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Identifying Stasis In
David Foster Wallace's
Infinite Jest

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INTRODUCTION

THE PARALYSIS OF INFINITE CHOICES

According to the general consensus, *Infinite Jest* lies at the core of a literary movement intended to react against Postmodernism and the self-reflexivity of the fictional works it inspired. Despite its length, Wallace's novel attracted a large cult following shortly after its publication in 1996. It soon became the symbol of a new way of conceiving literature, and was acknowledged as a masterful effort at coming to terms with the chaos of Postmodernism through an earnest involvement with the concrete and dramatic cultural issues facing contemporary society. Wallace's commitment to an ethical and politically-aware type of fiction has been recognized by the critical establishment to such an extent that it has now become a cliché.

Wallace's ideas concerning literature are strongly connected to his criticism of contemporary society, addressed in all its specific shades and details, denounced and unveiled and stubbornly dissected in order to fully reveal its problems. Wallace's investigation of the issues at stake is closely associated with an effort to analyse philosophical concepts such as the self and individual freedom. His critique stems from the awareness that Postmodernism is no longer apt to describe contemporary society, having become similar to an old fashioned and superficial term that lost its predominance. As Linda Hutcheon says: "Postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts the very concepts it challenges" (3-4).

Due to the powerful impact of his 1996 masterpiece, the number of critics mentioning Wallace as belonging to a new literary generation grew enthusiastically. If it is true that "Infinite Jest depicts the state of the postmodern self in the American society of the 1990s" (Hirt, 4), we shall not adhere completely to the idea that Wallace's work, both fictional and non-fictional, was merely the critical enactment of such a condition. In fact, his ambition was more a serious and updated reconsideration of postmodernism than a complete departure from its limited precepts and norms.

Matei Calinescu's description of postmodern era is crucial in the way it casts light upon the very force at the heart of the cultural and social movement of Wallace's generation: "(it is) a cult of instant joy, fun morality, and the generalized confusion between self-realization and simple self-gratification" (Calinescu, 7).

As for any artistic movement, the end of Postmodernism began in the very same day in which it

became socially acceptable and integrated in ordinary culture as it lost its subversive force, its innovative and critical drive.

Postmodernism has systematically debunked and playfully deconstructed traditional ethics and cultural values, leaving the contemporary individual lost in an ethical vacuum and bombarded by a myriad of possible choices; the only viable codes of behaviour or belief systems appear to be the ones that TV and mass media aim to promote and diffuse.

Narcissism and desire for immediate pleasure are two of the most obvious symptoms of such situation. In order to achieve personal satisfaction, media and TV actively contribute to the creation of a fictitious reality in which death itself is denied as well as anything that may remotely refer to it:

In most other countries, if you hurt, if you have a symptom that's causing you to suffer, they view this as basically healthy and natural, a sign that your nervous system knows something's wrong. (...) But if you just look at the number of ways that we try like hell to alleviate mere symptoms in this country – from fast-fast-fast relief antacids to the popularity of lighthearted musicals during the Depression – you can see an almost compulsive tendency to regard pain itself as the problem. And so pleasure becomes a value, a teleological end in itself (McCaffery, 23).

We have seen that man's desire for immediate pleasure and gratification originates from Modernism's rebellion against the old, traditional values and certainties of Western culture, and Postmodernism's subsequent action. But such an immense hunger for pleasure, if left unfulfilled, cannot but result in a feeling of deprivation and despair. Contemporary society is plagued by a series of issues ranging from passivity, to materialism, to existential emptiness, to non-communication, to cynicism, whose effects produce a condition of stasis that inhibits the individual and prevents him from having a decisive impact in the world he lives in. Placed in a world characterized by an “authority vacuum”, the self is lost in the “funhouse” of an artificial reality dominated by mass media and television, hideous entities that cunningly employ postmodern techniques in order to question the traditional authorities of the past and enact the same “illusion of autonomy” that Soren Kierkegaard, one of the main influences of Wallace's thought, argued would lead to despair and annihilation. Contemporary society no longer provides its citizens with a coherent teleology, but insists on inculcating a hedonist desire for pleasure that inevitably leads to paralysis. The humanist self of Enlightenment, who is responsible only to its free will, has been replaced by the postmodern self, who is free from any responsibility. This is what leads to paralysis in the first place. According to Wallace, there are “no sources of insight on comparative worth, no guides to why and how to choose among experiences, fantasies, beliefs, and predilections” (Wallace, *Fun Thing*, 76). He continues: “when all experience can be deconstructed

and reconfigured, there become simply too many choices. And in the absence of any credible, noncommercial guides for living, the freedom to choose is about as "liberating" as a bad acid trip" (Wallace, 79).

In "The Paradox of Choice", Barry Schwartz poses a fundamental question that has been fueling the contemporary debate on freedom of choice since the publication of the essay in 2004. His assumptions are telling, for they lead to theoretical consequences that I intend to address as the pillars from which to start with an in-depth analysis of the notion of stasis. The main theme of Schwarz's study relies on the belief that more choice on the market is detrimental for the individual's welfare. Maximizing welfare means maximizing freedom. Maximizing freedom means maximizing choice. More choice means more freedom. More freedom means more welfare. It is on the basis of such a circular assertion that Schwartz aims to demonstrate the opposite: having too many things to choose from can lead the consumer to feel bewildered and paralyzed when facing the choice, paranoid and remorseful about all the choices he could have made and was forced to discard. As a result, the individual feels less satisfied after taking a decision. Paralysis is to be considered as the consequence of too many choices. The more options you have, the easier is to regret the decision you have made. When you decide to commit yourself to one thing, there are several other things that you wish you could have done instead. Consequently, the more options you have, the more difficult it is for you to decide which one to choose instead of the others. This consideration shares common ground with Sheena Iyengar's TEDTalk titled "The Art of Choosing": "

When someone can't see how one choice is unlike another, or when there are too many choices to compare and contrast, the process of choosing can be confusing and frustrating. Instead of making better choices, we become overwhelmed by choice, sometimes even afraid of it. Choice no longer offers opportunities, but imposes constraints. It's not a marker of liberation, but of suffocation by meaningless minutia. In other words, choice can develop into the very opposite of everything it represents in America, when it is thrust up on those who are insufficiently prepared for it" (Iyengar, n.p.).

Schwartz provides several examples of social situations in which too many choices can create indecision, anxiety, dissatisfaction and stasis: from the simple goods that one could find in a modern supermarket, to doctor visits, to jeans, to cell phones. The options at stake are infinite. If we apply the same concept to all the small fields and sectors that shape our daily-life, we come to realize that we are in fact overloaded with choices. As the number of offers has increased, so does the time we have

to spend evaluating them.

Infinite Jest is filled with characters who appear to be anguished by such paralysis due to infinite choices. Daniel Kahneman, a nobel-awarded psychologist of Princeton University and Amos Tversky of Stanford have published a research in which they demonstrate that losses have a much greater psychological impact than gains. Such losses may create conflict to the point of producing paralysis. Although some choice is indisputably better than none, more choices may impact the general well-being of the individual. Curiously, as the gross domestic product managed to double in the past 30 years, such an increase of affluence and choice was inversely proportional to the growth of personal happiness: “

When people have no choice, life is almost unbearable. As the number of available choices increases, as it has in our consumer culture, the autonomy, control, and liberation this variety brings are powerful and positive. But as the number of choices keeps growing, negative aspects of having a multitude of options begin to appear. As the number of choices grows further, the negatives escalate until we become overloaded. At this point, choice no longer liberates, but debilitates. It might even be said to tyrannize” (Schwartz, n.p.).

Unlimited choice may produce an increase in self-loathing and depression, an issue that Schwartz connects to the experience of disappointment regarding a decision that did not live up to the consumer's expectations. As a result, freedom of choice does not necessarily mean that too many alternatives can improve our well-being. It may mean the opposite, as Schwartz says:

But what I think is most important is that people won't ignore alternatives if they don't realize that too many alternatives can create a problem. And our culture sanctifies freedom of choice so profoundly that the benefits of infinite options seem self-evident. When experiencing dissatisfaction or hassle on a shopping trip, consumers are likely to blame it on something else—surly salespeople, traffic jams, high prices, items out of stock—anything but the overwhelming array of options (Schwartz, n.p.).

