly two hands. He's still performing for her, syntax- and vocabulary-wise, at seventeen, the same way he did when he was ten. The kid is so shut down talking to him is like throwing a stone in a pond. The kid has no idea he even knows something's wrong. (234n. 1040)

Orin is so scared by Avril's influence and Hal's cerebral response to their mother's expectations that he tries to emerge from his own dependence from Avril by leaving tennis, the academy, and the family, going to Boston University first, and then to Arizona.

The story about Orin quitting the academy is a story of «[…] oblique family pressures […]» (284). Even though it is never really said that Orin's choice was determined by his need to distance himself from Avril, the section about Orin's choice insists on his mother effort not to influence her eldest son, an effort that is so self-evident as to obtain the opposite result:

> Orin's decision to attend college pleased his parents a great deal, though Mrs. Avril Incandenza, especially, had gone out of her way to make it clear that whatever Orin decided to do would please them because they stood squarely behind and in full support of him, Orin, and any decision his very best thinking yielded. (283)

And then again, two pages later:

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[99] According to Bain, Orin used to take drugs but the eventually substituted them with women addiction: «We both ended up losing enthusiasm for substances after only a couple years, Orin because he had finally entered puberty and had discovered the weaker sex and found he needed all his faculties and guile […]» (*Infinite Jest* 269n. 1047).

Orin's Moms privately thought it was important for Orin to be away from home, psychologically speaking, but still to be able to come home whenever he wished. She put everything to Orin in terms of worrying that her concern over what'd be best for him psychologically might prompt her to overstep her maternal bounds and speak out of turn or give intrusive advice. According to her lists and advantage-disadvantage charts, B.U. was from every angle far and away O.'s best choice, but to keep ever from overstepping or lobbying intrusively the Moms actually for six weeks would flee any room Orin entered, both hands clapped over her mouth. (285)

Avril's behavior with her children sounds too self-imposed and doubly binding for Hal and Orin, and, as it leads Hal being obsessed with secrecy, it also brings Orin to aspirations of forced independence. A big difference between Hal and Orin is that Orin is more functionalist than his brother, and this helps him to transform his weakness into useful tools. According to Hal, who loses control during a phone call with his brother, Orin's behavior with women mirrors his internal conflicts connected to Avril:

"Orin "Homewrecker" Incandenza […] wants to blame her, won't admit it, needs to, won't admit it, sweepingly blames the whole affair of Himself on her, won't interface with her or worse even acknowledge her, resents even the fact she forgives things like you and Marlon Bain killing her dog […]. Disowns her – worse, sicker, tells himself he's convinced himself she doesn't even exist, as if she never existed, but by some coincidence has this rapacious fetish for young married mothers he can strategize into betraying their spouses and maybe damaging their kids for all time […]". (110n. 1015)

Instead of confronting directly his problem with his own self and his mother, Orin prefers to use that inability to establish temporary relationship that deceitfully makes him feel like he is unique and in control.[100]

However, leaving the academy, moving first to Boston and then to Arizona, and developing a self-imposed sense of independence from Avril and the family do not

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[100] This tendency of Orin is noted by Schtitt even in the boy's approach to sport: «Schtitt posited that Orin had stumbled by accident on a way, in this grotesquely physical and territorial U.S. game, to legitimate the same dependency on the one shot of lob that had kept him from developing the courage to develop his weaker areas, which this unwillingness to risk the temporary failure and weakness for long-term gaining had been the real herbicide on the carrot of Orin Incandenza's tennis» (*Infinite Jest* 293-294).

resolve Orin's fear of dependence upon women. There is especially one significant nightmare he has in Arizona while he is sleeping with a "Subject", a dream characterized by:

> […] the ghastly feeling of being submerged and not knowing which way to head for the surface and air, and after some interval the dream's Orin struggles up from this kind of visual suffocation to find his mother's head, Mrs. Avril M. T. Incandenza's, the Mom's disconnected head attached face-to-face to his own fine head, strapped tight to his face […]. As if the Mom's head was some sort of overtight helmet Orin can't wrestle his way out of. In the dream, it's understandably vital to Orin that he disengage his head from the phylacteryish bind of his mother's disembodied head, and he cannot. (46-47)

The fact that in Orin's nightmare the relationship between mother and son is represented by a coerced bond between two heads, and that Avril's head is disembodied, is a symbol of Orin's perception of his mother: Avril is seen as a cerebral person whose emotional life is unreachable and who keeps her children tight to her by use of her intellectual abilities, a parent from whom Orin needs to escape in order not to be consumed, as it happens with Hal instead.

AVRIL MONDRAGON INCANDENZA ("THE MOMS")

Avril, the mother of the three Incandenza children, is an obscure character whose feelings and inner thoughts are never revealed. Originally Québécoise but married to Jim Incandenza and established in Enfield, she plays an ambiguous role both within the geopolitical conflict between Québec and the U.S. and within her own family. Avril is apparently a perfect mother and civilian, a hard worker, Dean of Academic Affairs and of Females at E.T.A., co-founder of the Militant Grammarians of Massachusetts. But she ultimately comes across as a puppeteer, «[…] a kind of contortionist with other people's bodies […]», as Orin puts it (285). The fact that Avril acts as someone different from whom she really is, is expressed in the novel through an ironic but

irritating insistence on the concern for her children, that is supposedly her motivation in life, while it is actually a cover for her fundamental narcissism and sense of guilt.

The most critical towards their mother is Orin, whose reasons have already been suggested. Orin does not trust Avril and he believes he is the only one who can see her for what she really is because of his distance from home.[101] He thinks that Avril is an obsessive-compulsive person whose strategy to go ahead is a functional organization of her obsessions into an all-inclusive meta-obsession: «She's so compulsive she's got the compulsions themselves arranged so efficiently that she can get everything done and still have plenty of time leftover for her children» (234n. 1040).[102] Orin implies that Avril knows how to hide well her inner feelings, like for example her pride for Hal's prodigious linguistic abilities, as already mentioned, and her sense of guilt towards Mario, her disabled son most likely born from an incestuous relationship with Charles Tavis:

> […] the Moms has to obsess over Mario and Mario's various challenges and tribulations and little patheticnesses and worship Mario and think Mario's some kind of secular martyr to the mess she'd made of her adult life, all the while having to keep up a front of laissez-faire laid-back management where she pretends to let Mario go his own way and do his own thing. (234n. 1040)

So, according to Orin, Avril has this attitude of understanding mother, supported by her friend and colleague Dolores Rusk who provides Avril with the suitable professional and detached language to express the mother's concern for her children's psychological needs.

Hal has a different way to read Avril's behavior towards her children: he seems more naïve about what concerns his mother and does not see her as a

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[101] Referring to Hal and Mario, Orin says: «"They both might have to wait until they get away from there before they can even realize what's going on, that the Moms is unredeemably fucking bats» (*Infinite Jest* 234n. 1040).

[102] Freudenthal argues that Avril uses material compulsiveness both to dominate the family and to escape from the traditional maternal role: «Avril Incandenza uses her maternal anxiety, in concert with her OCD, to control the physical, temporal, and emotional experiences of her family. […] She creates the appearance of perfect maternal nurturing that conceals a self-interested abandonment of the patriarchal woman's role» ("Anti-Interiority" 200).

narcissist, as Orin does, but rather as a mother purely devoted to her children, especially to Mario:

> Despite himself (and showing a striking lack of insight into his Mom's psyche), Hal fears that Avril sees Mario as the family's real prodigy, an in-bent savant-type genius of no classifiable type, a very rare and shining thing, even if his intuition – slow and silent – scares her, his academic poverty breaks her heart, the smile he puts on each A.M. without fail since the suicide of their father makes her wish she could cry. This is why she tries so terribly hard to leave Mario alone, not to hover or wring, to treat him so less specially than she wants: it is for him. It is kind of noble, pitiable. Her love for the son who was born a surprise transcends all other experiences and informs her life. (317)

Hal's perception of Avril, discredited by an unknown external narrator, seems very positive and justifies her need to keep her secrets as doing it for the others, where Orin had seen a narcissistic intent to redeem herself from her own secrets and manipulating strategies. Or maybe Hal is not naïve at all about what concerns his mother, but he would never bring to surface authentic feelings towards her.

Avril knows about Hal's sporadic drinking, and she worries about that because of the Incandenzas' hereditary tendency to alcoholism that started at least with Hal's great-grandfather, but she does not want to sound oppressive because she «[…] feels it's important that a concerned but unsmothering single parent know when to let go somewhat and let the two high-functioning of her three sons make their own possible mistakes and learn from their own valid experience, no matter how much the secret worry about mistakes tears her gizzard out, the mother's» (50). Avril does not suspect that Hal's addiction is instead caused by marijuana, because he smokes it secretly. And, in fact, Avril's phobia does not mainly concerns her children's possible use of drugs, but rather the fact that they may have secrets: «Dr. Tavis and Dolores Rusk have privately discussed the fact that not least among the phobic stressors Avril suffers so uncomplainingly with is a black phobic dread of secrecy in all possible forms with respect to her sons» (51). It is somehow paradoxical that Avril's reaction to her phobia of her sons' secrecy is, in turn, her own secrecy.

It appears paradoxical as well that Avril, a person that fears enclosure and has "little sense of spatial privacy or boundary" (511), might have been the source of inspiration for Jim's production of a series of movies entitled "Cage". Hal wonders «[…] about some hazy connection between [Avril's] passion for hiddenness and the fact that Himself had made so many films titled *Cage*, and that the amateur player he became so attached to was the veiled girl, Orin's love» (957). Both Hal and Orin know about Avril's secret sexual life, something that might have geopolitical implications since she always choose Québécois lovers, but more importantly that seems to have value for her only in virtue of its secrecy, like the use of cannabis for Hal.

Similarly to Hal's obsession with secrecy, Orin's pathologic falsehood might be the consequence of Avril's narcissism and ambiguity. Avril's response to Orin's childhood lies was to hide even the suspicion that her son could possibly be lying, and instead of showing disappointment she would increase her love for him. This situation raises again a doubt about the real motivations behind Avril's behavior: «[…] was this generosity for Orin's sake, or for Avril's own? Was it Orin's "self-esteem" she was safeguarding, or her own vision of herself as a more stellar Moms than any human son could ever hope to feel he merits?» (269n. 1051). According to Marlon Bain Avril's fundamental narcissism is the reason for Orin's pathologies, a trap where the Incandenza children cannot do other than lie or hide the truth to their mother because they would not want to disappoint such a perfect mother. This psychological trap is acknowledged by Hal and Orin as well, who call it "Politeness Roulette":

> This Moms-thing that makes you hate yourself for telling her the truth about any kind of problem because of what the consequences will be for her. It's like to report any sort of need or problem is to mug her. […] The special fantodish chill of feeling both complicit and obliged. Hal despised the way he always reacted […]. Orin believed she did it on purpose, which was way too easy. He said she went around with her feelings out in front of her with an arm around the feelings' windpipe and a Glock 9 mm. to the feelings' temple like a terrorist with a hostage, daring you to shoot. (523)

Again, Hal and Orin have different opinions about their mother: where Hal sees naïveté, Orin reads purposeful incitement of sense of guilt. Bain probably is the one who grasps that Avril's emotional immaturity and narcissism may not be intentional but still have problematic consequences on her children.[103]

If I credit a lot of value to Bain's opinion on the relationship between Avril and her children it is because he opens the way to an important reflection on the invisibility of some kind of parental emotional abuse, that of apparently perfect parents who keep the attention focused on themselves and involuntary charge their children with their own sense of guilt, which is a tricky situation at the basis of the novel: «[…] *could* you call it abuse without feeling that you were a pathetic self-indulgent piss-puddle, what with all the genuine cases of hair-raising physical and emotional abuse diligently reported and analyzed daily by conscientious journalists (and profiled)?» (269n. 1050). This kind of emotional abuse is the one that Hal cannot recognize when he complains not being able to accuse his parents for his cannabis addiction and growing sense of inner void.[104] It is this abuse that puts in motion the main part of family relationships and causes the Incandenza children psychological issues, and it obviously concerns Avril more than Jim, because Jim was not perfect at all, despite his genius work.

JAMES ORIN INCANDENZA ("HIMSELF")

James, or Jim, Incandenza was Avril's husband and father of the three Incandenza children. Besides being E.T.A.'s founder, Jim was also a successful optician who

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[103] Mary K. Holland explores the theme of parental narcissism in *Infinite Jest*, according to which «[…] Avril provides the novel's key model of the self-indulgent mother […], the perfect metaphor for a woman who extends her emotional energy to her children only so that they could reflect it back to her» ("The Art's Heart's Purpose" 226).

[104] During an "Inner Infant" support group, Hal reflects on his present psychological condition and cannot find a correlation between his infancy and his drug addiction: «All through his own infancy and toddlerhood, Hal had continually been held and dandled and told at high volume that he was loved, and he feels […] that getting held and told you were loved didn't automatically seem like it rendered you emotionally whole or Substance-free. Hal finds he rather envies a man who feels he has something to explain his being fucked up, parents to blame on it» (*Infinite Jest* 805). I think that this reinforces the suspect that Avril's apparent perfection is based on the ability to say always the right thing but never being able to connect emotionally with her children, thus making it hard for Hal to individuate the cause of his own emotional issues. Boswell, instead, sees some characters' tendency to find an external cause for unhappiness as a parody of Lacan's theories, making of Hal "the novel's hero" in the "significantly designated Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment" (*Understanding* 131).

contributed to the development of Annular Fusion in the Great Concavity and a controversial filmmaker. Jim committed suicide in the Year of the Trial-Size Dove Bar, that is five years before the Year of the Dependent Adult Undergarment when most of the events take place in the novel. Due to Jim's antecedent death, what the reader knows about him comes from the other characters' dialogues or memories. Thus, Jim's analysis exacerbates the relativity that characterizes the whole narration, culminating in the last section of the novel when he comes back as a wraith and talks to and through an hospitalized and muted Don Gately.

The novel hints at some general facts about Jim's character and suicide that are shared by everybody, like the fact that he used to be an alcoholic and committed suicide by putting his head in a microwave oven. But then this general thread is disseminated by several characters' interpretations and doubts about who Jim was and what led him to suicide. More specifically, I think that each character projects his own feelings and fears into a different reading about the objective facts. See for example:

> It's worth noting that, among younger E.T.A.s, the standard take on Dr. J. O. Incandenza's suicide attributes his putting his head in the microwave to this kind of anhedonia. […] In fact this is in fact not what killed Incandenza at all. In fact the presumption that he'd achieved all his goals and found that achievement didn't confer meaning or joy on his existence says more about the students at E.T.A. than it says about Orin's and Hal's father [...]. (693)

The students' fear of being devoured by the Show and realizing that fame is not going to make them feel fulfilled is projected into Jim's unknown state of mind. They interpret and try to find a reason to something that in the novel is never explained by using their personal experience and feelings.

Something similar happens with other characters' reading of Jim's suicide. Orin, due to his hostile feelings for Avril, blames his mother for Jim's psychological decline and eventually for his suicide. Talking about the relationship between Jim and Avril, Orin declares: «The late Stork was the victim of the most monstrous practical joke ever played, in my opinion […]. The thing about people who are truly and malignantly crazy: their real genius is for making the people around them think they *themselves* are

crazy»[105] (234n. 1041). On the other side, the fact that a bottle of Wild Turkey was found near Jim's corpse although he had been sober for the last three months makes the reader suspect that someone may have put the bottle there to mislead the general opinion on the event. That person is likely to be Avril, in an attempt to control her children's reading of Jim's suicide by endorsing the idea that the cause of his psychological decline was alcohol instead of some deeper lack that may affect even the children themselves.

But this is just one way to interpret Jim's death. Joelle, for example, tends to see suicide, and in this case Jim's suicide, as a selfish and self-involved ultimate act that appears as the only way to escape the cage of the inner hole and addiction to substances. Joelle compares her own suicide attempt by overdose to Jim's death when she says: «She had in a way done as they'd made Jim do near the end and admitted powerlessness over this cage, this unfree show […]» (223). Joelle here seems to feel partly guilty for Jim's suicide, because she was the one who convinced Jim to stop drinking, and she thinks that that sudden abstinence eventually led him to confront his psychological dysfunction:

> […] the consuming guilt had been over the condition that the Auteur suspend the ingestion of spirits, which it turned out, M.P. had claimed in deluded hindsight, had been all that was keeping the man's tether ravelled, the ingestion, such that without it he was unable to withstand the psychic pressures that pushed him over the edge into what Madame Psychosis said she and the Auteur had sometimes referred to as quote "self-erasure". (791)

As a drug addict, Joelle grasps the reality of the temporary compensation of the lack of self provided by addictive substances, as Pemulis does in regards to Hal's abstinence.