How is there freedom of choice if one does not learn how to choose correctly and in a conscious, responsible way? As one of the several characters in *Infinite Jest* affirms “Your freedom is the freedom-from: no one tells your precious individual U.S.A. selves what they must do” (320). The multifaceted, bulging and receding structure of the novel indicates that we do not think of ourselves as citizens, as parts of something larger to which we have profound responsibilities. In a world so infused with the freedom to choose, with too many alternatives to consider when making a decisive step toward a concrete decision in one's life, choice still remains an action that lets the individual enter in a conscious relationship with the world. As “The Paradox of Choice” suggests, the ability to

choose rightly is a matter of responsibility, a task that can be easily related to the way which existentialist philosophers such as Camus and Sartre thought the modern individual should follow. Through choice the self emerges. Being able to choose delivers us the essence of what it is like to live in a paralyzed world as paralyzed selves, how unbearable it feels to be caged in static states of mind, and how difficult, boring, slow and demanding the process to become a human being is.

Being a “diagnosis and a critique of the culture's addiction to pleasure” (Boswell, 119), an “easy, pleasurable novel to read – full of narrative action, excitement, local delights - and at the same time a trying, annoying, difficult novel that is constantly interrupting itself” (Cioffi, 162), *Infinite Jest* is the ideal background for stasis. In fact, the novel's plot “advances and retreats at the same time” (Boswell, 120) and so does the reading itself, with the reader being both raptured by the book's hypnotic power and unsettled by the constant interruptions of the story. Given its structure and the kind of reading it fosters, *Infinite Jest* provides a precious lens to understand how the theme of stasis, which is central for the main characters of the novel and the development of its major plot-lines, is crucial for a critical understanding of contemporary society. I would have never attempted to trace and define the concept of stasis were it not immediately clear to me that such a crucial concept lies at the core of *Infinite Jest* and it is related to all the sections and chapters of the book, from the general themes to the particular descriptions of the characters' lives, speeches and psychical states, to the hundreds pages of endnotes that impose upon the overall narrative structure and force us to constantly interrupt the act of reading. Everything in the novel seems to suggest or inspire a stasis of sort, a never-ending state of discord between parts. I intend to argue that stasis may be a vital resource that Wallace employs for a thorough comprehension of contemporary society's values and issues, as well as a critical tool that readers can use in their personal path toward a responsible self-becoming. As we will discover in chapter 2, stasis is always the enactment of a state of discord in which no movement toward a possible escape can be taken or conceived. And yet, the very fact of showing a state of discord and paralysis allows Wallace to provide a potential resolution to that conflict, resolution that needs the reader's active participation in order to be fully acknowledged. Thus the reader and the author become parts of a community “where meaning is made” (Boswell, 121). This special sharing is closely associated to Wallace's definition of art as a “living transaction between humans” (Wallace, An Interview, 142). As such, stasis represents the complexity of the world, and thus acquires a potential positive meaning as it fosters in the reader of *Infinite Jest* a direct engagement with the novel that is never fully satisfied, but is nevertheless a propelling force for a conscious self-recognition.

A clear and precise analysis of stasis in *Infinite Jest* could not be undertaken without taking into

consideration the philosophical premises that Wallace has been referring to throughout his fictional and non-fictional career. As the philosophical concept of stasis is strongly connected to the existential themes of freedom, choice and despair, it is of primary importance to hint at the authors who worked and reflected on these topics. I will then address the definition and etymological history of the word stasis, connecting it with the concept of static or dynamic, round or flat characters. Is stasis to be considered a negative trait for a character to such an extent that it may prevent us from entering in an empathetic relationship with it? Why are there so many static characters in *Infinite Jest*? Does their presence in the text obey to a sort of hidden telos, being depicted as they are, suffering human beings devoid of barely any connection with each other? Why does Wallace put so much emphasis in the representation of such static and passive figurants? Are they really to be considered static at all? Each of those questions will be given its due attention. I will focus on the assumption that there are two major forms of stasis that recur throughout *Infinite Jest*, each one being treated and depicted inside the enclosed spaces of the novel's setting. They are stasis of addiction and stasis of communication. (Chapter 1)

We will see how communication in *Infinite Jest* is always crippled and plagued by reciprocal incomprehension, redundance, narcissism, cynicism. Nearly all the conversations are merely exchanges of words between two people who refuse to be involved into a conscious, concrete and purposeful dialogue. Stasis of addiction is closely associated to all the forms of addictions depicted in the novel. It can originate from a character's depending on substances, or be the effect of too harsh competitiveness, too many choices to consider, narcissism and infinite pleasure.

I will then focus on all the causes that produce or induce paralysis in a given character, and analyse how far stasis manages to become part of the novel *Infinite Jest* in each of the three places around which the main plot-lines revolve (E.T.A., Ennet House, O.N.A.N.), and how it comes to influence the lives of all the main characters that show the most relevant symptoms of that static, caged state (Chapter 2). I will examine if some of the characters who inhabit the world of *Infinite Jest* manage to escape from their static condition by trying to react or accept their state. I will look closely at the AA meetings, Hal and Gately's respective endings, Jim Incandenza's *Infinite Jest* and the figure of Mario Incandenza, and try to investigate the particular ways in which they manage or not to cope with the kinds of stasis depicted in the world of *Infinite Jest* (Chapter 3). I will then attempt to recognize if the novel has or has not succeeded in connecting with the reader or connecting characters to one another and to what extent stasis can acquire a potential positive meaning.

CHAPTER I

UNDERSTANDING STASIS

The concept of stasis has long been used in a broad set of disciplines that show no relevant relation between each other, from medicine to rhetoric to literary theory to politics. Consequently, it is extremely hard to elaborate a meaningful definition of the term.

In its most general definition, stasis is a state of discord between parts that disturbs the healthy and constant functioning of the whole. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, it is a period or state where there is no change or development. The word comes from the Indo-Germanic root STA, to stand. In medicine it is a stopping of the normal flow of a body fluid. Tellingly, in Greek medicine stasis can also be used as a synonym for *nosos*, or disease. Contemporary medicine uses *metastasis* to define the transfer of disease from one place in the body to another. But stasis can also be identified in a political way, meaning civil war. When an allegiance to a party is opposed to another one, the conflict generates an internal disturbance in both individuals and states. In classical rhetoric, stasis is the process of identifying the central issues in a certain dispute or debate. In Aristotle's physical science all the things are constituted by nature, that is, they are based upon the principle of kinèsis and stasis. It is the conflict between these two opposite poles that produces all that exists. In Books V-VIII of the Greek philosopher's *Physics*, stasis is described as a force that disrupts motion and poses an end to its continuity, as Otto Alvin Loeb Dieter , in his essay “Stasis”, has it: “

Stasis is not a motion, though in a sense it is the point, or moment, of change. Since what a thing is, is determined by the function it performs (...) stasis is nothing permanent, but a transitory state, a temporary standing in conflict, undecided and wavering, between contrary impulses” (Dieter, 217).

As a term that is highly polysemic, stasis thus comes to imply internal divisions of all types and forms within a given whole, a state of inactivity resulting from a static balance between opposing forces. Stasis is at the center of this research. The reason why I am inclined to insist on such a peculiar element is guided by the strong belief that *Infinite Jest* is a novel in which the theme of stasis is given full prominence, as if it were either the principal motive of the story or one of its main interpretive keys.

The term stasis is deployed several times both in *Infinite Jest* and in Wallace's non fictional works. In

the novel he often recurs to the use of synonyms such as paralysis, or to images like cages, traps, obstacles, or to concepts such as passivity, narcissism or addiction, whose very essences share with it a common thematic ground. If we consider all the characters of the story, from the two main protagonists Hal and Gately to the flat and static figurants of Cheers and Incandenza's Work, to the Quebecois terrorists, to the tennis players at E.T.A., to the recovering drug-addicts at Ennet House, we immediately notice that they are affected by a specific form of stasis: they may appear crippled, physically deformed or psychically paralyzed. They may indulge in self-consuming activities like substance-addiction or Tv addiction, or be devoured by self-reflexivity and narcissistic drives, entrapped in a hideous form of insincere openness. They may even be too earnestly open or too hidden, caged in the inner workings of their own mind.

In *Infinite Jest* every movement seems to be thwarted by something preventing the individual from making any concrete step toward a goal, a purpose, or a simple physical activity. But stasis is not limited to express the physical or psychological condition of the characters inhabiting the novel. Its effect comes to influence the entire structure of the novel, informing it subtly and forcing it to adapt to a form that always threatens to break or fall apart. Plot-lines are constantly interrupted, chapters are fragmented into subsections, the story is carried on according to a circular motion full of syntactical difficulties amplified by a lexicography stemming from a wide array of disciplines such as optics, theoretical math, a mixture of high-brow and low-brow expressions. Characters are either maimed and forced to use wheelchairs to move, or they are seated on couches, chairs or horizontal supports. They may stand still or lie on the bed in the same position for hours and hours. Even in a sport like tennis there is no real progression, as movement resembles more a static exchange of services, an inactive dance whose partners are constantly engaged in a paralyzing and unending repetition of movements whose meaning remains obscure. How can we address stasis, then, and what kind of definition are we allowed to use for our inquiry of the theme of stasis in the world of *Infinite Jest*?

The concept of stasis is relevant in the broader context of the crisis of the contemporary self as highlighted by early postmodernist writers and theorists. In examining the principal themes at the heart of *Infinite Jest*, we discover that they are not too distant from the same topics exposed and treated by the ironic and metafictional lens of Postmodernism. Addiction, narcissism and self-reflexivity abound in the book and, as Timothy Jackobs maintains, "Wallace's novel is at once a compendium of American neuroses and addiction, an astute examination of the insatiable American proclivity of the pursuit of happiness - "happification" - in an age of infinite stimulative choice, and a latent aesthetic allegory" (Jacobs, 215).

This work neither intends to limit itself to a critical comparison between Wallace's most important and popular novel and Postmodernism, nor addresses the vexed issue of the status of *Infinite Jest* within the canon of postmodernist text. It has already been done in more than a literary essay and with deeply satisfying results.¹ David Foster Wallace believes that there are two main issues that are mostly responsible for the production of stasis in U.S. culture: irony and ridicule. According to the author of *Infinite Jest*, irony is dehumanizing, reducing all social, existential and political problems to objects that can be ridiculed and treated jokingly. The split between the inner self on the one hand, and the world, on the other, urges writers to reflect on the need of conceiving new ways to analyse contemporary society “that neither reclaims discredited realism nor resurrects irony and self-reflexivity, the weapons of the enemy” (Boswell, 14).

Though he is not a proper existentialist, Wallace has often felt the need to insist on a “mild form of Camus-like existential engagement” (D.T. Max, 298) as a way to escape from American political narcissism. His central claim was to give metaphysical questions a narrative expression. In other words, he re-worked the issues and ideas posed by existential thinkers such as Camus, Sartre, Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein by absorbing them in both his fictional and non-fictional works. In fact, *Infinite Jest's* cast of characters can be described as a masquerade of people acting as representatives of the particular philosophical thinking expressed by the authors mentioned above. We will see how this thinking contributes to help the reader get a deeper understanding of stasis as depicted in some of the novel's most topical scenes. The main themes of the novel (e.g. freedom of choice, personal pleasure and outward-directed commitment) reflect some of the most popular concepts exposed by the aforementioned existentialist thinkers, whom Wallace rediscovers and contextualizes through his original narrative approach, joining together “cynicism and naiveté” (Boswell, 16).

Americans appear to have nothing to believe in or fight for, except their own desire to be entertained

¹ One of the most relevant studies that focus on the relationship between *Infinite Jest* and Postmodernism is “The Iron Bars Of Freedom: David Foster Wallace and the Postmodern Self”, by Stefan Hirt. Another crucial work is Chris Hager's “On Speculation: *Infinite Jest* and American Fiction After Postmodernism”. Cfr. Marshall Boswell's analysis of Wallace's narrative strategy on page 18 of “Understanding David Foster Wallace”.

and have immediate forms of pleasure. They live in a society that allows them to act and choose freely, but freedom of choice, we are told by Schwartz, can also become a crippling kind of imprisonment, a cause of paralysis and despair as well. If we consider the role of television in *Infinite Jest* as exemplified by the InterLace TelEntertainment system, we come to the conclusion that, in the end, an entertainment that provides spectators with unlimited choices regarding movies, shows or TV series, is nothing but a source of infinite stasis: “

The cable kabal’s promise of ‘empowerment,’ the campaign argued, was still just the invitation to choose which of the visual spoon feedings you’d sit and open wide for...And so but what if, their campaigns appeal basically ran, instead of choosing the least of infantile evils... what if a viewer could more or less 100% choose what's on at any given time?” (416).

It is the “appearance of freedom” promoted by the InterLace's ad campaign that fuels a vicious cycle of passivity and stasis, a state of inactivity in which communication is constantly interdicted and impeded. In *Infinite Jest*, the medical attaché, generally known to be the first victim of Entertainment, relieves himself after a long day at work by watching a selection of cartridges, a habit he shares with Ken Erdedy, a character who does not even try to choose which cartridge to view, as the very act of choosing leads him to despair. As the text suggests, watching movies and TV shows does not appear as liberating and positive as a healthy form of entertainment should be. Making a choice becomes a crucial and frightful task for the individual, who is always at risk of refusing to make a concrete decision and falling into a state of passive apathy. Like Postmodernism, stasis is both destructive and productive, a movement that is constantly striving to get to a certain point but fails to reach its end. Consequently, there is no real movement forward, but a perpetual and paralyzing state of inertia, a condition of total inactivity and despair that happens to be two-faceted, as we will see in the following chapters.

In examining the impact of Postmodernism on literature, theorists ended up considering irony, parody

and self-reflexivity as the main rhetorical tools inherited by the generation of John Barth and Thomas Pynchon, but limited their inquiry in asserting that Wallace, being born and raised in a postmodern environment, attempted to show that it is still possible for the new generation of writers to give new values to human existence. His prose aims to abandon the self-reflexive circle by opening up to the reader and sharing with him in the earnest possible way his own weaknesses and “naivetè”. There is no doubt that Wallace's ideal model of literature points towards establishing a democratic exchange of words and feelings between author and reader, as partners in a dance that is deeply engaging and not hierarchical. The narrator of Wallace's prose will always strive to find a way as to directly interact with his readers, as the author of Pop Quiz 9 openly affirms:

... it's going to make you (the author) look fundamentally lost and confused (...) unsure about whether to trust even your most fundamental intuitions about urgency and sameness and whether other people deep inside experience things in anything like the same way you do... more like a reader (...) down here quivering in the mud of the trench with the rest of us, instead of a Writer, whom we imagine to be clean and dry and radiant of command presence and unwavering conviction as he coordinates the whole campaign from back at some gleaming abstract Olympian HQ” (Wallace, Brief Interviews, 159-160).

Wallace's attempt at writing about topics which may appear outdated is an evident proof of his will to avoid falling into the womb of postmodernist's worst shortfalls.

Nearly all the most important critical readings of *Infinite Jest* have hinted at the theme of stasis without giving it a wider, specific focus.² In *The Iron Bars of Freedom*, by Stephan Hirt, the existentialist analysis of Wallace's major novel is relevant in helping us identify the essence of stasis from a metaphysical perspective. However, a deep and conscious insight into its many ramifications has never been done save by J. Karnicky, whose essay “Kinds of Stasis in David Foster Wallace” provides us with a glimpse of some of the most relevant examples of stasis at stake, mentioning ten.

² Greg Carlisle dedicates chapter ten of his seminal work *Elegant Complexity: a Study of David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest* to the state of “paralyzed stasis” experienced by clinically depressed patients. In *Understanding David Foster Wallace* Marshall Boswell hints at stasis on page 175, when he refers to the static condition of non-entertainment provided by works as complex and unsettling as *Infinite Jest*.

His work does not claim to understand how stasis works, but aims to point to the “overwhelming fact of (its) existence” (Karnicky, 94). He abstains from any judgment or opinion concerning the reason why such forms of stasis are so diffuse, as he merely relies on a distant and impersonal presentation of the issue. My intention is to expand the inquiry and provide an attempt at understanding the real motifs surrounding Wallace's treatment of the theme of stasis. What is the reason behind his use? Does the author of the novel follow a specific purpose, considering how frequent and recurring the topic comes to be both in the narrative form and inside the thematic elements of the book? The inquiry will start from a brief distinction between static and dynamic characters, and it will then address two different forms of stasis that are predominant and sustain, as I claim, the entire structure of the book.