Hal still does not acknowledge the sense of entrapment of addiction as Joelle does, although he starts to wonder about it in the last part of the novel. He would never blame Avril like Orin does because Hal trusts her, and he also rejects the conjecture about anhedonia, but he still does not know anything about clinical depression, which may be another possible cause of Jim's suicide: «Hal isn't old enough yet to know that

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[105] By the nicknames "Mad Stork" and "Sad Stork" Orin refers to his father, while the malignantly crazy person in this case would be Avril.

this is because numb emptiness isn't the worst kind of depression. That dead-eyed anhedonia is but a remora on the ventral flank of the true predator, the Great White Shark of pain. Authorities terms this condition *clinical depression*» (695). Hal seems to be following his father's steps, so he understands that anhedonia is not a sufficient reason for Jim's suicide, but the boy is still too young to completely grasp the meaning of clinical depression because he has no experience of it.

Like tennis itself according to Schtitt's philosophy, the possible interpretations of Jim's act are «[…] mathematically uncontrolled but humanly *contained*» (82). The mystery around Jim's suicide, fostered by the novel's polyphony and fragmentation of perspective, grants a variety of possibilities in the reading of the fatal event that are limited by the ability of the other characters (and of the reader) to interpret it according to their own personal experience. In this sense, Jim's suicide would be in line with his technical and artistic career: «"[Jim's] studying was not so much how one sees a thing, but this relation between oneself and what one sees. He translated this across different fields […]"» (682).[106] After all, Jim's past occupation as optician had to do with the way people see and perceive things, but with cinema he had moved a step beyond.

In the novel Jim's cinema is defined as "anticonfluential", that is «[a]n après-garde digital movement, a.k.a. "Digital Parallelism" and "Cinema of Chaotic Stasis," characterized by a stubborn and possibly intentionally irritating refusal of different

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[106] The way Jim's suicide and art not only influence but are determined by the others in turn maybe be a narrative representation of Wallace's conception of the relation between fiction and reader, compared to quantum physics by Boswell: «[…] whenever a quantum physicist makes a determination whether or not an observed proton is a particle or a wave, the universe splits so that in one universe, the one in which the observation takes place, the proton is, say, a way, while in an almost identical universe that same proton is a particle. […] Wallace has remarked that, for him, the "valence" of fictional meaning is equally distributive: the fiction is changed by the reader as much as the reader is changed by the fiction» (*Understanding* 125). Wallace himself has explained his vision of the relation between the text and the reader in terms of quantum physics: «Observing a quantum phenomenon's been proven to alter the phenomenon. Fiction likes to ignore this fact's implications. We still thinks in terms of a story "changing" the reader's emotions, cerebrations, maybe even her life. But the reader's own life "outside" the story changes the story. You could argue that it affects only "her reaction to the story" or "her take on the story." But these things *are* the story» ("An Expanded Interview" 40). Drawing from a different kind of vocabulary, Dowling and Bell reach a similar conclusion about the relation between the subject and the object: «Borrowing a term from astronomy, probably via Joyce, Wallace speaks of "parallaxing", emphasizing that what you see depends very much on where you stand. Who is the Moms? It depends which son you ask. The polyphonic medley of voices, a form of parallax, underscores the "apparent displacement of an observed object due to a change in the position [or identity] of the observer." A related narrative technique, common to Wallace and Joyce, is the incessant oscillation between positions inside and outside of a character's consciousness; this movement emphasizes both the connection and the distance between perception and reality, the perpetual tension between what a character perceives "in here" and what is "out there"» (*A Reader's Companion* 212).

narrative lines to merge into any kind of meaningful confluence […]» (61n. 996).[107] With a shift from early sophisticated and technical cinema to «[…] narratively anticonfluential but unironic melodrama […], Jim «[…] dropped the technical fireworks and tried to make characters move, however inconclusively, and showed courage, abandoned everything he did well and willingly took the risk of appearing amateurish (which he had)» (740-741). Thus, in Jim's cinematic career, there is a shift from a focus on irony and technique to the exploration of characters in a chaotic and non-hierarchical disposition that privileges the viewer's interpretation over the director's control, with a growing presence of what Joelle defines «flashes of something», «human flashes» (741). As in Schtitt's consideration about tennis, «[…] locating beauty and art and magic and improvement and keys to excellence and victory in the prolix flux of match play is not a fractal matter of reducing chaos to pattern. […] it was a matter not of reduction at all, but – perversely – of expansion […]» (82). The expansion into a chaotic technique is counterbalanced by the reduction of virtually infinite possibility into a limited set of interpretations humanly contained, as already noted. A fundamental feature emerging from the analogy between tennis and cinema in these terms is that expansion and reduction ultimately concern the boundaries of the self. Because tennis, as conceived by Schtitt and supported by Jim, is a game where:

> [t]he true opponent, the enfolding boundary, is the player himself. Always and only the self out there, on court, to be met, fought, brought to the table to hammer out terms. The competing boy on the net's other side: he is not the foe: he is more the partner in the dance. He is what is the word *excuse* or *occasion* for meeting the self. As you are his occasion. Tennis's beauty's infinite roots are self-competitive. You compete with your own limits to transcend the self in imagination and execution. Disappear inside the game: break through limits: transcend: improve: win. (84)

Tennis and cinema in Jim's late career are two different activities approached with a similar philosophy, that of an opportunity to expand the boundaries of the self in the

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[107] Jim's cinema can be stylistically compared to Wallace's novel, as Burn describes *Infinite Jest* as following: «[…] *Infinite Jest*'s resistance to ordinary textual cohesion is not a simple matter of plot, and an antiteleological spirit infects the entire novel, refusing or parodying the notion of resolution or goal-reaching on multiple levels», making of the novel a kind of narration where «[…] the diagnosis is painstakingly exact, but the final steps – whether cure or resolution – hardly ever come» ("Webs of Nerves" 61).

challenge with the other, a challenge that is not to be considered as a competition but rather as a way to transcend the self.

From Hal's point of view, instead, the development of Jim's cinema went from anticonfluentialism to something «[…] entertaining and diverting and conductive to self-forgetting that he had had professionals and amateurs alike emoting wildly all over the place» (944). Thus, where Joelle sees an improvement in Jim's communicative abilities expressed through those "human flashes" that represent something more than detached abstraction, Hal reads a progressive adjustment of Jim's cinema to the public's love for self-forgetting, «(As opposed to self-confronting, presumably)» (378n. 1078). Hal's interpretation of Jim's cinema's development is in line with E.T.A.'s training philosophy of self-forgetting as established by Jim himself. But E.T.A.'s philosophy, as already seen, is controversial because it is conceived for the students not to be ingested by the Show, but what it actually does is leading the kids to engulfment and petrification, and, consequently, to addiction.

The same process of self-forgetting and petrification is unwillingly obtained by Jim's masterpiece *Infinite Jest*, his last production. According to Jim's wraith, *Infinite Jest* (the cartridge) was his final effort to make his younger son (Hal) inner self to come out but he ended up producing a weapon of self-forgetting by entertaining:

> The wraith […] says he spent the whole sober last ninety days of his animate life working tirelessly to contrive a medium via which he and the muted son could simply *converse*. To concoct something the gifted boy couldn't simply master and move on from to a new plateau. Something the boy would love enough to induce him to open his mouth and come *out* – even if it was only to ask for more. Games hadn't done it, professionals hadn't done it, impersonation of professionals hadn't done it. His last resort: entertainment. Make something so bloody compelling it would reverse thrust on a young self's fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life. A magically entertaining toy to dangle at the infant still somewhere alive in the boy, to make its eyes light and toothless mouth open unconsciously, to laugh. To bring him "out of himself", as they say. The womb could be used both ways. A way to say I AM SO VERY, VERY SORRY and have it *heard*. A life-long dream. The scholars and Foundations and disseminators never saw that his most serious wish was: *to entertain*. (838-839)

As we know from the first section of the book, which is chronologically the last one, Jim has not reached his goal, and eventually Hal is more encaged inside himself than before. It is not clear what is the real reason of the boy's extreme incommunicability: he may have or not seen the cartridge, but he has ended up being mute and unheard, which is exactly what his father wished to avoid. What we do know is that the people who actually saw the movie are reduced to a catatonic state or to death by self-forgetting.[108]

The content of the movie, although never completely revealed, is said to have to do with «[…] some kind of maternal instantiation of the archetypal figure Death […]» where Madame Psychosis (Joelle) plays the role of Death Incarnate «[…] explaining in very simple childlike language to whomever the film's camera represents that Death is always female, and that the female is always maternal. I.e. that the woman who kills you is always your next life's mother» (788). The content of *Infinite Jest* (the movie but by homonymy also the novel) brings into light the issue of maternal care as admission of guilt, and the use of Madame Psychosis as main character provides a direct association with Avril as the mother and Death Incarnate, given the two women's previous juxtaposition. The movie and its admission of guilt are produced from Jim's point of view, as if he accounted for the fact that Avril's sense of guilt was at the basis of her compulsive-obsession for her children:

> […] the camera, with Madame Psychosis as the Death-Mother figure inclined over it, parturient and nude, talking *down* to it […] explaining to the camera as audience-synecdoche that this was why mothers were so obsessively, consumingly, drivenly, and yet somehow narcissistically loving you, their kid: the mothers are trying frantically to make amends for a murder neither of you quite remember. (788-789)

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[108] Boswell tries to explain the gap between Jim's intentions and the achievement of the cartridge according to a Lacanian reading: «Incandenza's film *Infinite Jest* is a dangerous piece of art that perpetuates the culture's desire for self-forgetting, a desire to be returned to the catatonic state of the womb, where needs are met and fed perpetually, endlessly. At the same time the film was undertaken, as Incandenza's "wraith" says, to "reverse thrust on a young self's fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life. A magically entertaining toy to dangle at the infant still somewhere alive in the boy…[…]" Incandenza's art, unfortunately, panders to the other infant, the dead infant of Denial that remains attached to us, "umbillically," no matter how we try to smother it or sever it with irony or drugs. Incandenza's intentions are sound; it's his methods that are the problem. The result is a body of work that, like so much postmodern fiction in Wallace's view, exacerbates the very problems it seeks to overcome» (*Understanding* 160).

From this description it is hard to imagine how the movie could provoke laughs in the viewer, but the insight is partial because it is given by Molly Notkin reporting Joelle's thoughts on cartridge, and Joelle has never seen the assembled product. But, by Joelle the reader is informed that the perspective of the camera, and thus of the public, to which Death Incarnate talks to in the movie, is distorted by a special lens that reproduces infantile vision (993).[109] Provided that the general content of the movie is reported faithfully, Jim's admission of guilt as a father is expressed in terms of Avril's narcissism because, as he says as a wraith, «[…] he personally spent the vast bulk of his former animate life as pretty much a figurant, furniture at the periphery of the very eyes closest to him, it turned out, and that it's one heck of a crummy way to try to live» (835).

Jim's admission is about his apparent absence, while he was hiding inside himself the whole time, unable to communicate with Hal and Orin. His situation is confirmed as he reappears as a wraith, still invisible and unable to communicate with the others, except with hospitalized Don Gately who is temporary "*trapped* and *encaged*" within his own body in a hospital bed (835). Jim's worry in life, then, had been seeing Hal, his youngest child, «[…] the one most like him, the one most marvelous and frightening to him, becoming a figurant, toward the end» (837); that, despise all Jim's effort to show his child that he (Hal) was seen and heard, «[…] his son had become what he (the wraith) had feared as a child he (the wraith) was». An invisible, muted ghost.

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[109] Due to the infants' perspective of the camera and Joelle's maternal role, Boswell interprets the movie's lethal attractiveness as both an artistic realization and parody of Lacan's theories about the mother as the ultimate unfulfillable desire of the self: «the fundamental source of the Entertainment's lethal appeal is its ability to give viewers what they think they have wanted all their lives: namely, a return to some state of maternal plenitude. The viewer is that child staring into a mirror that sends back a vision of the mother *apologizing* – and for what, exactly? Perhaps for not being there, always, as the provider of pleasure and wholeness. Now she *is* there for the viewer, providing the very pleasure the viewer has been seeking elsewhere all along. That viewer therefore is done with desire, and done with desiring» (*Understanding* 130-131).

3.3. *Found Drama*: "the historical zenith of self-consciously dumb stasis"

After the above introduction to the members of the Incandenza family with their controversial characters and relationships, in this section of Chapter 3 I give an account of the main critics who have approached the issue of the self in Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. Unlike *The Broom of the System*, *Infinite Jest* has attracted an astounding number of scholars who have embarked in the mission of disentangling Wallace's treatment of the self, a few of them even recurring to psychoanalytical theories.

In his guide to *Infinite Jest*, Stephen Burn points out the antagonism between Cartesian essentialism and contemporary materialism, as well and the split between body and mind endorsed by the Incandenza family's tradition and reiterated at E.T.A.. Contrary to the materialistic position embraced by most of the main characters in the novel, Burn confesses an inclination to see the economy of *Infinite Jest* pushing towards one of its

> […] obsessive explorations: the search for an adequate understanding of the self. This melancholy exploration, which is largely (but not entirely) focused on Hal, partly explains why Wallace chose *Hamlet* as one of the templates for his novel. *Hamlet* begins with the question, "who's there?," […] *Infinite Jest* attempts a millennial update, cataloging the twentieth century's endless efforts to understand itself. (*A Reader's Guide* 45-46)

According to Burn, if a Cartesian conception of the self as the "ghost in the machine" keeps on failing after its postmodern dismissal, yet *Infinite Jest* calls for the acknowledgment of a non-materialist dimension of selfhood (*A Reader's Guide* 49-50), a dimension that in the novel is supported at least by the mythological and religious/spiritual subtexts (63-64).[110] This is not to suggest that *Infinite Jest* should be

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[110] Starting from Burn's reflections about *Infinite Jest*'s references to the Cartesian conception of the self, Jamie Redgate has explored the theme of dualism between body and soul in Wallace's work. Redgate supports a Cartesian reading of Wallace's humanism and treats the body as a «[…] stubbornly material entity in which the interior self is contained» (*Wallace and I* 27) to confirm the author's departure from postmodernism. Although I agree with Redgate's critique of posthuman readings of Wallace's fiction, I think that characters' interiority needs a further distinction between the soul and the mind, a distinction that Redgate partly acknowledges when he makes a difference between the concept of "I" and that of "Me": «[t]he illusion we all have is that the conscious self, the "I," is aware of – and in charge of – everything, when actually is just a small part of the whole person, the "Me," which takes into account the

read as a *bildungsroman* as it was in the case of *The Broom of the System*; on the contrary, Burn defines it a «[…] progressive erasure of identity by the pressures of family and academy» (55).[111] Nonetheless, *Infinite Jest* emerges as a novel where not only are the characters looking for a sense of self, castrated as this may be, but the search for the self is further extended to a generational and authorial issue.

Infinite Jest's search for a contemporary self is not frustrated by the fact that most of the main characters follow a materialistic credo. The search for the self does not proceed linearly from single characters' perspective, but is rather distributed throughout the novel. In fact, in a following article, Burn analyses the structure of *Infinite Jest* according to a bodily gestalt that recurs to medical language and neural theories in order to redefine a concept of postmodern self that is distributed throughout the novel ("Webs of Nerves" 64): «the book came "*alive*", it can be seen as a living organism (an "*infant*"), the writer performs a "*diagnosis*," and it is «[…] a product of a layered aesthetic, designed to constantly generate multiple meanings depending on which clues and interpretative layers the reader isolates» (65). Burn rejects the idea of diagnosis as cure, he rather points out other achievements of Wallace's fiction by making use of the science of mind in order to explore significant representations of the self as living in the body and tending towards wholeness.

Following Paul D. MacLean's Triune Brain Theory, Burn classifies the Incandenza brothers according to three separate cerebral models: the *reptilian* brain, that is «[…] the oldest cerebral unit […] governing both basic fear reactions […] and reproductive urges» (Orin); the *paleomammalian* brain, «[…] "very much involved in emotional responses"» (Mario); and the *neomammalian* brain, «[…] which controls the special cognitive strengths that distinguish humanity» (Hal) ("Webs of Nerves" 66). This split of the self into separate cerebral models would be used by Wallace as a critique of the identification of the individual with his brain and a call for a unified integration of the self (69-70).