STATIC AND DYNAMIC CHARACTERS: A BRIEF DISTINCTION

When it comes to the task of categorizing characters in a story, one of the most widely known definitions is provided by E.M. Forster's opposition between flat and round characters, a distinction made in a series of lectures which were published in 1927 as “Aspects of the Novel”: “We may divide characters into flat and round. Flat characters... are sometimes called types, and sometimes caricatures. In their purest form, they are constructed round a single idea or quality” (67). Round characters, according to Forster, have a wider and more complete personality, full of varieties and dimensions, and cannot be summed up in a single phrase: “The test of a flat character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way. If it never surprises, it is flat. If it does not convince, it is a flat pretending to be round” (Forster, 78).

Forster's distinction between flat and round characters is not the most valuable or precise classificatory system in use. For instance, *Infinite Jest* is full of characters who may be categorized as flat characters, and yet they tend to develop through the story or show the will to adapt to changes. They are not one-dimensional *figurants*, and therefore they cannot be entirely considered flat, but involved in a slow and demanding process of personal growth. On the other hand, some characters may show complex personalities and an intricate psychology, to the extent that the reader has a deeper, broader and almost total knowledge of their traits and thoughts. They may stand out as manifold and

need elaborate descriptions to be fully treated and understood; and yet they may be interested by no personal development at all.

We do not have to mistake the distinction between static and dynamic characters with that between flat and round ones. Joseph Ewen's work has provided a significant contribution to get a better understanding of characters' categorization. He proposes a continuum of three axes: complexity, development and penetration into the "inner life". One end of the axis includes flat characters: allegorical figures, types and caricatures. Such characters, according to Ewen's classification, are static. Round characters belong to the other axis, while in between the two poles is an infinite degree of variation and change.

In the economy of the novel, flat and round characters are bound to be influenced by the formal development of the narrative. Some of them try to change and participate to the "bulging and receding" movement of the book, others attempt to adapt to the chaotic narrative flow, others regress to a state of total inactivity. In other words, stasis exerts a constant influence over all the characters in *Infinite Jest*, compelling them to either adapt to its rules or to be caught in a condition of complete paralysis and despair. As we have stressed the need to make a distinction between the two binary definitions of literary characters, a deeper understanding of the difference between static and dynamic characters is needed. All characters in a story, both flat and round ones, are either dynamic or static. A static character has a fixed personality, he does not change through the course of the story, and remains essentially the same that he or she was at the beginning. His beliefs, ideas and behavior are not influenced by any kind of alteration. Static characters may experience life changes according to plot lines or the development in the particular environment in which they live and act. If they were arrogant and narcissistic from the first chapters they will still be arrogant and narcissistic at the end. On the contrary, a dynamic character is the complete opposite of the static one. As a constantly evolving individual, it experiences a deep and gradual or a brief and sudden change in insight or understanding, as well as a change in values or commitment to a certain task or theme. If we consider a character like Ebenezer Scrooge, from Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, his development through the story is the perfect description of the process of personal growth generally experienced by a dynamic character. In *Infinite Jest* the distinction between static and dynamic characters is much less definite and precise, as the novel's hundreds of characters are mainly static and even those of them who attempt to break or escape from their paralyzing condition of passivity do not experience any meaningful change in the way they feel or live. As stasis addresses all the characters in the novel, the distinction between static and dynamic characters is relevant for a thorough comprehension of the way in which the two poles are interested by the state of discord. To what extent are they influenced by stasis? How do they react to the physical and psychological imprisonment that such a sickness

inevitably produces?

It has been previously underlined that the concept of stasis encompasses several different disciplines: being primarily a state of inactivity or discord between two conflicting forces, it can also be defined as the inability to escape one's own narrow opinions, the cage of one's own dogmas. But stasis can also occur once one has recognized what he is suffering from, or addicted to, but he still does not make the effort to actually improve his condition and live a better life. By narrowing the circle of definitions surrounding the word, there are two kinds of stasis that should be taken into consideration, depending on whether they appear to address the physical or the psychological traits of the individual. In *Infinite Jest* physical and psychological kinds of stasis occur all throughout the story. They do not necessarily follow an order, nor we have to believe that physical stasis is more frequent than its counterpart, or vice-versa. A single character may show traits of both psychological and physical stasis without letting us see what the predominant one tends to be. For instance, Hal and Gately are two of the most relevant cases in which psychological and physical forms of stasis are closely interwoven. As two representative of the static-dynamic distinction, they do develop through the course of the story together with the forms of stasis in which they are caged. Psychological stasis can be associated with anhedonia, which is generally defined as the inability to have any emotions at all, living in a state of death in life. Hal is the principal character who appears to be living under the influence of such a disease, caught inside the cage of pursuing “a kind of radical abstracting of everything, a hollowing out of stuff that used to have affective content. Terms the undepressed toss around and take for granted as full and fleshy — happiness, joie de vivre, preference, love — are stripped to their skeletons and reduced to abstract ideas. They have, as it were, denotation but not connotation... Everything becomes an outline of the thing. Objects become schemata. The world becomes a map of the world. An anhedonic can navigate, but has no location. I.e, the anhedonic becomes, in the lingo of Boston AA, Unable to Identify” (693).

Thus, anhedonia is the equivalent of a form of psychological stasis in which the individual no longer feels the connection between the meaning of an emotion and the experience he has of it. The world of the anhedonic is reduced to a series of abstractions and objects with whom he struggles to interact. As a mere performer of sentiments and feelings without actually perceiving them, the anhedonic knows perfectly how to employ terms and words of common usage such as happiness, joy, value, love, desire, etc without having a direct experience of them. Just like Hal, as we will see, who “can manipulate them well enough to satisfy everyone but himself that he's in there, inside his own hull, as a human being”.

Several characters are often depicted in the novel as people regressed to an infantile state of mind,

which is another way of considering how stasis intervenes upon the psychological traits of the individual. The Inner Infant support group that Hal attends is made up by participants who are encouraged to “work on [their] dysfunctional passivity and tendency to wait silently for [their] Inner Infant’s needs to be magically met” (802). The book itself is ridden with motifs and images of infantilism: fetal positions, passivity and absorption, the feeling of being underwater, each one of them suggesting, again, an idea of stasis that needs to be kept in mind.

Unlike the psychological one, physical stasis seems to reflect an improvement of self-realization, or self-awareness: at the end of the novel Gately is paralyzed, and yet he has never felt so alive. His “epiphanic moment” coincides with an image of rebirth whose meaning is still open to infinite debates. Likewise, a similar and yet more ambiguous form of improvement comes with the first chapter of the story: when Hal is seated in the office, surrounded by heads and bodies (that is, merely objects set around him, a situation that reflects the Sartrean conception of Being through the look of the Other) his posture is “consciously congruent to the shape of [his] hard chair” (3), as if he and the chair, a common and practical object, were unified in the same entity. As it appears through the chapter, we are granted the opportunity to witness the extraordinary effort made by Hal to actually escape from the encaging limitations of his previous paralytic condition of self-reflexivity, in a loud and decisive declaration of him being a human, not a machine. However, as we will discuss later in the research, his strong and steady assertion does not impress nor satisfies anyone of the Deans interviewing him. Furthermore, they mistake his words (at least the ones formulated in his mind that he believes are being expressed through his voice) for subanimalistic and undecipherable sounds. This initial conflict is crucial for our critical research, for it enacts two kinds of stasis that structure the novel's thematic areas and will be given a broader and thorough examination.

STASIS OF COMMUNICATION AND STASIS OF ADDICTION

Although giving form and structure to a theme so broad, ambiguous and multifaceted as stasis is an

extremely difficult task, we must attempt to pursue an order, delimiting our work in a way that might be useful for a thorough understanding of how stasis is depicted and employed in *Infinite Jest*. As Katherine Hayles wisely notes, “any starting point would be to some extent arbitrary, for no matter one where starts, everything eventually cycles together with everything else” (Hayles, 684-685). It is a true assertion, for *Infinite Jest* is not a work demanding a precise point from which to begin the critical inquiry. Karnicky's stance about the impossibility to start from a very definite place is also strongly relevant: “the arbitrary nature of the starting point can produce its own kind of stasis: if no point is any more relevant than another, and if all points are going to lead to the same place, how does one make any sort of decision whatsoever about where to start?” (Karnicky, 92).

This is closely associated to a particular kind of stasis of interpretation I intend to analyse at the end of the research, a form of critical inertia in which any attempt at summing up or coming to a sort of satisfying conclusion is inevitably illusory.