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hugely complex matrix of *non*conscious processes going on between mind, brain, and body» (*Wallace and I* 41-42). Nonetheless, Redgate associates consciousness and the self with a soul that is contained in a body and a mind embodied in the brain.

[111] Dowling and Bell actually stress the nature of Hal's development as the opposite of a *bildungsroman*: «The saga of Hal Incandenza in *Infinite Jest* is an inverted Bildungsroman – a story not of maturing, affirming his identity, and moving beyond the self into the world, but of unraveling, losing his way, and retreating deep inside himself» (*A Reader's Companion* 104).

For Burn, *Infinite Jest* presents itself as a diagnosis of the schizophrenic model of the Incandenza family and of the self required by society, and the resulting split of the self is analyzed by Burn through the lens of Ronald D. Laing's *The Divided Self*. Following Laing's holistic approach, Wallace would have let *Infinite Jest*'s characters shape themselves by providing the reader with the characters' past and familial histories, thus showing the schizophrenic context in which they have developed (72-73): «Wallace precisely locates a schizoid division as emerging from the family system, when he reveals that James Incandenza's parents pressed him toward conflicting modes of existence: the mother characterizing him in terms of his "scientific-prodigy's mind," the father insisting "you're a body"» (73). Hence, the characters' pathological obsession with the body or parts of the body, and their frequent identification with the mind.

This schizoid model does not only apply to *Infinite Jest*'s characters but to the novel's narrative as a whole. Burn claims that also the gaps in the chaotic narrative are justifiable on the base of Laing's description of the schizoid self:

> […] Wallace's narrative technique in *Infinite Jest* might be thought of as a kind of *schizo-narration* the functions within the novel on two levels. The first level is hinted at toward the end of *The Divided Self*, when Laing quotes a patient's explanation that "schizophrenics say and do a lot of stuff that is unimportant, and then we mix important things in with all this to see if the doctors cares enough to see them and feel them. […] At the same time, Laing's model also allows Wallace to draw visual perception into the novel's core concerns. (Burn, "Webs of Nerves" 76-77)

Besides explaining the overlapping of main narrative and minor digressions in the novel, Burn here justifies the topos of eye-sight that permeates *Infinite Jest*: the novel's fragmented structure would present itself as a chain of filmic snapshot that puts the reader in the position of the brain that selects and organizes information. This process would undermine the objective perception of fragmented information and evidence the unaware role of the brain in reorganizing the material:

> Just as the reader is forced to piece the static units of the plot together in the hope of creating a soothing narrative whole that isn't really there, so Wallace's optical trope works to reveal the conscious mind's dependence upon active processes that are forced to alter and mediate our sensory input

to create meaning rather than presenting the mind's eye as an unmarked lens through which we experience reality. (Burn, "Webs of Nerves" 78)

By forcing this unaware brain mediation to become aware, Wallace would stimulate the reader's consciousness to interact with the book by retracing the characters' psychic histories (80).

The characters' psychic histories have actually been considered by only a minority of Wallace's critics and with different approaches that sometimes contradict each other, but at times instill the doubt that Wallace may have known and used more than one psychoanalytic theory to delineate his characters. Marshall Boswell, for instance, reads *Infinite Jest* in the light of Jacques Lacan's poststructuralist psychoanalytic theories, while he acknowledges that Wallace's critical intent is to prove that «[…] Lacan's model of the psychological subject is a seductive but ultimately alienating and harmful idea that can and should be overcome» (*Understanding* 128).

The problem with Lacan's theory, deriving from the concept of the "mirror stage" is that it dooms the individual to perceive himself as separated from the others and alienated from himself. As Boswell puts it:

> Lacan argues that when the child recognizes her reflected image in a mirror, she comes to recognize herself *as* a self, but only in the form of that objective, and inverted, image. In other words, in order for the child to realize she is a distinct being, irreparably separated from others and, in a typically Lacan pun, (m)others, she must recognize "herself" in the form of an image. She acquires a subjectivity but only by becoming alienated from herself. […] The word *I* has an antecedent for the users that is always prior to that *I* and ultimately inaccessible, in accordance with Lacan's Saussurian Signifier/signified equation. (*Understanding* 129)

Thus, Lacan's model of subjecthood is based on unavoidable alienation of the self and consequent everlasting, unfulfillable desire to restore an ideal wholeness. This condition of the self continuously pushes the subject to look for temporary compensations of its essential absence, as it happens in *Infinite Jest* with various kinds of addiction (130).[112]

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[112] Here I add to Boswell's legitimate consideration about the alienating nature of the Lacanian self that even the perception of the self as "irreparably separated from others" is debatable, as well as the subject's

Boswell argues that, despite the likely use of Lacan's theories in *Infinite Jest* in order to depict «[…] the peculiar unhappiness that permeates our culture of *material plenitude*, […] Wallace sees Lacan's model as a trap, one that can be embraced for good reasons that nevertheless turn out to create more problems that they solve» (130). Jim's cartridge in *Infinite Jest* is especially permeated with Lacan's theories but, for Boswell, the overall philosophy of the novel would criticize those theories through the use of irony and mostly from Hal's point of view:

> [N]early everyone in the significantly designated Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment is a grownup baby in diapers, crawling on all fours in search of something to fill that need for maternal plenitude, for wholeness, or, at the very least, someone or something to blame for his or her own unhappiness. Hal, the novel's hero, admits that "he rather envies a man who feels he has something to explain his being fucked up, parents to blame it on," yet Wallace also understands that this leveling of blame, like Lacan's model, is a fiction, a trap, and a cage. (*Understanding* 131-132)

Boswell sees Has as the hero of the novel, because of the boy's skepticism towards self-apologetic psychoanalytical theories. Lacan's supposed self-indulgent theories are compared to addiction and postmodern self-reflexivity: they are means to escape the self and self-responsibility, they offer an apparent door to escape the trap whilst what they actually do is perpetrating and enforcing that trap: «Drugs are a particularly alluring means of escape from self, for without them Wallace's characters often find themselves "unable to withstand the psychic pressure that [have] pushed them over the edge into…'self-erasure'". Self-consciousness and irony also provide an illusion of escape and self-erasure – an illusion, moreover, that breeds more despair» (*Understanding* 138).

Nonetheless, while Wallace in the novel critiques this loop of self-erasure and self-reflexivity, he does not eschew self-reflexivity altogether but, for Boswell, he would rather push it towards new achievements, in a «[…] conflicted attempt both to

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constitution through language. Compare with Chapter 1 where I explain that, according to Winnicott, the self never obtains total independence from its environment and that language is a form of verbal symbolization that emerges from the encounter of the self with the environment and stands for union after separation.

honor the heritage of his artistic forefathers and to kill them off at the same time»
(*Understanding* 169):

> Hal's suicidal father also acts as Wallace's own postmodern father […].
> [Incandenza] creates the film *Infinite Jest*, the lethally closed entertainment
> that makes catatonic infants of its viewers, while Wallace creates the novel
> *Infinite Jest*, which contains the film. The book, contrary to Incandenza's
> film, loves its audience because […] it is willing to be cruel. […] Wallace's
> novel […] provides not an escape from "annular" self-consciousness, from
> "thought-helixes" and "analysis-paralysis" but rather extended immersion in
> these modes of thought. (Boswell, *Understanding* 164)

Where, for Boswell, Jim's art represents postmodern self-reflexivity and irony, which
induces the search for an escape from the cage of self-consciousness that ends up being
the cage itself (like drugs), Wallace's novel, like Hal's thoughts, would be an effort to
preserve humanity by diving into self-reflection itself: «[…] the end result is not escape
from consciousness but a disconcerting self-consciousness of one's own despair, of
one's own cowardly desire for escape from self» (*Understanding* 165).

Contrasting with Boswell's vision of *Infinite Jest* as a critique of the unfulfilling
Lacanian desire and a way to escape the cage of the crippled self by diving into self-
consciousness, Mary K. Holland contends that Wallace cannot do away with the
recursivity of unconscious narcissism embedded in society, despite the author's
declarations of intent:

> Evidence of this […] pathologically compensatory adult narcissism,
> permeates *Infinite Jest*. […] Whereas Wallace devotes constant attention in
> *Jest*, as in his critiques, to the problems of irony and mediation,
> infantilization and narcissism emerge in the novel not so much as problems
> consciously to be solved as a deadly undertow against which the novel
> struggles – and, I argue, fails – to make forward progress. ("The Art's
> Heart's Purpose" 224-225)

Holland reads the infinite jest of the novel's title as Wallace's unfulfilled promise about
rescuing Hal from unavoidable solipsism. Like Jim's homonymous cartridge, supposed
to be created for Hal's benefit, the novel would actually entrap its reader into the loop of
narcissistic recursivity: «[the movie] provides an attempt to reproduce the experience of

infantile fulfillment without the anxiety that leads to later pathology, to bypass the experience of original loss and free the viewer to enter adulthood without the burden of resentment and inconsolability that sends him or her looping back into narcissism» ("The Art's Heart's Purpose" 237). Thus, for Holland, the Lacanian symbolic order entailed in the Law of the Father and in language would be proposed in *Infinite Jest* as an escape from the cage of solipsism but then nullified by the characters' narcissism produced by the very negation of an expected but denied parental authority.

Holland's concept of secondary narcissism is drawn from Christopher Lasch's application of Freud's theories in *The Culture of Narcissism*. Holland explains that, following a stage of ordinary primary narcissism in infants,

> […] Freud posits a "secondary" narcissism, in which adults who remain dedicated to the satisfaction of the self create an "ideal ego" out of all they value in themselves and extend their libidinal energy to that ideal. In other words, adult narcissists love others for reflecting what they perceive as best about themselves in an attempt to approximate that closed-loop bliss of infantile self-fulfillment that ego formation forces them to abandon. ("The Art's Heart's Purpose" 224)

Lasch combines Freud's concept of secondary narcissism with Melanie Klein's further exploration of the aggressivity implied in the libidinal drive towards the other. Holland reports Klein's considerations of the individual's effort to compensate his sense of guilt for aggressivity with greatness, an effort that ultimately produces a sense of emptiness and inauthenticity in the individual. Accordingly, such a feeling is to be found in Wallace's characterization of society in *Infinite Jest*, as the author would draw from Lasch's extension of secondary narcissism from the individual to society (224).

Holland thinks that *Infinite Jest*'s recursivity expresses the insurmountable fight of the individual with his own unconscious narcissistic desire, within a process swinging between solipsistic self autonomy and pathological dependence of the self on the outside:

> […] "recursivity" manifests itself not only as a method of escaping an illusion of the autonomous self but also, and even more forcefully, as evidence of the destructive implications of a culture that counters the

potentially solipsistic autonomy of the individual with the self-obliterating invasion of the self through mediation. In this culture and this novel, the extreme opposite of autonomy does not lie in healthy, life-enhancing relationships with the world and the others, but in the crippling, utterly solipsistic trap of dependence. ("The Art's Heart's Purpose" 225)

Thus, for Holland, the crippled self, as embodied by *Infinite Jest*'s characters, is doomed to a «pathological recursivity of narcissism» (225), and the narrative of the novel reinforces this idea without providing a way to escape the lethal loop, similar to Jim's cartridge.

Holland identifies the cause of narcissist recursivity in the relationship between parents and children: Jim and Avril are too self-absorbed to respond to their sons' needs. The children are aware of this kind of parental abuse but they cannot react to the loop, eventually falling into addictive states in search for an escape from the trap:

The effects of this double dose of narcissistic parents are clear both in Orin and Hal, although the sons develop in opposite ways in response to their parental experience. Orin learns to mimic the self-absorption he has been taught [...]. Unlike Orin, Hal, rather than mimic his parents' pathologically narcissistic mediation of others, remains stuck in the role of mirror that his parents had assigned him throughout childhood. [...] Long before turning to the escape of tennis (also characterized as form of "self-forgetting") or finally of marijuana and DMZ, Hal has learned that pleasure comes most certainly from pleasing others and pathologically forgetting the self. ("The Art's Heart's Purpose 227)

What is originally a familiar issue, where pathological narcissism is perpetuated through generations, becomes a social widespread problem inasmuch American society fuels infantilization for consumerist purposes. By equating citizens to infants, the pathological recursivity of narcissism is extended to societal dynamics and reinforced by a use of irony that, masked as maturity, would actually propel infantilism and narcissism:

[...] the association of hip apathy with the cultural umbrella of the [contemporary] arts explains not only how a widespread perception of emptiness leading to infantile regression is produced, but also how this

production simultaneously results in its own denial. Hipness implies a kind of "mature" resistance to feeling for oneself and others, so that all expression of human need and pain is seen as "infantile"; yet, such hip emptiness encourages just this need to release oneself into the pure need of the infant. ("The Art's Heart's Purpose" 229-230)

Here the role of contemporary arts, especially of postmodern use of irony and self-reflexivity, is re-connected to the corporative nature of American contemporary society, and to Hal as an example of true young American. The individual, the familial, and the social threads are analyzed comparatively, according to an expanded parental model. Holland's reading of widespread narcissism ultimately renders every kind of potential cure (be it therapeutic talking cure, A.A. program, Jim's cartridge, or the novel itself) as infected with narcissism and, as such, doomed to impossibility of empathy and ineffectiveness of recursivity.

Nicoline Timmer specifically highlights *Infinite Jest* as the text where an interpersonal construction of a new sense of self reconfigures subjectivity after postmodern literature. While she acknowledges the death of the traditional subject intended as «a self-determining, self-contained subject, occupying a central position – as moral authority, as meaning-maker» (35), she also criticizes what she calls the poststructural "double deconstruction" («one, a deconstruction of traditional frameworks of meaning, and two, a deconstruction of the subject») that leads to subjective relativism but also, paradoxically, to relativism of the subject and negation of subjective interpretation (*Do You Feel It Too?* 39).

By contrast, Timmer proposes the use of narrative psychology in order to analyze the way *Infinite Jest*'s characters make sense of themselves, with a major focus on Hal Incandenza. In narrative psychology, she argues:

> The assumption that the self is mediated, structured in language still stands, but instead of surrendering to a form of linguistic determinism, the focus is on language use and for that what is needed is a conception of the self as language user, or: as storyteller. […] one has to pay attention to how in practice people construct a story of the/their self. Instead of just concluding or simply positing that we are mediated and fractured, the focus is on how we still do try to make sense of our selves, even when fractured and mediated. (*Do You Feel It Too?* 41-42)

It is in this sense that Timmer sees *Infinite Jest* not as a diagnosis of a lack of self but rather as a redemptive text that constructs a new sense of self not contained in enclosed characters but based on an interpersonal narrative of relations.

In the analysis of Hal's subjectivity, Timmer recognizes the value of the absence of the father as a guiding figure and the boy's repressed reaction to his mother's influence. She underlines the paradox of a society that requires the self to be self-sufficient and self-loving without providing the parental role necessary to develop that self, a paradox ultimately leading to a narcissistic loop of self-reflexivity without end (*Do You Feel It Too?* 152-153). But the fact that Hal complains about both feeling empty inside and being trapped inside his body without the ability to communicate implies that he must have developed a self that can discern that feeling:

> This experience of being encaged in the self when at the same time the individual feels 'empty inside', existentially imploded to the point of being nothing but an 'empty black malevolent lonely voided space', is in the novel circumscribed in various ways, as if there are no fitting words for it, as if it can exist in language only as 'it', a word that again and again is charged with the affective content it can hardly convey. (Timmer, *Do You Feel It Too?* 155-156).

This feeling of being empty inside, then, would not indicate a total lack of self but rather the societal model of negation of feelings provoking a gap between personal experiencing and the expectations of society.

Hal's development through the novel would consist, for Timmer, in a repossession of «[…] an 'I' present who can appropriate the hurt» (157), «[…] a grip on his feelings […]» (158). Hal's achievement of personal narrative agency would be reached thanks to a group conscience that, in the case of Hal, is not represented by A.A. meetings (although they are effective for other characters) but rather by a different, less naïve, kind of narrative practice. Timmer believes that it is the narrator, from a position analogous to that of Jim Incandenza's wraith, that accounts for the characters experience of feelings:

[…] sadness is repressed by most of the individuals in this storyworld
resulting in 'anhedonia', feelings of emptiness but also a residue feeling of
'hurt' that cannot be accounted for. But it is ultimately accounted for, not
by each individual character by itself, but by the narrator. It is up to the
narrator to 'open up' these isolated selves, to show how these individuals all
suffer from the same 'solipsistic delusion' […]. The strategy of the narrator
is to empathize with his characters, projecting himself imaginatively onto
his characters, through the magic of using their 'brain voice'. Each voice
alone seems entrapped in its own narrative cage. But all these voices strung
together, showing how they appear to struggle to say the same thing, may
breach the solipsistic delusion, for the reader. (*Do You Feel It Too?* 176)

The figure of the narrator for the reader is thus reconnected to the role of the father for
Hal, a father who, although absent, provides his son with cinematic stories of other
selves through which Hal ultimately recognizes his "sameness" and learns how to create
his own self-narrative, getting closer to his father and becoming narrator of his own
story in turn.

On the contrary, Alex Resar tries to demonstrate the insistence of subjecthood
despite the impossibility of mapping «[…] an always incomplete Self engaged in a
constant process of becoming, articulation, and re-articulation» in *Infinite Jest*
(*Signifying Everything* 144). Founding his study on Julia Kristeva's categories of
"semiotic" and "symbolic", Resar argues that the transcending of the self consists in the
annihilation of the limits of the self and of its signification, and he suggests a dialectic
of destruction as creation (*Signifying Everything* 144-146). By arguing that the constant
transgression of the semiotic (i.e. what exceed signification) into the symbolic (i.e.
shared cultural meaning) allows the transformation, and thus the production, of
signification itself, Resar justifies Hal's existence as a subject despite his inability to
communicate:

Infinite Jest performs this pluralization and thus pulverization of the truths
concerning the process of its textual subjects. Conflicting accounts of the
experiential basis for subjects' modes of expression – the reason why Joelle
van Dyne wears a veil, for example – serve to undermine the potential for
the emergence of a unitary symbolic subject, culminating in Hal's recourse
to laughter as a response to the infinite potential for subjective articulation.
(*Signifying Everything* 147)

Resar acknowledges the existence of a subject always in the process of becoming that cannot be expressed within the realm of the symbolic, and thus explains Hal's inability to communicate in terms of recognition of the limits of the signification of the self that is always mediated by the symbolic: «This reading of *Infinite Jest* thus represents Hal's laughter as the embrace of these charges and stases – the impossible articulation of the drives and forces of the unconscious – that compose the semiotic and, thereby, act as a denial of the symbolic subject as universally founded upon the transcendent ego» (150).

After acknowledging the fundamental codependency of the semiotic and the symbolic, Resar explains that Jim's lethal cartridge brings viewers to madness and annihilation as it seeks to «[…] establish a cartography of the unmappable: a material embodiment of the death drive itself, one of the core processes constituting Kristeva's unrepresentable semiotic» (*Signifying Everything* 154). Thus Jim's effort to map the emergence of subjectivity precludes any possibility of subjectivity itself, because of its total departure from the symbolic and only reliance on the semiotic:

> Reading *Infinite Jest* through this practice of mapping-as-deconstruction reveals the dialectic at the heart of Wallace's text: representing the production of subjectivity even as that representation annihilates that which it represents. […] In this way, *Infinite Jest* both renders visible and performs the ways in which mapping is indissociable from erasure, signification indissociable from annihilation, and transgression indissociable from limitation. (*Signifying Everything* 159)

So Resar does not deny the possibility of existence of the self but rather classifies *Infinite Jest*, the novel, as a critique to any attempt to mapping the self that entails a rejection of the communication of that self.

Elizabeth Freudenthal, instead, rejects the concept of inner self tout court, by detecting anti-interiority and medical objectification of subjectivity in *Infinite Jest*. She defines anti-interiority as:

> […] a mode of identity founded in the material world of both objects and biological bodies and divested from an essentialist notion of inner emotional, psychological, and spiritual life. Anti-interiority is a subjectivity generated by the material world and yet works against oppressive political, economic, and social forces in that same world, not in the ideal realm of

interiority, with its normative modes of agency and its metaphysical connotations. In fact, it replaces the referents associated with "interior" and "exterior" with a dynamic, generative materiality, itself composed of both object worlds and biomedical realities. ("Anti-Interiority" 192)

By supporting this model, Freudenthal does not embrace the poststructuralist dissolution of subjectivity, but rather a new concept of subjectivity based not on an inner psychic dimension but on materiality. This idea would be supported, for Freudenthal, by the extensive role of objects in the novel and the individuation of the cause of stasis in "addiction thinking", abstracting and enclosing self-consciousness.

Freudenthal sees the generalized compulsiveness of *Infinite Jest*'s characters and narrative structure as a double-edged tool to escape debilitating interiority and self-consciousness:

> Certainly *Infinite Jest*'s distinctive form is compulsive: the hoarded collections of endnoted information, the sentences both excessive and obsessively precise, the drive to pack as much as possible into the syntactic and narrative spaces. As a mode of anti-interiority, as a means of rejecting the siren call of a closed-off inner life and embracing instead objects and bodies in their materiality, compulsiveness can also empower characters. That is, the biomedical is both the foundation of the novel's structures of oppression, and also the main way characters resist and negotiate them. ("Anti-Interiority" 196)

Biomedical objectification of subjectivity would be both the cause of and escape from authoritarianist domination, in large and small scale. The novel would explore anti-interiority as simultaneously negative and positive, both used by social forces to dominate the geo-political field and by individuals to escape the stasis provoked by self-consciousness. For Freudenthal, similar to Jim Incandenza's father, anti-interiority compulsiveness generates subjectivity and fights back against dominating biomedical objectification: «[…] the novel uses compulsiveness to depict not an erasure of self within an overpowering commercial culture, as some critics argue, but a continuous reestablishment of selfhood contingent on external material reality. Anti-interior selfhood exists as a paradoxically dynamic thinghood between material and subjective realms […]» ("Anti-Interiority" 192).

Freudenthal clarifies that her vision of subjectivity, although embedded in materialism, is not to be considered as a reversal of the Cartesian tradition. The way *Infinite Jest* embraces anti-interiority would not imply a domination of the body over the mind but rather the acknowledgment that the head is a part of the body, thus rejecting body-mind dualism. Freudenthal posits identity as:

> […] a Möbius strip, with an "outside" and "inside" that are inseparable and irreducible yet unstable and dynamic, helps reconcile the overly oppositional notions of socially constructed and biologically determined identity. […] Such a model allows for the biological and social to be intertwined, mutually defining, and twisting into each other. Biomedical identity can be part of the social without either inflexible division or mutual assimilation. ("Anti-Interiority" 207)

This model takes account of the "inside" as a biomedical subject and object related to a material world according to a generative model of anti-interiority that would avoid the paralyzation of the subject by self-reflexive analysis-paralysis.

Allard den Dulk proposes an existential reading of the self in *Infinite Jest* based on Sartre's idea of self-becoming. Accordingly, den Dulk affirms that «[h]uman being is characterized by a "lack of being" (it always transcends what it is at any moment), and, as a result of that lack, is driven by an unfulfillable "*desire to be*" (consciousness casting itself toward the world, but never being able to coincide with it, to "be" as the world "is")» ("Good Faith and Sincerity" 206).

Den Dulk resorts to Sartre's individuation of two coexisting properties in the human being, *facticity* and *transcendence*, and he explains it as following:

> [A] human being always finds himself in a certain factual situation, but at the same time is always already beyond that situation, in the sense that he is always free to relate to it in a new way. The individual in bad faith tries to mask for himself this tension that characterizes his existence. To that end, he formulates "two-faced concepts" and decides to be convinced by these concepts, while "[i]n truth, [he has] not persuaded [him]self". ("Good Faith and Sincerity" 204)

Thus, for den Dulk, the self is not an essential and fixed entity but rather an ever-becoming process entailing the acceptance of the freedom not to coincide with itself and to transcend itself continuously. Nonetheless, according to Sartre, the good faith at the basis of the recognition of the freedom of the self to transcend itself is pre-reflective, in the sense that it does not entail volition or choice:

> Good faith is like an intuition, an immediate belief in what is important and what is not, occurring without what could be properly be called a choice. One can only speak of choice when there is the possibility of conscious consideration of doing something different. That possibility arises with reflection, which emerges as the bad faith attempts to mask the insight of good faith, and subsequently with the possibility or reflectively acknowledging that self deceit and (again: reflectively) *choosing* the insights of good faith. This reflective resumption of good faith is an act of volition, a choice to live in the awareness and acceptance of that insight, and give shape to the self. ("Good Faith and Sincerity" 209)

So bad faith is a fundamental stage in the acquisition of volition, making of good faith a reflective attitude that is what den Dulk identifies as sincerity in Wallace.[113] By clarifying his conception of sincerity as a reflective attitude of the self in the recognition of its freedom to transcend itself and not to succumb to *facticity*, den Dulk relieves the concept of the self from the danger of being interpreted as a fixed, inner self autonomous from the world, but he nonetheless acknowledges the existence of the self as an ever-becoming process.

Den Dulk focuses on the role of choice in the definition of sincerity and the development of self and meaning: «[…] the notion of sincerity, with its emphasis on the importance of the other and of the connection between the self and its actions, can also be regarded as expressive of a concept of the self as *external*, as shaped through choice and action [...] and through community and dialogue with others […]» (*Existential Engagement* 168). Den Dulk confronts Wallace's realization of sincerity with postmodern goal of authenticity on the basis of «the Sartrean view of the self that arises outside consciousness, that consciousness has to be directed towards the world in order

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[113] Den Dulk reformulates Sartre's terminological distinction between authenticity and sincerity: «It is this reflective attitude, resuming the awareness of good faith, that I would like to call sincerity, even though Sartre himself calls this attitude authenticity and describes sincerity as a form of bad faith» ("Good Faith and Sincerity" 209).

to discover the self, […] that consciousness needs to be facing outward and not be bent-inwards» (*Existential Engagement* 40).

Wittgenstein and Camus provide den Dulk's study with the sense of community necessary for the individual to produce meaning in relation with the world and others. Wittgenstein does so by defining meaning in language as something that does not depend on referentiality but on the communitarian agreement of the rules of the game (*Existential Engagement* 132-160). Camus illustrates how to overcome nihilism and the estrangement of the individual from reality by turning to communitarian solidarity against reality's meaninglessness (230-237). Then, according to den Dulk, the sense of community is one of the strategies used by Wallace to overcome postmodern hyperreflexivity and endless irony:

> The model of "Addicts Anonymous", portrayed in *Infinite Jest*, can be regarded as an example of how fiction should work, as forging community. […] Perhaps we could say that the works of Wallace […] affirm that a novel is at heart a language-game: it is a dialogue between writer and reader, grounded in the communal structures of the life-form. And by showing this, these fiction supply complex, human concepts, virtues such as sincerity, reality-commitment and community with meaning. (*Existential Engagement* 260)

From this assumption, den Dulk develops the idea of sincerity as the ability of the individual to «[…] realize meaningful connections to the world and to others» (162), to be sincere to oneself in the relation to the world. Conversely, authenticity would be a deconstructionist reaffirmation of a Romantic, pure, and inner self in the very effort to confute its plausibility:

> Deconstruction turns the ideal of being an autonomous, immanent self, free from external influences, against itself: it reveals authenticity to be impossible, as the subject is shown to be always the product of external forces, of societal structures that shape the individual. The result is a fragmented subject that can never be fully self-defining and that is, therefore, doomed to always be *in*authentic […]. (*Existential Engagement* 166)

Den Dulk understands sincerity in *Infinite Jest* as the reconciliation of the categories of inner self and outer other as they have been conceived by modern philosophies, and this reconciliation would be the basis for a "reality-commitment" and sense of self.[114]

Opposite to sincerity, addiction in *Infinite Jest* would be a metaphor for paralyzing self-consciousness and postmodern irony used as a tool of self-conscious detachment from the world, eventually leading to self-alienation and loss of meaning: «By excessive self-reflection is meant a form of consciousness that, because of its constant thinking about (distancing from, doubting) itself, estranges from that self, losing sight of (and contact with) its relation to the world and other people (leading to feelings of emptiness and even depression)» (den Dulk, *Existential Engagement* 27). Self-consciousness and irony, like addiction itself, entrap the individual in a loop where what seems to be the solution to a problematic relation to the world is in fact the cause of the problem itself.

The paradoxical fact that Wallace makes use of irony in order to overcome postmodern irony, is explained by den Dulk in terms of difference between verbal irony and existential irony as presented by Kierkegaard. Accordingly, irony as a figure of speech is directed towards specific targets and serves a positive and temporary reversal of established values, while irony as existential attitude towards existence consists of a perpetual avoidance of choice which eventually leads to detachment from the world, loss of meaning and alienation of the self (*Existential Engagement* 63-65). Existential irony is a feature of the Kierkegaardian aesthetic phase, characterized by a negative instance of "freedom from", which needs to be replaced by the ethical phase of "freedom to" in order to become positive, that is, constructive:

> The aesthetic life is characterized by not-choosing; the aesthete wants to retain his negative freedom. To overcome the empty despair in which this life-view runs aground, the negative freedom established through irony should be followed [...] by taking up responsibility to give shape and meaning to one's life, thereby realizing a positive freedom. This is the choice that, for Kierkegaard, characterizes the ethical life-view. ("Boredom, Irony, and Anxiety" 49)

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[114] Den Dulk takes Mario Incandenza as the foremost example of sincerity, or *good faith* in Sartrean terms, his happiness and satisfactory relationships deriving from his being open to the others, even physically «leaning forward» (182), and not self-reflexive or ironic at all.

Following this line of thought, den Dulk explains Wallace's paradoxical use of irony in order to overcome postmodern irony in terms of this difference between verbal irony and existential irony. Den Dulk claims that existential irony, represented in *Infinite Jest* by addiction as a way to eschew choice, is overcome by the AA ethics of responsibility and that the development from negative irony to positive irony is incarnated in the character of Don Gately.

Adam Kelly explores the transformation of the concept of sincerity over the course of the twentieth century and identifies in Lionel Trilling and David Foster Wallace two fundamental shifting points in this cultural process. Kelly draws from Trilling's revision of the difference between sincerity and authenticity, according to which «sincerity places emphasis on intersubjective truth and communication with others, and on what Trilling calls the "public end in view", [while] authenticity conceives truth as something inward, personal, and ridde, the goal primarily of self-expression rather than other-directed communication» ("David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity" 132). Although Trilling's concept of sincerity as something communal and other-directed is very much present in Wallace's fiction, Trilling's foundation of sincerity on an inner self existing prior to language had been re-discussed through the poststructuralist critique of subjectivity before it reached Wallace's attention. Wallace's exploration about sincerity would not focus on the match between the inner and the outer self, but about the possibility of sincerity in absence of expressive subjectivity:

> […] the problem of arguing for belief, commitment, and sincerity under a model of language without prior subjects would nonetheless prove a tricky one. One way to put the problem (a problem unanticipated in the work of Trilling) is as follows: Can one maintain an ideal and practice of sincerity without a grounding notion of expressive subjectivity? This is one of the central questions framed throughout the writing of David Foster Wallace, a major late-century inheritor of this postmodern age of irony and theory. (Kelly, "Dialectic of Sincerity" Web)

Here Kelly denies any re-emergence of subjectivity in Wallace's fiction, ascribing the author as one of the postmodern inheritors who rejected «[…] the split between inner

self and outer performance […] by the deconstruction of the expressive subject and the privileging of language as environment rather than tool» ("Dialectic of Sincerity" Web). Nonetheless, despite the postmodern negation of subjectivity mined in Trilling's idea of sincerity as correspondence between inner self and outer performance, Wallace recovered a renovated concept of sincerity as opposing irony: «[…] Wallace's overt preoccupation with irony alongside sincerity differentiates him from his forebear and marks his work as a further turn in the dialectic of sincerity. If for Trilling, in other words, the key concept that opposed sincerity was authenticity, for Wallace it was irony» ("Dialectic of Sincerity" Web).

Confirming, in fact, Wallace's position between postmodernism and some new form of literature by advocating a revised concept of sincerity as opposed to postmodern irony, Kelly concludes that Wallace «[…] bridges […] two positions, combining the cultivation of sincerity as a poetic value with an awareness of the materialistically determined construction of sincerity as a convention» ("Dialectic of Sincerity" Web). This opposition between sincerity and irony, though, stems from a Derridean vision of truth as something not metaphysical but rather «[…] displaced by a singtagmatic chain of signifiers […]» (Kelly, "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity" 138). Despite Wallace's call for humanity, this idea of sincerity is informed by the poststructuralist displacement of the self, with intention and morality.