A beginning must then be traced. Barry Schwartz's *The Paradox of Choice* provides us with thoughtful and precise aspects that can help us get a deeper understanding of how multiple choices may lead to a state of paralysis in contemporary society, a theme that some characters of the novel employ as an object of discussion and debate, and others impersonate as they lead passive, inactive, uncertain and desperate lives. I also intend to trace a parallel between both his resolutions and those expressed in *Infinite Jest* and find if they share similarities with one another. I will focus on the assumption that there are two major forms of stasis that recur throughout *Infinite Jest* and in the specific and limited spaces of the fictional world it encompasses. Each form consists of a series of stases that will be traced in the very specific settings in which they occur. The two different typologies of stasis that I will give an insight of are stasis of addiction and stasis of communication.

STASIS OF COMMUNICATION

Communication in *Infinite Jest* is always crippled and plagued by reciprocal incomprehension, redundance, overintellectualization. It often leads to an overdose of information, useless and obsessive detailing, comic technicalities, irony, self-reflexivity. A simple example of the chaotic stasis that the reader might experience as she approaches the story is provided by the structure of the book itself: the novel is extremely long, it has a circular plot structure divided into several other subplots

some of which end abruptly without developing. The book features a massive cast of characters who employ slangs, neologisms, people who are given the occasion to discuss and reflect about subjects as theoretical math, computer science, drug addiction, terrorism, politics and tennis. Finally, a hundred pages of endnotes are spread throughout the novel and force the reader to “move from the body text to the endnotes and back again” (Boswell, 120), in an infinite interpretative loop. As the "bulging and receding" ceiling that Don Gately obsessively notices during his convalescence at the end of the book, we as readers move back and forth at the same time, thus appearing to make no movement at all, because no form of positive and interactive communication has actually been made. We are caught in “the illusion of both the dreamer's unmoving sprint and the disco-moonwalker's backward glide” (Boswell, 119). This is the main reason that adds to my claim that one of the two most relevant forms in which stasis appears to manifest itself is closely related to the element of non-communication so predominant in *Infinite Jest*. In the next chapter I will follow a close reading of some of the most important scenes where stasis of communication is most overtly depicted.

STASIS OF ADDICTION

In the multifaceted world of *Infinite Jest*, addiction is a topic that has been fully addressed and developed, as each drug addict of the story is given a thorough and detailed insight. We have already said that the novel's characters are not necessarily addicted to substances, but they can easily depend on anything that can help them escape from the cage of their suffering. What kinds of addictions are the most predominant in the world of the novel that Wallace so powerfully describes? According to Stefan Hirt *Infinite Jest* is about “addictions to oneself, to substances and to television” (Hirt, 25). I find that his assertion is correct in addressing those as the most recurrent aspects of addiction in the novel. Hirt is aware that trying to trace and impose a general order out of a book so vastly ambivalent, disordered and obscure, is a risk. And yet, by reducing the overall theme of addiction into three well defined and different types, he does not try to conceal the fact that several other hidden forms of such an issue can be taken into consideration. Following his assumption I will attempt to find how stasis appears to be the effect or cause of all the forms of addiction happening in each of the three major places in the book.

CHAPTER II

THE STATIC WORLD OF INFINITE JEST

Infinite Jest's plot revolves around a very limited number of elements, the most important of which is the quest for the Entertainment, a cartridge so powerful and addictive, that anyone who watches it becomes absorbed in an infinite loop, reduced in a cathartic state where he dies of starvation or dehydration. With regards to the hundreds of characters who populate such a broad, massive and multifaceted work of fiction, *Infinite Jest* is a novel that could easily be referred to as an encyclopedic work. Sam Pott's character-diagram is particularly relevant as it groups all the hundreds of characters of the novel in three main areas: E.T.A., Ennet House, A.F.R.³

The novel major plot lines take place along a binary opposition between the Enfield Tennis Academy and Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House. Both the institutions are different from one another, and it is telling that they are set at the opposite ends of a hill, face to face. Such opposition is a state of discord, as it confronts the “wealthy, disciplined and self-fashioning inhabitants of the ETA” (Harris, n.p.) with the “fallen, dissolute and enslaved inhabitants of Enfield House” (Harris, n.p.). Greg Carlisle, in “Elegant Complexity, a study of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*”, has divided the novel into six units, each one being part of a whole structure that may be labelled, according to him, as “a chaotic stasis of narrative tensions” (Carlisle, n.p.). Such division is intended to convey two precise ideas: the first one being a tentative to impose order upon a disordered mix of narrative strands. The other one aims to point out that no study of *Infinite Jest* can be definitive or exhaustive, especially with regard to what is widely considered as the real structure of the novel.

In a 1996 radio interview after the publication of the book, Wallace explained that the structure of its

³ The .pdf file of Pott's diagram is available at <http://samppottsync.com/ij/>

first draft was based on the Sierpinski Gasket, a fractal object created geometrically through a recursive process of cutting a large triangle into smaller triangles, so that each triangle is made of smaller parts in an apparently infinite loop.

Infinite Jest mirrors such an iterative structure, and Carlisle has arranged its critical study of the novel according to the fractal object. One of the several triangles in which the novel's structure is divided belongs to the theme of Non-action, that is, another synonym for stasis that can be employed to describe the “lack of activity, passivity, being horizontal” that Wallace's prose has always endeavoured to explore and describe. Wallace's use of the fractal structure is mirrored in the novel's characters and the particular thoughts behind their actions. Recursiveness and repetition are reflected by nearly all the characters' actions, from the tennis matches at E.T.A., to the AA recovery meetings and prayers, to the drug-addicts habits.

Infinite Jest is a complex world comprising multiple voices combined to create what Wallace penned as "radical realism": the novel features essays and critical articles written and published by the characters in the novel, highly detailed newspaper headlines, email messages, transcripts of phone conversations, first-, second- and third- person narratives. As Hayles argues, "Infinite Jest achieves unity through recursive loops performing a world in which actions against others have consequences for those who perform them; a world where dysfunctional families cannot be healed without becoming aware of the underlying ideologies driving their dynamics; and a world where interdependence is not just a corrupt political slogan but a description of the complex interconnections tying together virtual Entertainments, political realities, and real ecologies" (Hayles, 695). In the static world of *Infinite Jest*, as we have previously said, everything is connected, every action has consequences; it could be argued that the best way to represent the contemporary world in its closest and truest form is to create a complex, fragmentary, multifaceted novel that may provide readers with a “speculative mirror” (Karnicky, 96) representing a “future, possible world, and then taking steps to avert this world” (Karnicky, 96). By reading a novel so massive, gargantuan and filled with echoes and references within the text, the reader learns to acknowledge his task, the responsibility to becoming himself and have a direct, active and meaningful impact on the world he lives in. And yet, everything in the world of *Infinite Jest* has the potential to suggest the presence of a peculiar form of stasis as the lead and central element of such an ambitious novel. Even if *Infinite Jest* is a “compendium of false steps, movements in any and all directions, leading not toward a goal, but toward ways of breaking down” (Karnicky, 97), in an infinite recursive loop of static iteration, it must be stressed that Wallace, throughout the novel, never ceases to put emphasis on the critical assessment that all those activities that prevent us from paying active attention to our own choices are to be

considered as engaging as the nature of addiction itself. To quote Marshall Boswell: “Infinite Jest is a world all to itself, a virtual reality in the most literal sense of that term” (123).

The text of *Infinite Jest* is an incoherent set of information in which characters appear without introduction, and the different groups all exist simultaneously. For instance, it must be pointed out that, even though AA is not introduced until page 137, by the end of the book it has become the predominant setting of the narrative, with much greater emphasis than the other groups combined. As Mary K. Holland notes, “Even as Wallace struggles to create for his characters a way out of the cultural quagmire in which his novel places them, *Infinite Jest* depicts what happens when recursivity, through the society of consumption and mediation, becomes pathological – trapping one within the self rather than freeing one from it” (Holland, 225).

Tellingly, Michael Pietsch described the book’s internal structure as “two poles of a magnet”(Henry, 482), between which the reader is expected to move. Its circular narrative system is close to the “annular fusion”, process depicted in the novel, which works as a cyclical process creating infinite energy through a “closed, self-sustaining system” (Henry, 482).

Throughout the novel, we encounter hundreds of characters of the most varied condition: eccentric, weird, complexed, disconnected, paranoid, desperate, paralyzed. In other words, nearly all of them are characterized by a physical or psychological condition that, from now on, will be referred to as stasis. It is the same method of characterization that makes them "split between the flatness of their appearance and their implied roundness" through the voice of a conflicted narrator both detached and emotionally involved in the story that creates a static balance, an equilibrium “between negation and affirmation, seriousness and infinite jest” (643).

E.T.A.

STASIS OF ADDICTION

In the fictional world of *Infinite Jest*, much of the action takes place at Enfield Tennis Academy (E.T.A.), a prestigious tennis boarding school for children and teenagers, situated east of metropolitan Boston, on the largest hill in Enfield, at the opposite side of which lies Ennet House. Its shape resembles that of a cardioid, with the four main buildings rounded at the back and sides so as to form a cardioid's curve. E.T.A. is the home of Hal Incandenza, one of the two protagonists of the novel. Hal is the youngest son of Avril and James Orin Incandenza Jr., the latter being the founder of the tennis academy and the creator of the lethal film *Infinite Jest*, a movie so entertaining that it leads every viewer into a catatonic state, forcing him to watch it again and again until the infinite loop provokes death by exhaustion or dehydration. Enfield Tennis Academy is an institution that promotes tennis culture and encourages its students to become professional players. Above all, it is a place where stasis of addiction and communication is rampant among the students of the academy. There are several types of addiction that recur at E.T.A. We may consider, due to their recurrence throughout the novel, addiction to tennis and addiction to substances, as well as addiction to self, as the three most relevant forms of addiction that plague and blight the lives of E.T.A. students. Hal Incandenza is exemplary in this respect. For the students attending the Enfield Tennis Academy, tennis is much more than a game, it is “a way of life, a movement toward a static, infinite world circumscribed by the lines of the tennis court” (Karnicky, 117). Gerard Schtitt, who is one of the main tennis instructors at E.T.A., explains to his students that the whole purpose of the game is to preserve stasis and give order to the chaotic world outside, imparting on it a method, a repetitive set of actions and schemes inside the limited space bordered by the tennis lines. There is no other way to achieve this condition of “pure potential” but to “disappear inside the game: break through limits: transcend: improve: win” (84). Repetition is essential for the player, as he strives to improve at his game to the point that he will be playing “with such ease and total mindless effortless effort and enhanced concentration” to feel detached from the “connectedness of all events” (84). Thus the tennis court provides the students with a second world, static and limited by rules, borders, a world in which the individual may find a purpose, a means to become himself, as Schtitt points out: “You seek to vanquish and transcend the limited self whose limits make the game possible in the first place. It is tragic and sad and chaotic and lovely” (84). What Schtitt wants to convey to his students appeals to the necessity of considering

that tennis is just a small bit of a bigger picture, namely the real world, and there are several other opportunities for the individual's complex journey toward becoming himself. Enfield Tennis Academy is a place where competition happens on a daily basis and excellence is to be achieved at all costs. Friendship and affections are not encouraged due to the fact that they may thwart tennis players' purpose of their competitiveness.

E.T.A. students are “all in the 'same boat'; share their pain and loneliness, and in that way move out of their individual 'I' to a 'we'”, says Allard Den Dulk, who associates Camus's view of Rebellion with the way of coping with the “exhausting training” that is followed by the students. Camus comes to mind because in *The Myth of Sisyphus* he stresses the prominent role of the absurd with regard to the human condition. This latter is characterized by the probability of suffering and the certainty of death, which is a fate that human reason cannot accept as reasonable. The absurd surfaces when the individual realizes that the world lacks rationality: “the absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (Camus, n.p.). Habit and “default-settings” impose upon our view of life and influence our actions, preventing us from having a truthful knowledge of the world. The French philosopher's notion of rebellion stems from the fact that, as the world lacks any meaning save that of merely being itself, the individual's rebellion demands meaning from “the unreasonable silence of the world” (Camus, n.p.). Thus rebellion becomes the way in which the human condition can find a way to give meaning to his existence. The type of fate and loneliness E.T.A. students have to face are the key terms with which they manage to form a “community of victims” aimed at overcoming the emptiness that such an educational regime is bound to produce. Clearly, E.T.A.'s players' suffering is by no means at the same level of that experienced by Ennet House residents, nor does it share the same potential positive ending, unless you enter the world of professional tennis. One of the causes that stress and encourage the production of stasis is routine, in a form that is not dissimilar to that experienced by AA recovering addicts, as we will see. Drills and constant conditioning are strongly recommended, for they allow E.T.A. students to perfect their game and become unbeatable: “

... its repetition. First, last and always...its repetitive movements and motions for their own sakes, over and over until...they sink and soak into the hardware, the CPS, the machine language...it's no accident that they say you eat, sleep and breath tennis here. These are autonomical” (110).

Repetition at E.T.A. follows the ultimate purpose of getting to the world of professional tennis, known to students as “The Show”. As it has been stressed, The Show is “both poison and cure, cure to the degree that it justifies the myriad sacrifices and interminable repetition necessary to perform upon that stage” (Harris, n.p.). It is also poison, due to the logic of pressures and rewards, whose binary opposition precludes a sane and genuine development of the individual, lost within the infinite cycle of training and matches and forced to endure it on his own, lonely among the others.

It is no surprise that, as a consequence, nearly all the students at E.T.A. are addicted to light drugs: “

Since the place's inception, there's always been a certain percentage of the high-calibre adolescent players who ... (...) rely on personal chemistry to manage ETA's special demands- dexidine or low volt methedrine before matches and benzodiazapenes to come back down after ... (with) beer and bongs in some discrete academy corner to short circuit the up-and-down cycle” (53).

Drugs help the students to be “neurologically reborn” and start the “gradual cycle all over again... this circular routine” (53). Far from being a source of liberation from the limited and demanding pressure of the tennis discipline, circular routine of this sort inevitably leads to a form of stasis that must heavily rely on addiction in order to be expressed.

Substance abuse and addiction is common to all social classes and individuals. There is a curious and significant connection that can be established between drugs and time, as narcotics and marijuana addicts use drugs to try to slow down time, craving complete stillness through a simple and effective equation: “(Quaaludes) + (not even that many beers) = getting whapped by the nearest sidewalk - as in you're walking innocently along down a sidewalk and out of nowhere the sidewalk comes rushing up to meet you: WHAP” (904-905). Marijuana is depicted as a substance that strongly and vehemently contributes to self-involved paralysis, something that the narrator calls “the cute Boston AA term for addictive-type thinking (...): Analysis-Paralysis” (203). This is a state of over-thinking a situation to the point that a decision or choice is never taken, as in the case described by Schwartz, where too many choices prevent the individual from making a concrete and definite decision. Compulsive thinkers are obsessed with self-directed thinking, something that is also defined as “Marijuana thinking” (324-343). Passivity and stasis are two of the main effects of substance addiction, and Hal, as we have said, is exemplary.

In a scene near the end of the novel, Hal is lying on the floor, caught in what might be assumed to be a kind of marijuana withdrawal. Communication is nullified by the position he holds as he feels

uncomfortable but not “wholly unpleasant” (839). His horizontal stasis is mistaken by Hal's friend Michael Pemulis as a state of inactivity provoked by an excess of thinking, an assumption that Hal does not seem to share. Thought-prophylaxis is what Jim Incandenza's son is suffering from at the moment, a form of unthinking stasis that may have been induced by the withdrawal. It is not the first time that Hal shows indifference if not hostility to the task of thinking, at least when it comes to truly address a particular problem with a deeper insight. We learn that he enjoys smoking marijuana in secret, though it never occurred to him the urgency to discover why his pleasure in such secretiveness is so high. And, later in the novel, Hal does show a consistent and static inability to decide and perceive how he feels about anything and anyone, members of his family, friends and himself alike. Boswell's assumption that Hal's addiction is not limited to drugs, but to a layered type of thinking. As the narrator says in one of the first chapters of the novel, “Most Substance-addicted people are also addicted to thinking, meaning they have a compulsive and unhealthy relationship with their own thinking” (203). Stasis appears to originate multiple times from such an obsessive, unhealthy way of thinking, and Hal exemplifies with extreme precision the distress at the core of this particular addiction, wondering “not for the first time, whether he might deep down be a secret snob about collar color issues... then whether the fact that he's capable of wondering whether he's a snob attenuates the possibility that he's really a snob” (335). As an unhealthy thinking-addict, Hal ponders obsessively about himself and the way he thinks about himself, gradually becoming imprisoned in a “paralytic thought-helix” (335), a form of psychical stasis that may be associated with the one that haunts the drug-addict Ken Erdedy and thwarts any possible movement toward a different condition. A hero of self-consciousness and hiddenness, Hal is “blank, inert, silent, frightening, mute” (838). As we follow his thoughts and story through the course of the novel, Hal does little to deny that he is devoid of inner life, a mere function of something higher and bigger than him. His psychical condition resembles in many respects the same paralyzing condition of despair experienced by the Kierkegaardian aesthete: “

I lie prostrate, inert; the only thing I see is emptiness, the only thing I live on is emptiness, the only thing I move in is emptiness. I do not even suffer pain. (...) If I were to become aware of an idea that joined the finite and the infinite. But my soul's poisonous doubt consumes everything” (Kierkegaard, 43).