New sincerity is a way, for Kelly, to escape from the recursivity of what he calls "anticipatory logic", that is «[…] the anticipation of others' reception of one's outward behavior […] so that inner states lose their originating causal status and instead become effects of that anticipatory logic» ("David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity" 136). Once the inner self has been questioned by poststructuralism, Wallace recognizes the impossibility to be naïve towards the promise of sincerity or morality, and this state of uncertainty would provoke the recursivity of suspect and paranoid, even self-directed:

> […] sincerity […] can always be taken for manipulation, and this risk is fundamental […] because true sincerity, if there is ever such a thing, must take place in the aporia between the conditional and the unconditional. Or in Wallace's terms, sincerity must involve "intent" but cannot involve "motive." This is a fraught distinction, and even the writer him- or herself will never know whether they have attained true sincerity, and the reader will never know either. And yet true sincerity happens, is in fact made

possible by the impossibility of its certain identification. […] For Wallace, consciousness is precisely this kind of "infinite jest," making absolute cognitive certainty concerning the difference between intent and motive impossible to finally ascertain. (Kelly, "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity" 140)

Since sincerity happens but it can only be expressed through paradoxes and aporias, there is no use for Kelly to look for deeper truths in communication: truth would emerge in the dialogic form of *Infinite Jest*'s narrative and ultimately depend on the reader's potential to realize it: «[…] the distinction between intent and motive, and any possible affirmation of sincerity, can only be made by a particular kind of listener. More generally, […] the possibility of sincerity depends upon its becoming dialogic in character, always requiring a response from the other to bring it into play». ("David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity" 141).

Kelly's vision of sincerity implies the denial of an autonomous inner self in favor of dialogical communication in the context of a re-evaluated role of institutions, in reaction to solipsist authenticity of a pure self encouraged and manipulated by new media:

> […] in the technocapitalist world of hyper-entertainment presented in *Infinite Jest* as a near-future version of the American present, classic liberal freedom has irretrievably morphed into a libertarianism that leaves individuals isolated but increasingly without sovereignty over themselves. True freedom, Wallace seems to suggest, is now to be found in recognizing limits and submitting oneself to boundaries (on the analogy of submitting oneself freely to the moral law in Kant), and thereby discovering within those boundaries others like oneself. ("Dialectic of Sincerity" Web)

Thus Kelly's reading of sincerity in Wallace's fiction converges with the possibility of escaping the postmodern trap of solipsism, by criticizing irony while acknowledging the impossibility to do without it. The result is a fiction where sincerity would entail irony rather the oppose it, and the sense of community and institutions would replace subjectivity.

David Hering also reads *Infinite Jest*'s return to institutional restraint as a positive element: a preparatory stage that, reflected into the narcissist recursivity of the novel, allows an escape through refraction and dialogism:

> As the reader performs a linear rearrangement of the novel's disparate and temporal elements, they create a hermeneutic space which mirrors the "huge circle" of communication. It is this reader-directed framework that ultimately characterizes the major territorial shift within *Infinite Jest*. As spatial restriction becomes more exponential, egress can be found in the erection of a communication loop between narrative and reader whereby the reader reconstructs the narrative. (Hering, *Fiction and Form*: 66-67)

Hering detects a privileged role of the reader within the redemptive circularity of the novel where the fragmented but recursive narrative needs to be pieced together by the reader's consciousness. He refers to this process as refraction, that is, a particular kind of mirroring pointing towards the outside of the text, rather than to the inside as in the case of self-reflexivity, and he claims that refraction is only possible thanks to the dialogical dimension between author and reader: «I read the process of internal reflection produced by the implied presence of the author in *Infinite Jest* as offering an implicit dialectical and co-constructive framework *both inside and outside* the bound world and structure of the novel, one which can address the problems of narcissism in terms of "looking through" and, latterly, "breaking through"» (*Fiction and Form* 109-110).

For Hering, this process of refraction and escape from the self-reflexivity of the text is possible thanks to the dialogical form obtained in *Infinite Jest* as a result of the return of the dead author as Jim Incandenza's wraith:

> […] the "revenant" author, who has undergone his theoretical "death", returns as a modified, and sometimes explicitly curatorial, textual presence. I do not read the revenant author as a direct "revival" of the pre-Barthesian author figure, but rather a "ghostly" return of the dead author, one aware of his existential contingency upon readerly presence and interpretation and committed to a dialogic engagement with those readers. (*Fiction and Form* 18)

Hering identifies Jim's wraith with Wallace's conscious as an author who is aware of the Barthesian theory of the death of the author and who acknowledges its relevance, but still advocates a return of an authorial role, not within a monologic narrative but rather in a polyphonic and dialogical form. Hering sees the return of the author as a revenant that participates in the novel according to Bakhtin's dialogical model, as opposed to a return of authorial orchestration of the romantic conception of authorship referred to as "*apophrades*", drawing from Harold Bloom's vocabulary:

> This is a literalizing and reversal of Bloom's return of the dead: in *apophrades* the voice of the dead appears, almost inexplicably, to have been generated through the work of the living, who have superseded their place in the canon. In the narrative of *Infinite Jest* the dead literally return, with the express intention of possessing the brain of their descendants. (*Fiction and Form* 26)

Even if the author's wraith returns to posses Gately's brain, though, Hering claims that the wraith is not controlling Gately's (and the reader's) mind but actually establishing a dialogue between the inside and the outside of the text, staging a shift from *The Broom of the System*'s "absent possessor" (Lenore Sr.) to *Infinite Jest*'s "companion ghost". In this shift, the visual apparition of the author as a wraith is essential to set a dialogue between two recognizable consciousness rather than a monologue by an orchestrating invisible entity (*Fiction and Form* 34).

Clare Hayes-Brady also praises *Infinite Jest*'s structural openness and reads it in terms of dialogism and intended generative failures. She sees the novel's refusal of closing recursive loops as a means to achieve a Rortyan conception of problematization rather than conclusion:

> To close a story in the traditional sense is in some way to end a conversation, to offer the illusion of logic, linearity, and control, and to quit the grand project of keeping the conversation going, which offers a rout out of the postmodernist trap of solipsism. Hence, Wallace's resistance to endings becomes a central part of his creative process, in which the reader is and must continually be a coproducer of meaning. (Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*: 3)

Hayes-Brady considers Wallace's strategies as essentially postmodern, but she focuses on the reversal of such strategies, that is, the positive and communicative value of absence and decentering of the self. And in fact she talks of relief, rather than solution, to postmodern solipsism:

> […] generative failure, which refers to the necessarily unfinished nature of communicative acts, and at its most powerful entails the simultaneous narrowing and strengthening of the gap between self and other, the isolation of the subject. […] Rather than seeking to collapse that boundary, Wallace's work depends on the persistence of alterity and the ongoing dynamic exchange between self and untouchable other for the relief of – but not solution to – postmodernist narcissism and the threat of solipsistic entrapment. (*Unspeakable Failures* 5-6)

Then, the boundaries of the self and the distance between the self and the other assume a double-edged significance, being both feared and reasserted. The existence of boundaries in the communicative practice implies the recognition of the other as an independent subject to whom the self relates. This is where Hayes-Brady considers Wallace to be anti-deconstruction, in the sense that he would intend the decentering of the self as redemptive rather than alienating.

The loss of the self, for Hayes-Brady, would be rather a consequence of «[…] the inability or refusal to communicate meaningfully (infantile narcissism), the propensity to rely too heavily on identification with others (subjective solipsism, the sense of self as universal subject), or on overabundance of empathy (displaced solipsism, or the sense of the self as no more than object)» (*Unspeakable Failures* 18). The interpretative gap between self and other, or author and reader, depends upon the existence of two independent subjects who relate to each other by means of language. The active role of the reader in interpreting completes the process of articulating textual signification and, thanks to the filling in of generative failures, the reader supersedes postmodern closeness and solipsism.

In the exploration of the paradoxical position of the self with regards to the other, Hayes-Brady accredits the positive value of boundaries and interpretive gaps to Wallace's original development of poststructuralist philosophy. Postmodern alienation of the decentered subject is described as «[…] exceptionally free-floating sense of identity

mirror[ing] Rorty's conception of the metastable liberal ironist, whose openness to relativism is so wholehearted that the very sense of self is compromised» (*Unspeakable Failures* 198). On the contrary, Wallace's reflection of the self as limited by institutions or morality provides not alienation but a control that is necessary for the articulation of the self itself.

Timothy Aubry establishes a correlation of strategies and intent between *Infinite Jest* (the novel) and the AA recovery process within the novel. Aubry acknowledges the paradoxical nature of AA logics consisting in the remission of personal agency in order to achieve freedom from addiction, but he also warns that skepticism towards AA values is the very cause of addiction itself (211-213). AA's advice to submit individual agency to the group dynamics is due to the fact that, in a state where the self has been substituted by an addictive substance, individual agency is nothing more than the expression of addiction itself. Aubry describes addiction as «ceaselessly self-subverting and self-destructive» (211) and he argues that AA meetings' primary task is to put the members of the group in the condition «to produce a stable narrative of the self» (211) in order to overcome addiction.

If sincerity is a fundamental requirement of self-narration in the process of identification and recovery, then cynical irony is a psychological defense against personal responsibilities and an obstacle to the achievement of a stronger self and communication. Aubry equates drugs and irony for their role to be addictive concealment of the self (214) and, in so doing, he sets the premises for his comparison between Wallace's writing and AA recovery process:

> The experience of reading *Infinite Jest* is designed, in my view, to undermine the psychological defenses that forestall the acknowledgement of sentiment and need, and thus to provoke a new perspective on AA's humanistic values. *Infinite Jest* offers irony, deconstructive games, and postmodern fictional tricks, in a seemingly endless process that mimics addiction and can exhaust readers intellectually, make them weary, at least temporarily, of sophistication, and ready to trust the simple and apparently earnest statements Wallace periodically produces, for instance, "that there is such a thing as raw, unalloyed, agendaless kindness." The complexity of *Infinite Jest* is an absolutely necessary element of the experience I am describing: in order to draw skeptical readers in, challenge and tire their critical capacities, and push them eventually to accept, as a refreshing

departure, a perspective whose banality and simplicity is legitimized only by the arduous intellectual process, the journey through difficulty, required to reach that point. ("Selfless Cravings" 215)

Accordingly, *Infinite Jest* works both as an addictive and a healing text, where a first moment of addiction/deconstruction is necessary to a later process of recovery/reconstruction in order to produce something of human value. Then irony and sincerity are not to be considered as mutually exclusive but rather as complementing forces, within a fruitful balance that avoids the complete dissimulation of the self.

Frank Cioffi treats *Infinite Jest* as a performative narrative that both estranges and seeks empathy from the reader. He defines *Infinite Jest* a "disturbing text" in the sense that it is characterized by idiosyncratic aspects that aim to provoke an emotional response in the reader that is not solely dependent on formal features: «The "disturbing" aspect of the texts results from some combination of reader inference, textual structure, and cultural circumstances. This combination as been as difficult to entangle as it has been resistant to labeling» ("An Anguish Become Thing" 163). Here Cioffi refers to the reader's subjective response to the estranged feeling acknowledged by Freud as the *Unheimlich*, as seen in Wallace's use of deeply moving stories which narration is characterized by a high intellect and ostensible detachment disturbing the reader and forcing him to do extra work in order to follow the novel's development.

The very intellectual level of *Infinite Jest* is determined by the performative character of the novel, which is supposed both to please and to challenge the reader, and that is embedded in the syntactic and especially semantic apparatus of the text: «This is a virtuoso vocabulist at work, performing busily, somewhat aggressively demonstrating his skill» (Cioffi, "An Anguish Become Thing" 168). Consequently, Cioffi recognizes performativity also in the act of reading the novel: «I believe the reader is a kind of performer of (or perhaps "in") the narrative of *Infinite Jest*. The novel's performative gestures, its Brechtian alienation effects that interrupt the flow of the narrative and call attention to the work *qua* performance, encourage readers to become conscious of their own performances as readers» (168). The reader's effort consists in cognitive, motor, and emotional activities implied in the narrative reading of such a performative text.

On the other hand, the reader not only acts as performer but he is also attracted by the addictive text, feeling a necessity to perform in that text by participating in the paratextual reflections on the addictive reading itself: «By making the novel a kind of addiction, 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, Wallace creates a work that is extraordinarily disturbing» ("An Anguish Become Thing" 170). Thanks to this performing participation with the text, the reader would feel particularly compelled by the act of reading, so as to blur the boundaries between fiction and reality, and between real and responsive emotions: «[…] although I freely admit that the emotions we feel in response to texts tend not to be of the same depth, complexity, or duration as "real" emotions, they *sometimes* are, as in the case of disturbing texts» (174). For Cioffi, the result of the double role acted by the reader, both as performer and addict, is an ontological split in the reader consisting of the double consciousness required by *Infinite Jest*'s performativity (177).

Robert K. Bolger investigates the paradoxical condition between epistemological freedom and ontological constraint as expressed in the Fish Parable written and inserted by Wallace in *Infinite Jest* first, and then in *This is Water*. Bolger sees *This is Water* as «[…] an account of the process of self-realization that […] resembles a fairly straightforward and orthodox explanation of the religious path from self to God» ("Pragmatic Spirituality" 33). As the title of Bolger's essays suggests, Bolger interprets the process of self-realization of the individual in Wallace writing as progress towards what he calls "pragmatic spirituality", that is the realization of the self as a first-person perspective consciousness that is not entrapped in selfishness (37) and eventually finds «[…] the divine presence in the mundane stuff of the world» (33). He specifically recognizes the actualization of this process in the program of the A.A. (33).

Bolger insists on the trickiness of the ability/inability to choose one's beliefs and ways to interpret the outer world in order to overcome selfishness and solipsism, as suggested in *This is Water* and in most of Wallace's writings:

> This freedom to choose how we interpret certain aspects of reality is the *epistemological* point […]. But this is not the whole story. It may be that there is something that is part and parcel of being human, something so

close to our nature that […] we rarely notice, but something that is also
capable of frustrating and thwarting our *actual* freedom to choose how we
interpret reality. This is the *ontological* point […]. ("Pragmatic Spirituality"
36)

Bolger suggests that, in order to choose one's own belief, it is necessary to change one's
inner narrative, and vice versa. It is a circular, paradoxical process of «[…] conversion
away from ourselves […]» where «[…] we create new beliefs and change our inner
narrative, which changes our belief, which…you get the idea» (44). The most difficult
part of this process is the fact that it cannot be controlled intellectually, because it is an
existential issue that, according to Bolger, must be overcome through volition. It is not
clear what Bolger means by the term "volition", but then he quotes a passage from an e-
mail from Wallace where the writer says:

It's not overcoming the in[d]ividual ego's terror of annihilation. It is
somehow cathecting enough other people and enough of the world that we
identify, less and less, with the individual ego – that we literally care more
about the universe than about our own flesh-sac and its needs. Cath[e]xis of
and identification with God yiel[d]s "immortality", since the part of us that
is or is-in God can clearl[y] not be a[n]nihilated the way the individual ego
can. […] Very, very hard to actually do, in my experience. Especially
because it's not intellectual but rather attitudinal, existential. (*Email from
Wallace: 22 October 2005*, in Bolger, "Pragmatic Spirituality" 45)

What Bolger refers to as "volition" is described as "attitudinal, existential" by Wallace.
There is something at the foundation of the individual's ability and necessity of the
individual to cathect the world and create a "meta-narrative" (to use Bolger's term) of
reality that is still not identified in its roots. Bolger defines the process of cathecting in
terms of spirituality, not as doctrinal or metaphysical religion, but rather as «[…] an
interpretive spirituality, a sort of "seeing-as" (following Wittgenstein)» (48).

Toon Staes reflects upon Wallace's use of narrative strategies in the creation of
an empathetic relation between the writer and the reader. Staes values the notion of the
implied author on a theoretical level but he also acknowledges the common tendency of
the reader to identify the author with the writer's persona (24), while suggesting that
empathy works on a basis of self-projection: «[…] since we attribute feelings to others

when we put ourselves in their shoes, is empathy but a projection of the self? Perhaps the novels that touch us most are novels that, in our reading of them, reflect our own state of mind. […] the special connection we feel with the novelists we love and praise exists only in our heads» ("Wallace and Empathy" 23). Staes takes Wallace's considerable use of gaps and fragmentation not as a postmodern device aimed at the deconstruction of representation, but as a call for active participation on the part of the reader. While passive reception is beheld to be detrimental to the individual's self, as *Infinite Jest* itself makes very clear, the reader's active engagement in filling in the gaps and personal elaboration of the inconsistencies proposed by the text generate a dialogic relation between the writer and the reader:

> Every reader who fills in the gaps in a text does so on the basis of her or his knowledge, preferences, and experiences [...]. Central to this process is the fairly common idea that narration involves communication, generally speaking, as a transfer of information. The narrator provides the plot elements, and the reader process them. *Infinite Jest* turns this assumption around, in that several crucial narrative events are deliberately left out. […] whereas most texts rely on the reader's inferences to flesh out the contours of the storyworld – the setting of a particular scene, say, or the context of a conversation – gaps take center stage in *Infinite Jest*. ("Wallace and Empathy" 29)

The pleasure of reading as such would result from the reader's opportunity to infer meaning thanks to self-projective dynamics that, in turn, would affect the reader's mind-reading ability (26). This is a self-transformative conception of fiction, where the reader is accounted for both a partial production of the meaning of the text and a self-development through the process of empathetic reading.

The most symptomatic example given by Staes to illustrate Wallace's dialogic strategies is the estranging presence of a wraith in *Infinite Jest*, a presence that may or may not connect the different threads in the novel according to the reader's interpretation and level of naturalization:[115]

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[115] Staes borrows the term "naturalization" from Jonathan Culler, and by it he means «the interpretive strategies readers use whenever they are confronted with inconsistencies and still try to restore a text's "communicative function"» ("Wallace and Empathy" 30).

[…] *Infinite Jest* distorts the humanistic concept of the narrator "who is like a person" because there seems to be no discrete narrative voice that dominates the novel. […] While *Infinite Jest* does have local narrators, attempts to understand or empathize with the novel's global narrative are ultimately centered around an absence in the text. The wraith is an especially problematic figure in this respect, since it acts out what most of the book's third-person narration covertly do by taking over another character's brain voice». ("Wallace and Empathy" 34)

What do we make of the wraith in *Infinite Jest*, a novel that, on some level, seems to deny all possibilities of spirituality and interiority? Does the late appearance of the wraith reverse the reader's expectation of materiality or does it stick to the vision of Gately suffering from hallucinations due to his physical conditions? Staes suggests that the wraith could possibly represent Wallace himself, the author as the consciousness permeating the characters' words, but he reaches no definite conclusion because this is one of the fundamental ambiguities upon which the novel is built, and ambiguities are what makes the text so susceptible to empathetic and dialogic reading (35). Accordingly, Wallace would voluntarily be playing with the illusion/delusion of the ghost of an author that may or may not exist, an author that according to the reader's inferring of meaning could more or less identify with the writer's person.

To draw conclusions about the many readings of *Infinite Jest* reported in this section of the chapter, I would like to bring to attention the multiplicity of interpretations proposed by all these scholars who often contradict each other at the very basis of their assumptions. Many of them acknowledge Wallace's exploration of the self, but they reject the existence of an autonomous self in favor of an open self in the process; some of them reject the idea of interiority tout court; others focus on the paradoxical nature of the self and on the role of the other in the delineation of that self. Yet, all of these arguments are supported by strong evidence drawn from *Infinite Jest*, a text that is not just open to interpretation but seems to push deliberately the readers towards conflicting but plausible directions without ever revealing an objective truth. In the last section of this chapter, I propose a Winnicottian reading of Wallace's treatment of the self and of the author's self by emphasizing the need to accept a paradox of interpretation.

3.4. "Mathematically uncontrolled but humanely *contained*"

After providing an overview of the previous studies on the emergence of a new self in *Infinite Jest*, I proceed to expose my reading of the main issues explored in the novel concerning self-distortion in relation to familial environment according to Winnicott's psychoanalytical theories. Here I try to analyze the Incandenzas both as individuals and as family members, and to explain how their ruinous interaction embodies prototypical relations of the contemporary self within American society as seen by Wallace. I also explore the author's effort to create a text that serves an opportunity for the reader's self to redefine its limits within aesthetic experience as intended by Winnicott.

Looking at the description of the Incandenza family members as analyzed in Chapter 3.2., the first consideration to explore is that the characters are affected by what Winnicott calls "unthinkable anxieties", and that they react with related psychotic defenses. A sense of *disintegration* is expressed in terms of solipsism, entrapment, and irreconciliability with society, and it is reinforced by the fragmentation of the narrative. A sense of *depersonalization* affects the characters relationship with their unbalanced bodies and the split between their physical and psychical dimensions. And finally, their sense of being empty inside as a consequence of «the feeling that the centre of gravity of consciousness transfers from the kernel to the shell, from the individual to the care, the technique» (Winnicott, "Anxiety Associated with Insecurity" 99).

At the basis of these three forms of "unthinkable anxieties," there is the dysfunctional relationship of the characters with the environment, which is represented in the novel by the Incandenza family but also with American society as depicted by Wallace. Avril, who according to Winnicott's theories would embody the first environment for the Incandenza children, is emotionally sterile, narcissistically absorbed by her own psychosis. She tries to compensate for her inability to empathize with her children by a compulsive and perfectionist use of language, as if through language by itself she could respond to her sons' needs. By overstating her supposed openness, Avril actually hides her emotional distortion behind a flawless use of language that is based on a strict adherence to grammar rules rather than any creative form of expression.

Jim, in turn, comes across as a deeply emotional father, one that withdrew into himself in order protect himself and his children. Jim is very much likely the precursor of his natural children' psychosis, as it is symbolized by his full name James Orin Incandenza (his natural sons' names are Orin Incandenza and Harold James Incandenza). Due to his withdrawal, Jim cannot communicate with his children, so he is forced to be mediated by Avril's emotionless mastery of language, ultimately finding himself in the position of being emotionally muted. Jim's best attempts to communicate with his children are rather materialized in the foundation of the tennis academy and in his cinematic career, two examples of creative activities (i.e. Winnicott's playing and cultural experience) through which he hopes he can help his children first to protect their selves and then, in the case of Hal, bring the self out. Unfortunately, Jim's cinematic attempt remains "unheard."

This parenting couple can be defined a *not good enough environment*, borrowing from Winnicott's terminology, for the Incandenza children. They are *not good enough* parents, not because they are responsible of self-evident abuse towards their sons, but because they cannot provide the emotional and empathetic environment that would protect the children from external impingement and allow them to develop a healthy sense of self in relation to society. This essential lack of parental support finally leads Hal and Orin to organize themselves into two extreme positions: Hal withdraws into himself and Orin performs a role out of compliance.

In the broad picture, Avril's mothering is entangled with the geo-political situation described in *Infinite Jest*.[116] The very Reconfiguration politics adopted by U.S. President Gentle remind the reader of Avril's hygienist anxiety, as they are based on obsessive personal hygiene projected into a program of waste disposal in the Great Concavity generating «[…] a surrounding environment so fertilely lush it's practically

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[116] Avril seems to have some unclear connection with separatist organizations from l'Islet county, Québec, where she originally comes from, she is suspected to have had a secret affair with the insurrectionist medical attaché M. DuPlessis (*Infinite Jest* 30), and she is known by Unspecified Services for her supposed practices of "political sex" (*Infinite Jest* 92). Avril's manipulating attitude characterizes her not only in the family context but also in the Reconfiguration of O.N.A.N., since the Chief of the Office of Unspecified Services and architect of Reconfiguration Rodney Tine is apparently in love with and manipulated by a certain Luria P. (Canadian, former lover of DuPlessis, sharing a suspect name resemblance with Avril by anagram). The overlapping of Avril and Luria P.'s character is finally denied by the fact that Luria P. entraps and tortures Orin, after having sex with him, but their analogous emotionless, manipulator role is symbolically confirmed by the fact that Orin tends to seduce women that remind him of his mother.

unlivable» (*Infinite Jest* 573).[117] The consequences of Gentle's hygienist project concern not only the Great Concavity but also the «[…] vulnerable psyche of an increasingly hygiene-conscious U.S.A. […]» (414), because the Reconfiguration is economically supported by corporations in exchange for invasive advertisment.[118] In this sense, I think, the geo-political setting depicted in *Infinite Jest* can be compared to a *not good enough* surrounding environment, one that, for the sake of self-interest, does not protect the individual self from the impingement of advertising.[119]

On Jim's side, there is rather a representation of the parental aspect of creative life, including the use of artistic language. The parental role of arts, that in Wallace's view is supposed to set values and limits for the individual's self to develop, fails in Jim's case because he is too absorbed in protecting himself from exploitation. Jim's embodies a kind of art that is too engaged in defense strategies to be creative in the Winnicottian sense, because it is too aware of external threats. And if one thinks of Jim as a symbol of arts, it is reasonable to assume that the Incandenza family's generational issues represent the transition from postmodernism to post-postmodernism that worried Wallace so much. Thus, postmodern self-reflexivity can be considered as a defense

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[117] A similar consideration about the emotional unbearability of excessive order is presented in "A Supposedly Fun Thing", where Wallace compares economically-motivated pampering and an obsession for order that reminds one of Avril: «[…] if pampering and radical kindness don't seem motivated by strong affection and thus don't somehow affirm one or help assure one that one is not, finally, a dork, of what final and significant value is all this indulgence and cleaning?» Wallace argues that this apparent unmotivated kindness generates a similar feeling to being a guest in the home of someone who cleans you things for you without asking anything in exchange: «For a while, with a host like this, it seems great, and you feel cared about and prized and affirmed and worthwhile, etc. But then after a while you begin to intuit that the host isn't acting out of regard or affection for you so much as simply going around obeying the imperatives of some personal neurosis having to do with domestic cleanliness and order…» (Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing" 299). Katherine Hayles sees both the political and the familial treatment of filth in *Infinite Jest* as an illusory tool for the subject to cling to the idea of autonomous self that is negated instead by the interconnectedness and recursive structure of the novel: [a] way to think about abjection is as an attempt to preserve the autonomy of the self in the face of an unavoidable confrontation with interconnection. Instead of acknowledging the coproduction that binds together the subject and the environment, the self clings to its precious autonomy and creates a liminal space in which the distinction between inside and outside, self and other, momentarily blurs. The interconnectedness created by recursive loops is at once recognized and obscured, brought into view and mystified» ("The Illusion of Autonomy" 686).

[118] Gentle's hygiene campaign makes the nation a perfect victim for new experiments on advertisement that eventually leads to the founding and organization of the old cable TV channels into InterLace TelEntertainment, the company producing teleputers and cartridges to which young generations are addicted in the novel. (*Infinite Jest* 410-418). Furthermore, in order to realize Gentle's Reconfiguration project, the U.S. government, under subtle "advice" from Luria P. passing through Tine, asks for economic help from corporations that, in exchange, request to sponsor North American calendar (438-442). At least this is how the whole business is envisioned by Hal Incandenza.

[119] Compare with Wallace's concept of television as creeping inside the audience's self explored in the introduction to this study.

strategy towards "unthinkable anxieties" such as ontological insecurity and fragmentation of reality exposed by poststructural theories.

In fact, in *Infinite Jest* there is a generalized sense of anxiety that affects all the characters. Being set in a *not good enough* surrounding environment, the novel depicts a broad spectrum of characters who react to "unthinkable anxieties" through defense strategies that mirror those very anxieties, identified by Winnicott in *disintegration*, *depersonalization*, *exploitation of primary narcissism* and *autistic states*. These behaviors are reactions not determined by an actual lack of self, but by the attempt to preserve a self that, in absence of *good enough* parental figures, is constantly impinged by the political-economical reality and the process of cultural deconstruction operated by postmodern arts.

Jim is both individual and environment in the novel, he himself suffers and perpetuates the consequences of contemporary American society depicted as a *not good enough environment*. The episode on Jim's father's lesson about the self and the body narratively sets the premises for Jim's anxieties and withdrawal that later are transmitted to E.T.A. depersonalizing policies. Jim's reaction to his father's consideration of him as a body results in *depersonalization* because, as already explained, according to Winnicott it is preferable for the individual to be self-objectified rather than objectified by the external world. Hence, Jim's fixation with the others' petrifying gaze, represented by his frequent use of Medusa characters in his movies, and his project to teach E.T.A. students to rely on their bodies in order to avoid their inner selves being petrified by the public gaze.

Jim's policies are based on defense strategies that ultimately cause a split between the self and the body. Conceived with the intention of preserving the students' selves from the Show, those policies actually encage the inner self, separate it from the outer world (*disintegration*), turn it inward (*exploitation of primary narcissism*) and prevent it from relating to others (*autistic states*). When Jim notices that his strategies to protect Hal from muteness are obtaining the opposite result, that he has being perpetuating in his son the same anxieties he is subject to, he comes up with the idea of *Infinite Jest*, the movie, that is supposed to invert Hal's process of withdrawal.

Jim's focus (and the novel's main focus, too) concerns Hal's self development, but, in order to understand Hal's psychic decline, one must compare him to his two brothers and their relationship with Avril. In fact, I think that the three brothers embody three different extreme positions of the individual in relation to the mother/environment.

Considering Winnicott's theoretical distinction between *true self* and *false self*, a distinction that never finds a total polarization in real persons but always implies a coexistence of the two elements in various degrees, I argue that, by creating Mario's character, Wallace experimented with a hypothesis personifying the theoretical *true self*. Mario is repeatedly defined as a true person who likes true people, meaning that he does not have defense strategies and that he sees the others' anxieties hidden behind their defense strategies. Mario does not feel anxieties because his physical issues protect him from the environment, so he does not need to establish defense strategies. His *true self* cannot be exploited because the others perceive him as empty inside, while he is actually the emotionally richer character in the novel. Mario's body preserves him from the others' expectations, especially Avril, who cannot project her own anxieties on him like she does with Hal and Orin.

In a way, Mario naturally incarnates Jim's unrealistic project to protect the self by shifting the attention to the body, to use the body as a shield for the *true self*. And, in fact, Mario is an unrealistic character, in the sense that he is the personification of a theoretical *true self* that could never survive in real life. Because, according to Winnicott, the *true self* always needs a certain degree of protection provided by the *false self* in order to survive. Mario cannot even stand by himself, he needs a special support that grotesquely makes him look like a human tripod: his character only works in the context of the novel, where he is idealized by his brother Hal who is in search of his own *true self* but cannot find it.

On the opposite extreme of the personification of Winnicott's theory about the split of the self there is Orin who embodies the *false self*. Orin assumes an attitude of compliance toward the environment in order to be liked by the others. He adapts to the expectations of others, by lying compulsively and shaping his character according to women's requests. His fixation with women, especially with mothers, symbolizes Orin's attempt to mend past maternal failures that he cannot confront directly because

he has shut Avril out of his life. While he tries to recover independence from his mother and agency over his life by manipulating women, Orin's way of living is actually determined by the need to be liked by his mother and those women. And, in fact, by the end of the novel, Orin is actually encaged by Luria P., the woman whose identity is enmeshed with Avril's character in the novel. Orin cannot "be" in a Winnicottian sense, because he lives reacting to the environment, and reacting is the opposite of being for Winnicott (hence, Orin's habit to refer to women as "Subjects").

Mario and Orin do not just stand for two opposite forms of distortion of the self, but also for two contrasting prototypes of author, thus bringing the considerations about the self and the author together. Together Mario and Orin symbolize Wallace's own preoccupation with his obsession for public recognition. On the one hand, Wallace would like to be the kind of author that is always true to himself, like Mario, eschewing irony and coolness and valuing sincerity and communicative straightness. But contrary to Hal's elevation of Mario to a model, Wallace is aware of the fact that that kind of author would not be able to stand on his own legs, like Mario himself, in the sense that straight communication of what one perceives as *true self* would not actually achieve its intent. Wallace acknowledges the postmodern environment in which the reader has grown and the defense strategies the reader has developed in that kind of environment, namely irony and cynicism.[120] Those strategies, intended to preserve both the author and the reader's selves, have trapped the *true self* behind the intellectual mask of an intellectual *false self*, but Wallace considers them unavoidable.[121] He tries, then, to find

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[120] In the notorious interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace admits: «What's poisonous about the cultural environment today is that it makes this so scary to try to carry out. Really good work probably comes out of a willingness to disclose yourself, open yourself up in spiritual and emotional ways that risk making you look banal or melodramatic or naïve or unhip or sappy, and to ask the reader really to feel something» (Wallace, "An Expanded Interview" 50). See also Wallace's interview with Ostap Karmodi: «[i]t may be that the only way in America to produce pure art would be to remove oneself from the public sphere and produce that art only as gifts, where there's no money involved and no attempt at publicity or publication involved. The problem is that if everyone does that, then there is no public arts here. So it all becomes really a paradox that I've spent a lot of the last years thinking about, and I don't have an answer» ("'A Frightening Time in America'" Web).