Realizing that inside him there is nothing at all, being devoid of himself as if he were a machine, Hal

has long been identified by critics as the perfect representative of his generation. I do not want to stress any longer the postmodernist definition of contemporary man. It has already been noticed that Postmodernism and U.S. culture have managed to free the individual from the traditional limitations posed by pre-modern societies, to the point that he is no longer bound to any form of cultural ethic, but to individual pleasure. Immediate gratification is the only value that the contemporary self has to search for and try to satisfy. Wallace insists on claiming, as we have discussed in the introduction, that Postmodernism's liberation has turned itself to be a new and more crippling prison for the individual. There is no use denying it, as nearly all the characters in *Infinite Jest* appear to contribute to their own entrapment. Drugs and entertainment offer a way out of the cage of self-consciousness that, as Marshall Boswell claims, "often results, paradoxically, in the construction of an even more confining cage, such that "what looks like the cage's exit is actually the bars of the cage" (222). Kierkegaard's three forms of despair can be useful to understand the existentialist contribution made by the Danish philosopher in the development of the theme of stasis depicted in *Infinite Jest*. A first definition of the notion of despair should pay attention to the three different forms of which the sickness is made: despair not to be conscious of having a self, despair not to will to be a self, despair to will to be oneself. As almost all of *Infinite Jest*'s characters suffer from the Kierkegaardian form of despair of not wanting to be themselves, drugs offer an alternative world in which to feel at ease and escape from the encaging "psychic pressures" of self-consciousness and the existential task of becoming themselves. It takes all our suspension of disbelief to notice, acknowledge and accept Lyle, the weight room guru at E.T.A. He is one of the most bizarre characters of the novel, a champion of absurdism. Being a symbol of stasis and equilibrium, he spends most of his time perched at the top of the towel dispenser, in the lotus position. His sole source of nourishment is the sweat of the boys' bodies, which Lyle licks off after they work out, giving them in turn general life advices. Though unusual, his behavior is described by the narrator as nothing of that sort, and even more strange and curious is the fact that every student at E.T.A. fully accepts him and his odd conduct. In the first scenes of the book, Lyle is seen secretly offering advice to sweaty students. One of his first wise suggestions, under the guise of an ancient Oriental proverb, is "Do not let the weight (one) would pull to himself exceed his own personal weight" (128). It is a remarkable phrase that sums up well the personal conflict of most of *Infinite Jest*'s characters. He remains in the same place all day, and receives nourishment from the students in exchange for wise words that seem to share no relation with the limited reality of the academy or the inner life of the students who gather asking for advice. Lyle is close to Mario Incandenza, whom he sometimes employs to speak to players struggling with self-esteem. What does Wallace aim to demonstrate, with such an eccentric and weird figure? It has long been debated whether Lyle is used by Wallace as a means to discuss the role of religion. I do not

want to enter into a topic so wide and deep and complex that may lead me astray from what I am attempting to analyse. The thing I find particularly relevant about Lyle is the context in which Wallace decided to put him. At E.T.A., universally acknowledged as an academy where students are put into constant pressure as they are expected to excel as tennis players, Lyle appears to counterbalance the crippling, anxious, besetting teachings of coaches like Schtitt by giving them secretly advice and reassurance. Students at E.T.A. must surrender to something greater than themselves, a condition shared by Ennet residents and A.F.R. members, though in a totally different way.

Lyle's advices and wise words provide the E.T.A. students with motivational pills that help them face the abhorrent pressure of the game, as well as the hard conditioning they are required to sustain on a daily basis. ETA students aim to enter into the world of tennis as professionals. The purpose is addictive, for it requires "myriad sacrifices and interminable repetition"(Harris) in order to be achieved. As LaMont Chu admits to Lyle, such a constant pressure can rapidly become an obsession and lead to a form of stasis that the young tennis player believes fame and personal success can overcome. Being the academy's sage, Lyle instantly replies to him that "Fame is not the exit from any cage" because: "

After the first photograph has been in a magazine, the famous men do not enjoy their photographs in magazines so much as they fear that their photographs will cease to appear in magazines" (389).

Fame is but another side of imprisonment. It is not an escape from the specific form of despair that plagues the individual, a condition that Kierkegaard had mentioned in the figure of the aesthete.

Lyle's way of living is closely associated with a Buddhist's kind of lifestyle. It is built and founded upon an avoidance of extremes. Why does Lyle tell Ortho Stice to not underestimate any object? What does such an ambiguous and cryptic advice actually mean? Is there a hidden connection between the static Guru's words and the appearance of J.O. Incandenza at Ennet House? It has been noticed that the advice recalls James Incandenza's obsession with objects as means that must be taken and kept under control.

STASIS OF COMMUNICATION

For Hayles, “actions have consequences that rebound to the self because everything is connected with everything else” (693). This is true. In fact, if we consider the main characters of the novel, there is a sort of inner and tacitly combined connection between Gately and Hal, a reversed symmetry, so much as it is also evident the closeness between James and Hal with regard to finding a way to communicate with one another.

Mostly all of the events that take place at E.T.A. follow the life of Hal Incandenza during his senior year at the tennis academy. Hal is the youngest of the Incandenza family and, together with Gately, has commonly be referred to as the main protagonist of the novel. A prodigal son and talented tennis player, he has a difficult relationship with all those around him. Every time he interacts with someone we are always left with a feeling that no conversation or connection has really taken place. Throughout the novel, it is a mixture of stasis of communication and addiction that marks and effects Hal's personality. Nevertheless, his language skills know no comparison with anyone in the book. He reads and memorizes the *Oxford English Dictionary* in its entirety, consumes libraries, and like his mother Avril he often corrects his friends' grammar. His school essays are widely read and lauded. He does possess all the elements and abilities that could suggest he is a character able to realize himself and escape from any sort of cage, whether of addiction or lack of communication.

Hal does not want the others to discover how he feels, partly because of his emptiness or anhedonia, a kind of spiritual sickness in which the individual loses the ability to feel pleasure or joy or enthusiasm for things that, once, held great importance and meaning for him. Anhedonia is a form of death in life, “a psychic numbing” (698), it is a form of stasis of communication that prevents the individual from having any positive and meaningful dialogue with anyone. Hal does hide from social interaction and is addicted to marijuana. His first night at E.T.A. is recalled as a nightmare where total evil happens to surround him and disturb his sleep. Avril considers those who fear to involve themselves in tasks that require responsibility for their own choices as “Not quite there. Blank. Distant. Muted. Wooden. Deadened. Disconnected” (767). As a result, we read that Hal dwells in a static condition due to his unwillingness to show his real emotions, for fear of taking responsibility and accepting the reality of his condition. There is a scene in *Infinite Jest* in which Hal's inner conflict is particularly accurate in showing how stasis has eventually overcome his “inner workings” . Hal and

Orin have a phone call in which Orin tries to discuss with him Jim's suicide. While being asked about his father's death, Hal cuts off his toenails into a wastebasket placed in the room, managing to land the majority of them there. At every successful landing he experiences the pleasant feeling of "Being in the Zone. (...) And once the magic descends you don't want to change even the smallest detail. You don't know what concordance of factors and variables yields that calibrated can't-miss feeling, and you don't want to spoil the magic by trying to figure it out" (243).

As if clipping his toenails while hearing his brother attempting to discuss with him about their father's suicide were not enough, Hal states, "I haven't even started on the right foot yet... I'm self conscious and afraid... frozen with aboriginal terror" (248). The frozen aboriginal terror that Hal accuses is a kind of stasis that has its roots in the fear of having to face pain and behave according to what Camus described in *The Rebel* as the sole form of existence that is worth living and striving for.