[121] Assuming Wallace's reversal of Bakhtin's liberating carnivalesque, Catherine Nichols, instead, thinks of Hal and Gately as heroes who avoid to wear Orin's mask of false openness by rejecting postmodern escapism from humanity that in *Infinite Jest* has become institutional: «[…] the transformation experienced by Hal and Don becomes one of moving through the alienation denied by their carnivalesque masks to begin expressing themselves as vocal "figurants" whose incoherent voices may eventually coalesce into an audible, collective human hum capable of restoring dialogue to a decidedly monologic culture. The metamorphoses of Hal Incandenza and Don Gately bring the artistic vision of *Infinite Jest* full circle through the self-consciously adopted masks of postmodern multiplicity and polyphony to arrive

a way to use them without being encaged by them, without being transformed by them into an Orin-like author, one whose voice and agency are only legitimated by the public he seeks to please.

This difficult, paradoxical condition of the author divided between his need to communicate his *true self* straightforwardly and to preserve himself behind the ironic and intellectual mask of his *false self* without being encaged by it is described as such by Wallace in the article "The Nature of the Fun":

> In the beginning, when you first start out trying to write fiction, the whole endeavor's about fun. You don't expect anybody else to read it. You're writing almost wholly to get yourself off. […] Then, if you have good luck and people seem to like what you do, […] you feel like you're writing for other people […]. You're no longer writing just to get yourself off, which – since any kind of masturbation is lonely and hollow – is probably good. But […] the motive of pure personal fun starts to get supplanted by the motive of being liked […]. Onanism gives way to attempted seduction, as a motive. Now, attempted seduction is hard work, and its fun is offset by a terrible fear of rejection. Whatever "ego" means, your ego has now gotten into the game […] You discover a tricky thing about fiction writing: a certain amount of vanity is necessary to be able to do it at all, but any vanity above that certain amount is lethal. […] At this point in the evolution of writerly fun, the very thing that's always motivated you to write is now also what's motivating you to feed your writing to the wastebasket. This is a paradox and a kind of double bind, and it can keep you stuck inside yourself for months or even years […]. The smart thing to say, I think, is that the way out of this bind is to work your way somehow back to your original motivation: fun. […] Because the fun you work back to has been transfigured by the unpleasantness of vanity and fear, an unpleasantness you're now so anxious to avoid that the fun you rediscover is a way fuller and more large-hearted kind of fun. It has something to do with Work as Play. […] Or with figuring out that not all paradoxes have to be paralyzing. (196-198)

It is worth quoting this passage at length because here Wallace exposes his personal experience of the process of becoming an author as a fight between the need to express himself without surrendering to the temptation to polarize into one of the two extremes embodied by Mario and Orin. Wallace depicts the condition of the author's self as

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at a view of contemporary human "reality" that is more fully grotesque than its instrumentalized counterparts» ("Dialogizing Postmodern Carnival" 15).

fighting to accept the paradox, Winnicott's *essential paradox*, of being both separated from the environment and yet partly determined by it. And he acknowledges the constant struggle of the self of redefining its position within this paradoxical assumption to be a kind of play, sounding very much like a Winnicottian play.[122]

Most of Wallace's interview to Lipsky, conducted at the time of *Infinite Jest* promotional tour in 1996, revolves around this topic and Wallace's own obsession with the expectations of others (public, publishing houses, competing writers…) is provided as an important factor in the author's personal crises following *The Broom of the System* and *Girl With Curious Hair* (a short stories collection published in 1989), when he was first interned into the McLean psychiatric institution.[123] And by the time he was deeply engaged in the writing of *Infinite Jest*, Wallace was trying to redefine his relationship with himself and with the readers. As he declares to McCaffery in 1993, «I'm and exhibitionist who wants to hide, but is unsuccessful at hiding; therefore, somehow I succeed» (Wallace, "Expanded Interview" 43). This game of hide and seek, as Winnicott calls it, characterizes Hal in *Infinite Jest*, the only one of the Incandenza brothers who undergoes a similar process to the one described by Wallace in works of nonfiction as those mentioned above. This is not to say that Hal the character stands for Wallace the author, but that Hal brings the burden of Wallace's exploration of the paradox of the self and of the author.

As already mentioned, Hal finds himself in a condition that shares features of both Mario and Orin's positions. Hal aspires to a sincere manifestation of his *true self*, drawing inspiration from his brother Mario, and he criticizes young Americans' anhedonic pose, but at the same time he denounces his own feeling of an inner void. Hal's paradoxical condition does not imply the actual absence of a self, but it is rather a

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[122] Mark Bresnan has written about the role of play in *Infinite Jest*, suggesting that Wallace substitutes the postmodern deconstructionist sense of play with Donna Haraway's "serious play", i.e. a liberating and playful sense of self contained by rules of the game which are respected and changed by the self, in turn ("The Work of Play in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*" 2008). I appreciate Bresnan's reading of a playful sense of self but I find that, by identifying it with A.A.'s serious engagement he binds the reader to an objective interpretation of the text that nullifies the paradoxical structure of the novel and limits the opportunities for interpretation.

[123] Referring to his first serious psychological crisis, Wallace declared: «I think the I'll-show-people, or, People-are-really-gonna-like-this – thinking that way has hurt me so bad. That, um, that when I'm thinkin' that way, I'm not writing. […] Whereas my experience has been, I think in certain ways I'm just emotionally kinda delicate, and it's just *devastating* to me to think that way. And I'm willing to do enormous work – and enormous emotional and psychological gymnastics – to avoid thinking that way» (Lipsky, *Although of Course* 34-35).

consequence of his relationship with the mother/environment. Hal's attitude of compliance towards the others, and especially towards Avril, has already been noted, in its especially performative use of language. Hal's ostensible lack of self is rather explainable in terms of *false self*, like in Orin's case, but there is a fundamental difference between the two brothers' behavior that is important to acknowledge. While Orin reacts to his split of the self by relying completely on his *false self*, ending up identifying with his seduction strategies that will eventually lead to his own entrapment and torture, Hal is torn between his *true self* and his *false self*. This is something that, observed from a Winnicottian perspective, may leave hope for the boy's development.

Provided that the opening scene of *Infinite Jest*, where Hal appears encaged inside himself and totally unable to communicate to the people surrounding him, is actually the last scene of the novel in chronological order and the fact that the text does not conclude the episode, the reader is left with a doubt about what is really happening to Hal and whether the boy is going to recover or not. My purpose here is not to resolve that doubt, but to suggest that there may be at least two possible interpretations of Hal's crisis that intersect with the novel's lack of conclusion.

Following Winnicott's theories, it is possible to posit Hal's sense of inner void as the consequence of his overdeveloped *false self* and his muteness as an attempt to recover a sense of self and of reality. In fact, Hal's use of language is based on an intellectual effort to compensate for Avril's inability to empathize emotionally with her children and her cerebral and technical approach to their needs. The relationship between Hal and Avril is characterized by the mother's incapacity to mirror her child's *true self*, given her narcissism and her tendency to project her needs into her sons. According to Winnicott, the mother's inability to reflect the child's spontaneous gestures provokes the split of the self into *true self* and *false self*, the latter of which is often identified with the mind. This seems to illustrate exactly what happens to Hal, a boy who relies mainly on his intellectual abilities and prodigious use of language in order to respond to his mother's needs, while he internally feels empty because his intellectual abilities nurture his *false self* at expenses of his *true self*.

From a Winnicottian point of view, Hal's split of the self explains the boy's need for secrecy and his unsatisfactory communication despite of his mastery use of

language. In fact, the environmental setting that generates the split of the self simultaneously causes a split in the perception of reality that cannot be cathected by the subject because a gradual process from *illusion* to *disillusion* has not been granted, thus forcing the subject to split reality into subjective objects and objective objects. In Hal's case, this split of the self and of reality brings him to fight to preserve his *true self* from external exploitations by use of non-communication, which is only partial for the majority of the novel but intensifies as time goes by until it results in complete muteness in the end of Hal's evolution (the opening scene).[124]

As I see it, Hal's need for secrecy is an unconscious effort to preserve his own *true self* while his *false self* plays the role of "delivering the goods" to his mother, to the grief therapist, and to the others in general. But from the moment when his secrets start to crumble (after the Eschaton game, when Hal realizes that he will be forced to have urine tests and Avril to accept the evidence of her son smoking pot), Hal must confront a renovated anxiety of having his *true self* being found by his mother and the environment, and thus he starts withdrawing into himself and gradually ceases to communicate, while the novel's narration intensifies Hal's inner perspective.

As explained in the first chapter on Winnicott, non-communication is a way to preserve the *true self* from being found, and there are different kinds of non-communication that can be temporary or stable in time, healthy or psychotic. There can be states of active or reactive non-communication, where the individual suspends explicit communication (with objective reality) and engages in implicit communication (with subjective reality) in order to recover a sense of self and of reality. This seems to be Hal's case, at a moment in which Hal's appears increasingly absorbed by subjective reality, communicating with himself through the extensive narrative space dedicated to

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[124] Even before getting to the mute phase of Hal's withdrawal, the ironic use of language in *Infinite Jest* may be seen not as a tool to eschew the inner self but rather to protect it. Timmer comments upon the use of irony as follows: «Irony in any case can give the illusion that something else is meant, something 'more', even when speaker and listener both have no idea what this something would actually be. In *Infinite Jest*, at least, the irony of speakers often works this way. Irony implies something 'more' than what is said, but this 'something more' does never have to be articulated. These ironic interactions, then, become more like a performance wherein every player is careful not to draw the curtains for fear of having to face a reality that lurks beyond, the reality that there may be nothing 'more'» (Timmer, *Do You Feel It Too?* 149).

him, but less and less able to express his thoughts and feeling both linguistically and physically.[125]

The problem is that, given the suspended episode narrated in the opening scene, the reader does not know whether Hal is going to recover from his muted condition or not. Hal's case of muteness could be intended both as an irreversible withdrawing into himself, that is, a case of reactive non-communication as explained by Winnicott, or a temporal breakdown necessary in order to redefine the boundaries of his own self, also called active non-communication in Winnicottian terms. The novel purposely leaves the question open to the reader's interpretation, giving way to the long flashbacks that make up *Infinite Jest*. I think that the fact that Hal, like all the students at E.T.A., is a teenager instills hope about the future of the boy and of the young American generation he represents. In fact, according to Winnicott, adolescence is a fundamental stage in the life of an individual where the boundaries of the self are very pliable. This, of course, could be a note of further danger for students at E.T.A. in the hands of the distorted academy environment, but it could also represent an opportunity to redefine a stronger sense of self under better conditions.

Infinite Jest provides the reader with Hal's past history, but does not hint at the boy's future. With a reversal in the narrative chronology but in some way similarly to *The Broom of the System*, the novel ends (or rather, begins in this case) with the protagonist (or one of them) leaving the familial environment and the city where the novel is set. The open ending of the story allows both the protagonist to escape the environmental dynamics to seek out new experiences and the reader to make predictions about the future of the character. The open and complex structure of *Infinite Jest* makes the set of possibilities even more "mathematically uncontrolled but humanely *contained*" than was the case with *The Broom of the System*, where, as already noted, a stronger sense of authorial control was granted by the predictability of most of the events and of the very ending (the final word "word"). On the contrary, Hal's future is

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[125] In *A Reader's Companion to* Infinite Jest, William Dowling and Robert Bell point out the constructive function of nervous breakdowns in the novel, with particular regard to Hal's opening scene: «The notion of a "nervous breakdown" is in a way reassuring. […] It's the possibility that we live inside a social reality – the world of SUV's and TV sitcoms and satellite pornography and endless bombardment by brand-name advertising – that is itself psychotic, in which case getting "out of touch" with one's reality wouldn't be insane at all» (13-14). See also Timmer, who suggests that the shift in narration from third-person to first-person point of view might indicate Hal's re-appropriation of feelings after he quite drugs (*Do You Feel It Too?* 156-157).

not predictable in any way: he might be "*for ever silent*", engaged in reactive communication with himself, or he could go through a temporary phase of active non-communication bound for the recovery of a stronger sense of self. It is especially in this gap in the narration that the aesthetic experience of *Infinite Jest* provides a *potential space* of *transitional phenomena*, with dramatic differences between the intradiegetic instance of the movie and the extradiegetic case of the novel.

Hal's character must not be intended as a mimetic representation of a specific self, let alone of the author's self. Hal is rather a part of a broader reflection upon the processes of development of the self that includes all the members of his family. Hal and his family serve as a hypothesis about the dynamics of a society that must deal with such issues as the split of the self, the development of a *false self* and other defense strategies for the self to survive in a *not good enough environment*. Hence, I argue that a univocal solution to the problems of the self in contemporary America must not be sought in Hal's story and relationships with his family, because this would mean controlling the reader's interpretation on the author's part. From the very beginning of the novel, Hal is virtually out of the story and of the environment, and the reader is left to confront the developmental processes that lead to the conclusion of Hal's withdrawal.[126] Thus, what is "at stake" in *Infinite Jest* is not Hal's destiny but the reader's participation in those developmental processes created by an author who is playing "a game of hide and seek."

Conversely to Wallace's open ending, Jim's last movie tries to provide the public with a solution that consists in the mother/environment's confession of guilt. The fact that the woman played by Joelle (read Avril) in the movie confesses her guilt to a spectator/infant through a mindful understanding of her mistake does not help the spectator's self to develop. On the contrary, that confession symbolizes the fundamentally narcissistic environment that cannot mirror back the individual's

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[126] See Dowling and Bell on the role of the circular structure of the novel in making the reader's identify with Hal's story: «[…] the story comes full circle and we end where we began. By the time that happens, though, every character in this teeming story will have undergone important changes, and we ourselves will have learned to see our own society in radically different terms. In that transformation lies *Infinite Jest*'s hope of redemption in a world in which we, like Hal in the opening episode, have been locked away within the private world of our isolated consciousness with no awareness that our isolation is tragic» (*A Reader's Companion* 18).

emotional needs, within a distorted relation exacerbated by a kind of art that is quintessentially unable to provide any emotional support.

Nonetheless, there are some aspects of Jim's cinematic production that are in line with Wallace's agenda. Both the authors seek to give voice to all the characters following a project that in the novel is defined "anticonfluential", that is a non-hierarchical system of characters that does not impose or suggest a univocal interpretation. In the novel, events are narrated from the perspective of different characters but there are no privileged points of view, not even when the text creates the illusion of revealing a truth by means of alternative voices.[127] If the reader, like Steeply, recurs to *Infinite Jest* hoping to find a kind of "samizdat", i.e. «[…] any sort of politically underground or beyond-the-pale press […]» (*Infinite Jest* 110n. 1011) he is going to be disappointed: «[t]here's no real samizdat in the U.S. per se, First Amendement-wise, I don't think. I suppose ultra-radical Québecois and Albertan stuff could be considered O.N.A.N.ite samizdat» says Hal, rejecting the idea of his father's cartridge being relevant to Steeply's research.

The interpretation of facts in *Infinite Jest*, the novel, is built between the author and the reader's consciousness in the sense that both of them are required to engage in a creative act.[128] Following Winnicott's theories, by creative act I mean the creation and interpretation of a text that works as an *intermediate area of experience* where the boundaries of illusion and reality are blurred, providing both the author and the reader with the opportunity to renegotiate their subjective sense of self in relation to the

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[127] Beatrice Pire and Pierre-Louis Patoine invite to a playful reading that responds to *Infinite Jest* non-hierarchical structure: «In the great tradition of Baroque art, Wallace creates dynamism and play that precludes any fixed and pre-ordained interpretation but rather offers multiple positions and infinite suggestive possibilities. […] Open is also Wallace's refusal of a privileged and frontal view, of a single and unequivocal line that would make the work ordered and hierarchical. […] The reader as (significant) other is here called upon to play with Wallace's text but also to experience forms of alienation typical of contemporary existence» ("Reading David Foster Wallace" 3).

[128] Jamie Redgate alludes to the playful aspect of writing, in addition to creative reading as hypothesized by Barthes, by reconciling the role of the author's consciousness with a bodily and nonconscious dimension: «For Barthes, the work is static, but the Text […] comes to life through the play of the reader […]. Wallace inverts Barthes's model. For Wallace, the Work itself […] is what's fun. If there was no "play" at this point in the process, if it was all about the play of the reader, then we would have nothing to read. A consequence of this embodied metaphor is that the author's consciousness, their 'I,' plays a somewhat insignificant role in the creative process. The 'I' […] is a stranger to itself, filling a human form that has its own desires and processes. If someone creates something then, is it the 'I' or the 'Me' who made it? […] The 'Author' is still dead in this sense because the 'I' is not in charge of what the author makes. Wallace cannot be an authority on his own work, because consciousness itself is not authoritative» (*Wallace and I* 60).

objective environment.[129] In this sense, the introduction of a ghost in a novel that generally sounds rather skeptical and cynically realistic, contributes to the destabilization of the reader's relationship with the objective text and forces him to a subjective reading of an event that, per se, does not seem to fit with the rest of the text. The wraith in the novel requires a suspension of disbelief that postmodern literature neutralizes by continuously unmasking the fictional status of the text, while here Wallace demands a level of empathy and identification that is necessary for Winnicottian *illusion* to happen. Besides, the fact that Jim's wraith seems to partially coincide with *Infinite Jest*'s author's consciousness exacerbates that blurring between fiction and reality that is never completely resolved.[130]

I believe that Wallace, like Jim, plays with the critical reception of his work by anticipating cerebral and skeptical readings of the novel. In this sense, Wallace's *Infinite Jest* resembles Jim's *Found Drama*, a joke at the expense of the critics that celebrated the movie a priori as the ultimate expression of avant-garde Neorealism, while the movie did not exist at all: «[t]he joke's theory was there's no audience and no director and no stage or set because, The Mad Stork[131] and his cronies argued, in Reality there are none of this things. And the protagonist doesn't know he's the protagonist in a Found Drama because in Reality nobody thinks they're in any sort of Drama» (*Infinite Jest* 145n. 1028).

In Jim's *Found Drama* the line between fiction and reality is totally blurred, and the joke consists in challenging the critics' intellectual efforts to reduce art to an objective, analyzable product in terms of theory while the actual human charge of Jim's

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[129] Peter Rudnytsky synthetically explains this function of art confronted with environmental care: «At first the mother […] must endow her infant with the capacity for illusion by making her love […] available on demand, but she must then also accustom the infant to disillusionment by gradual failure of empathy. Art provides a lifelong refuge to which we can turn as we negotiate our precarious oscillations between illusion and reality» (xiii).

[130] Jamie Redgate argues that Jim's wraith does not coincide with the embodied author (the "Me") but rather with a conscious soul (the "I") that is different from the mind which, being based on the brain, is still part of the body: «Wallace's ghost is the "enemy" of the "mind," therefore, because the ghost is immaterial while the mind is not. The mind, as Wallace knew, is itself embodied, and therefore not part of the soul, the self, the conscious I that we think of as ourselves. By framing the conscious 'I' as a "SOUL/GHOST," Wallace elevates the very small part of the mind that is conscious out of the body altogether. Though this is a Cartesian metaphor that prioritises conscious experience, the metaphor is still rooted in the posthuman understanding of the body and the mind, because the "soul" here does not refer to the mind in its entirety but rather to the small part of the mind's activities that are conscious. Because we now understand that most of what the brain does is unconscious, the Cartesian soul is much smaller than it used to be. But, for Wallace, it is still *in* there» (*Wallace and I* 91).

[131] The Mad Stork is another nickname for Jim Incandenza.

project escapes classification and reduction to objectivity. This is, I believe, Wallace's ultimate strategy to overcome postmodern lack of self in *Infinite Jest*: creating something human that escapes intellectual objectification by means of theory and scientific analysis.[132] What is at stake in *Infinite Jest* is and is not there: like Jim's wraith, the human self is not objectively perceivable, it rather requires a reader's playful act in order to cathect the objective text with personal meaning.[133] And in this creative act limited by the boundaries set by the author's articulation, the reader himself engages in a kind of experience constituting an instance of *transitional phenomena* that may help the reader to redefine the walls of his own self.

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[132] Nick Levey also supports a similar vision about the danger for the critics of getting stuck with intellectual lucubration, but I find that his conclusions are not very convincing: «Infinite Jest frequently invokes a logic of what we might call epistemological equivocation. […] If we read the novel attempting to harmonise [its] elements, interrogating the reliability of the given textual evidence, we will be sorely disappointed, if not doomed to […] "analysis paralysis" […] If we consider what it might mean to view the book as a "Failed Entertainment," and consider what it is we love to do when reading suspiciously, we can then see that it is perhaps intended to steer us away from trying to decode it […]. But what are we offered instead of these pleasures of suspicious reading? Perhaps, […] the novel wants us to learn to listen what is already in front of us […]» ("'Analysis Paralysis'" Web).

[133] In Wallace's words: «There are ways to [play] with the reader that are benign, and a certain amount of [playing] with the reader seems to be extremely useful» ("The 'Infinite Story' Cult Hero" 78).

Conclusions
"My Best Thinking Got Me Here"

I have jokingly chosen to conclude my thesis with this motto taken from *Infinite Jest*, «My Best Thinking Got Me Here» (135n. 1026), an admission of the limitedness of intellectual practices which is in line with both the philosophy of the novel and the approach of my work. My purpose is obviously neither to deny the importance of scientific research in the field of Wallace studies, nor to frustrate the possibilities of reaching any reasonable conclusions about David Foster Wallace's novels. Nonetheless, I have proposed a psychoanalytical model of interpretation that is founded on both perception of objective reality and cathexis of subjective reality, thus implying what Winnicott would call *transitional phenomena* that I hope respond, at least partially, to Wallace's vision of literature about human beings.

I have introduced my study with a general overview of Wallace's declarations of intents. Then, I have divided my thesis into three chapters where, after explaining Winnicott's main psychoanalytic theories, I have analyzed Wallace's first two novels (*The Broom of the System* and *Infinite Jest*) in order to discuss how those theories may have contributed to the actualization of Wallace's intents in fictional texts.

In the introduction I mention Wallace's nonfictional texts that have been considered as a sort of declaration of intent on his part, where he acknowledges the original relevance of postmodern irony and self-reflexivity in the subversion of established patterns while he simultaneously denounces the canonization of such tools. I refer to Wallace's controversial relationship with postmodern literature and his statement against its infinite deferral of selfhood and meaning. I focus on Wallace's concern surrounding the influence of such postmodern practices on the human self and his call for a new kind of literature that redefines the relation between the author and the reader's consciousnesses. I include a brief overview of the state of art concerning the re-emergence of the self as a distinctive trait of Wallace's preoccupation with postmodern deconstruction and I propose my original approach to an author that made of paradoxes of the self one of his main features.

My reading of the re-emergence of the self in Wallace's first two novels is based on the concept of *transitional phenomena* proposed by the psychoanalyst Donald W. Winnicott. In the first chapter I summarize Winnicott's main theories about the development of the self, possible distortions in the maturational process, and the redefinition of the boundaries of the self through creative experiences. I introduce Winnicott's concept of *essential paradox*, that is the founding condition of the self as being both separated yet interrelated to the surrounding environment. I explain the relevance of the surrounding environment for the self to develop in a gradual transition from *illusion of omnipotence* (i.e. subjective creation) to *disillusion* (i.e. objective perception). Then, I take into account the possible split of the individual psyche into *true self* and *false self* in case of a *not good enough environment* and failures in the transition from *illusion* to *disillusion*. I talk about the frequent consequences of this split of the self, the delusional split between body and psyche, with subsequent identification of the *false self* with the mind. Finally, I point out the significance of not-communicating both in cases of psychosis and in healthy cases of *unintegration*, such as *transitional phenomena*. I draw from Winnicott's vision of creative experiences as *transitional phenomena* where the *illusion of omnipotence* is re-lived by the individual by blurring the boundaries between objective perception and subjective creation.

In the second chapter I apply some of those theories to Wallace's *The Broom of the System*. I explore the author's preoccupation with the split of the self and its subsequent feelings of inner void and outer manipulation. I mainly take into account the relation between Lenore Beadsman and her family as an example of relationship between individual and surrounding environment. First, I give a brief summary of the main events and state of things concerning the family in order to show the processes that lead Lenore to feel like a two-dimensional character rather than a person with an inner dimension. Then, I examine the characters' split of the self, their distorted relationship with the body, and their reliance on intellectual abilities in order to demonstrate their compatibility with Winnicott's model of *true self* and *false self*. Finally, I argue that Lenore's feeling of being empty inside is not a case of lack of self but rather a case of overdeveloped *false self* that is redefined throughout the novel. In fact, I take the chaotic set of events triggered by Lenore's grandmother's disappearance as a pretest for *unintegration*, a process in Lenore's life where she gets the opportunity

to redefine the boundaries of her own self. I also propose a reading of the novel as a first attempt of *intermediate area of experiencing* that engages the reader in an instance of *transitional phenomena* through the author's creation of a chaotic and unresolved plot that can be subjectively cathected by the reader.

In the third and final chapter, I analyze *Infinite Jest* by focusing again on the dynamics concerning the main family of the novel, as I do with *The Broom of the System* in the previous chapter. I highlight the fact that the psychological insight on the members of the family is broadened and further explored by *Infinite Jest*'s narration, but that many issues characterizing the Incandenzas are a continuation of the same preoccupations already approached in *The Broom of the System*. Such issues concerned again are the characters' split of the self and the identification of the *false self* with the mind, with a particular emphasis on Hal Incandenza's sense of inner void that seems to deny the possibility of re-emergence of the self. Thus, I examine the controversial delineation of the members of the family and connect it to the polyphony of the novel in order to demonstrate the unreliability of narrations. This unreliability can be explained both in terms of falsehood and compliance, as in Orin's case, and of Winnicottian right not to communicate, as in the case of Hal. This interpretation brings me to take Hal's muteness and the narration's unreliability as tools that serve to preserve those inner self and essential meaning that they seem to deny. Finally, I argue that the novel's silence about Hal's future development is the ultimate instance of non-communicating that confirms the novel as a *potential space* where narrative openness and unreliability provide the reader with an objective text to cathect with personal meaning.

From *The Broom of the System* to *Infinite Jest* it is possible to detect a development in Wallace's treatment of the self and in his vision of authorship. As already said, the two novels share a similar approach to the symptoms of emotional distortions, but while *The Broom of the System* is characterized by the avoidance of coming across as a self and as an author, with *Infinite Jest* Wallace seems to have come to terms with the fact that the *true self* needs to be healthily protected by "unthinkable anxieties" and impingements from the environment.

Wallace's maturation is mainly evident in the structure of his second novel: although *Infinite Jest* is maniacally organized and controlled in every single aspect of

the text, it is ultimately much more open to interpretation than *The Broom of the System*. The overabundance of information skillfully provided by *Infinite Jest* does not impose the author's self on the text, but it rather results in further space for the reader's interpretation thanks to the characters' hiddenness and unreliability. In a way, Wallace's way of (not-)communicating through *Infinite Jest* is similar to Hal's use of language: they both seek to please the public and preserve the self from the public expectations. In this paradoxical condition, literature as *transitional phenomena* represents a kind of intermediate form of communication that, by combining explicit (i.e. language) and implicit (i.e. silence) ways of communicating, seeks to express the author's self without exploiting it. And then, of course, in order for the text to work as *transitional phenomena* for the reader, an act of creativity is required on the reader's side.[134]

In this study I have approached the matter of authorship as an extension of the re-emergence of the individual self in relation to the environment. Hence, I have only taken into account Wallace's first two novels because they are the best instances of Wallace's representation of the relationship between the individual and the family. Nonetheless, I think that, starting from the analysis of the family as original environmental nucleus, this reflection conducted on the self could be further developed into a transversal exploration of the matter of authorship embraced across Wallace's fiction. In fact, the association between mind and *false self*, with the subsequent feeling of inner void, was always present in Wallace's production, originating in his first published short story in 1984, "The Planet Trillaphon As It Stands In Relation To The Bad Thing", to his posthumous novel of 2011, *The Pale King*, and I think that Wallace's preoccupation with the self was gradually entangled with and organized into reflections about the expression of the author's self and the relation between the author and the reader.

"Planet Trillaphon" already narrated the story of a likely autobiographical "troubled little soldier" who «[…] had plenty of time to do well in classes and have

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[134] There is also the eventuality of readers who might perceive Wallace's obsessive organization of the text as a cold exercise of the mind, as in the case of Michiko Kakutani who commented *Infinite Jest* by arguing that «[…] the whole novel often seems like an excuse for Mr. Wallace to simply show off his remarkable skills as a writer and empty the contents of his restless mind» ("A Country Dying of Laughter" Web). This is quite a minority opinion about *Infinite Jest*, but it is there, and I think it is one of the possible readings of the novel according to one's own ability to engage more or less creatively with the text.

people say "Outstanding" and still be neurotic and weird as hell» ("Planet Trillaphon" 28). Wallace was very young when he wrote "Planet Trillaphon" but he was already confronting what would later proved to be the severe clinic depression that ultimately brought him to commit suicide in 2008. While writing this short story Wallace still did not have a clear project about what kind of author he wanted to be, and the matter of authorship was still not a component of his fiction. Nonetheless, "Planet Trillaphon" already introduces a preoccupation with the incongruence between career success and personal frustration that in "Good Old Neon" (*Oblivion*, 2004) Wallace would describe as the feeling of being a fraud.

With 1989 short story collection *Girl With Curious Hair*, Wallace started reflecting upon his condition as an author, especially in relation to his postmodern predecessors. The short story "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" explicitly treats Wallace's paradoxical position between postmodernism and something new that inherited but also criticized postmodern artistic devices. It is in *Girl With Curios Hair* and particularly in "Westward" that the association between "cleveritis" and falsehood becomes one of Wallace's main concerns, that "Look-Mom-no-hands quality" (234) that would be a constant siren call and thorn in his side. And it is in "Westward" that the reader encounters the possibility that hiding the self can be considered a tool to actually preserve it: «[…] there's way less self-hatred than selflessness being performatively rendered here. Selflessness is, of course, horror embodied; but the argument here is that it keeps safe in its ghastly center the green kernel that is the true self» (368).

With *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999) the paradoxes of the self become more and more insisting and significantly linked with Wallace's obsessive lucubration about the way he came across as an author. Existential doubts become ordinary conditions eventually leading to psychosis and suicide, within the awareness that mental understanding of one's own condition is not enough to overcome emotional distortions («[o]n a rational, intellectual, "head" level, the depressed person was completely aware of all [her] realities and compensations, she told the therapist, and so of course felt that she (i.e., the depressed person) had no rational reason or excuse for feeling the vain, needy, childish feelings […] she felt», 47), and that defense mechanisms are simultaneously hateful and necessary («[…] the toxic vestigial defenses

could […] deny the depressed adult access to her own precious inner resources and tools for both reaching out for support and for being gentle and compassionate and affirming with herself, and that thus, paradoxically, arrested defense-mechanism helped contribute to the vary pain and sadness they had originally been erected to forestall», 54).

Brief Interviews with Hideous Men is a book about violation of the self and the possibility to either react by «[…] think[ing] of yourself not as you or even as a person but just a thing, […] split[ting] yourself off and like float up to the ceiling and […] looking down at this thing […] that is you and it doesn't mean anything[…]» (103), or by playing, where «[t]he […] *play* is […] the giving up of power to another, but the […] *contract* […] ensures that all abdications of power are freely chosen. In other words, an assertion that one is secure enough in one's concept of one's own personal power to ritualistically give up that power to another person […]» (90). And in *Brief Interviews*, these and other issues of the self are connected to the author's paradoxical condition explicitly described in "Pop Quiz 9", where the author engages in a play where he ultimately give up the power to the reader: «So decide» (136).

Finally, I want to mention *Oblivion: Stories* (2004) and *The Pale King* (2011, posthumous) where Wallace includes characters named David Wallace and purposely blurs the boundaries between himself as real person and a fictitious character, confirming his engagement in a game of hide-and-seek with the reader, where he seems to strive for recognition and simultaneously preserves his inner self from public expectations. In "The Suffering Channel" in particular there is this sense of art as «[…] the conflict between […] extreme personal shyness and need for privacy on the one hand versus […] involuntary need to express what lay inside [oneself] through some type of personal expression of art» (*Oblivion* 271), and the idea that artistic products, so embarrassing as pieces of shit that are fine when they are inside of a person and yet disgusting when they are expelled, engage the public selves in the re-elaboration of personal boundaries: «The interns ended up hashing out what came to be called the miraculous poo story in some detail, and the discussion was lively and far ranging, with passions aroused and a good deal of personal background information laid on the table, some of which would alter various power constellations in subtle ways […] (*Oblivion* 262).

With this little roundup and the extended invitation to continue playing Wallace's infinite game of hide and seek, I conclude my thesis, regretting the many things left unresolved, but consoled by the fact that those things are Wallace's very joke on us, the readers.

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