This tremendously emotional and yet static reaction results from a conflicted state of mind that is exactly the same one that Avril takes as an example when she confronts Mario about the feeling of not being "oneself". She says these people are "frozen inside, emotionally" (766). A few sentences later, after Orin presses him for more questions, Hal says, "I'm still frozen, by the way" (249). Unfortunately for Hal his stasis is a sort of catatonic fear of moving, or adjusting variables. Hal thinks that, if he remains still, he won't have to fear playing at the game of "life and death." Connection with his brother appears blighted and obstructed from the beginning. During the first telephonic conversation between Orin and Hal, the exchange of words shares the same words of a Beatles song titled "I Want to Tell You". The meaning of the dialogue is hidden by the cryptic speech employed by both Hal and Orin, as they merely repeat the lyrics of the song without giving us any further detail concerning the reason of Orin's call: "

His way of answering the phone sounded like 'Myellow.' I want to tell you,' the voice said. 'My head is filled with things to say.' . . . I don't mind,' Hal said softly. 'I could wait forever.' That's what you think,' the voice said. The connection was cut. It had been Orin" (32).

As the mini-chapter ends with Mario asking Hal with whom he was talking at the phone, and Hal answering "No one you know, I don't think"(33), we are left with a sense of doubt and a feeling of having been cheated, as stasis of communication prevents us from posing more meaningful formulations.

Another crucial section of our understanding of this type of stasis is provided by the Eschaton Game. An astonishingly difficult game, Eschaton serves as the background for Hal's fall into the "womb of solipsism" (839) that his father tried so emphatically to prevent. The game is a simulation of a nuclear apocalypse, where tennis courts represent the world and the players throw tennis balls, disguised as missiles, with their rackets.

During the game, Hal plunges into an existential crisis, exacerbated by addiction and self-reflection. He knows that using marijuana helps him escape the necessity of choice and the responsibility it takes. As he contemplates his static condition, he becomes aware that he is unable to make any relevant decision about his duties at the academy and the approaching future outside E.T.A, and he falls into a kind of reverie that prefigures, later in the novel, Hal's descent into a nightmarish form of solipsism:

“

I was moving down the damp hall when it hit. I don't know where it came from. It was some variant of the telescopically self-conscious panic that can be so devastating during a match.(...) But the panic was there too, endocrinal, paralyzing, and with an overcognitive, bad-trip-like element that I didn't recognize from the very visceral on-court attacks of fear” (896).

As the game progresses and snow begins to fall on the field, the players are less and less able to clearly distinguish between reality and fiction, as they start to discuss whether the snow falling on the field belongs to the game or not. Such an innocent question quickly leads to chaos and paralysis, and the players start a debate on the difference between map and territory that degenerates into a debacle:

“

Eschaton gentlemen is about logic and axiom and mathematical probity and discipline and verity and order...It's like the one ground-rule boundary that keeps Eschaton from degenerating into chaos” (338).

Eschaton's debacle starts right after Ingersoll breaks the one rule of the game, by attacking the map

instead of the territory: “The real world's what the map here stands for (...) Real-world snow isn't a factor if it's falling on the fucking map” (334).

The debate around the difference between map and territory is still impending, but does not provide us with a better understanding of how stasis works. Hal watches the game from the sidelines, “paralyzed with absorption” (340). He has already begun to withdraw from marijuana, a decision that it has been argued might have been the primary cause of his disconnection and static condition. He “finds himself riveted at something about the degenerating game that seems so terribly abstract and fraught with implications and consequences that even thinking about how to articulate it seems so complexly stressful that being almost incapacitated with absorption is almost the only way out of the complex stress” (340). Hal fears associating with the real world because of it being “fraught with implications and consequences.” Later on in the scene where Hal watches some of Himself's cartridges, he expresses this fear again: “There seemed to be so many implications even to thinking about sitting up and standing up and exiting V.R.5 and taking a certain variable-according-to-stride-length number of steps to the stairwell door...that just the thought of getting up made [him] glad [he] was lying on the floor” (900).

Hal has a certain feeling that if he participates in the real world he would experience a sort of debacle Eschaton-like. He decides to retreat, hiding in himself and assuming a calculating, intellectual, paralyzed state as an attempt to face the fear of being involved in the chaos of the real world.

The third chapter of *Infinite Jest* is structured as a long and intricate dialogue between Hal and his father James Orin Incandenza. Sound effects are placed inside the chapter and give a sort of comical interruption to the speech. It is the Year of The Tucks Medicated Pad, and Hal is ten. I.T.M.P. is placed seven years before the Year of Glad. In this specific section of the novel, James Incandenza is disguised as a “professional conversationalist” in an attempt to communicate with Hal. The premises of the impending speech are anything but suspicious. Why should James take the role of someone else in order to talk with his son? What is the reason that makes the conversation a failed attempt of connection between them? First of all, Hal's father, also called by his son as Himself, has the strong and obsessive belief that Hal is unable to speak. As the exchange of words progresses, Himself begins to believe his son is not answering to his questions. Jim's trouble in communicating with Hal mirrors the same paralyzing relationship between Jim and Hal's grandfather. This is the reason why he decides to disguise himself as a “professional conversationalist”, so as to inscribe the attempted dialogue into the formal patterns of a therapy-inspired interaction that may help his son . Suffice it to say that such conversation is doomed to fail, following nearly the same scheme that

shapes all the conversations and dialogues in *Infinite Jest*.

At the beginning of the conversation we discover that Jim's relationship with his son is surreal if non-existent at all. He even mistakes Hal's real age, as he asks him: “

' You're how old, Hal, fourteen?'

' I'll be eleven in June. Are you a dentist? Is this like a dental consult?'" (27).

The conversation is immediately interrupted by Jim noticing that Hal's mouth is so dry it could prevent him from having a good and propositive conversation with his father. Jim's recursively asking Hal if he knows the meaning of the word “implore” is telling, for we know that he is just striving to connect with his son, and the comic effects enacted by the sounds of Hal's drinking a soda drink “SPFFFT (...) MYURP... SHULGSPAHHH” do not produce in the reader anything but the grave and sad awareness that both father and son are confined into the cage of solipsism, each according to his own personal demons. This static and conflicted scene gives us a hint of Hal's peculiar resistance to openness and sentimental naiveté that will be later developed and exacerbated after Jim's suicide. Jim is constantly focused on reminding Hal that he is a professional conversationalist. In other words, he is trying to persuade both himself and his son that the lack of mutual connection is by no means to ascribe to Jim's faults in properly educating Hal, even if he had been an absent father figure for him, neglecting his paternal responsibilities and presence, resorting to engage himself for the last moments of his life with avant-garde cinema.

Jim's speech grows more and more technical as the artificial conversation progresses, to the point of becoming an absurdly complicated muddle of words: “

' ...that (Avril) introduction of esoteric mnemonic steroids, stereochemically not dissimilar to your father's own daily hypodermic “megavitamin” supplement derived from a certain organic testosterone-regeneration compound distilled by the Jivaro shamen of the South-Central L-A- basin, into your innocent-looking bowl of

morning Ralston..." (30).

Hal recognizes the falsity of Jim's disguise as a professional conversationalist. For instance, he notices how " 'Your nose is pointing at your lap.' and continues to retort that ' is Himself still having this hallucination I never speak? Is that why he put the Moms up to having me bike up here? (...)" (29).

The dialogue gets even worse, with Jim proposing Hal they discuss Byzantine erotica and even accusing him of being affiliated with a pan-Canadian terrorist group guided by M. DuPlessis and Luria P. , as Avril Incandenza is of Quebecois origin.⁴The scene ends up being a complete failure, as no sort of connection has happened to be established and Jim keeps on repeating his son's name in a latest, desperate attempt at talking with him: "

' Son?'
'...'
'*Son?*'" (Italics in the original, 31).

Incandenza's reaction to his son's "retreat to the periphery of life's frame" is the ultimate lead to the filming of the Infinite Jest cartridge. What causes the shift to the first person at the beginning of the book? Does this change of narrative perspective parallel Hal's definitive loss of control over himself, being totally detached and disconnected from the others in a way that has been gradually foregrounded later in the story? It is the only moment, besides another one near the end of the novel, in which Hal is the narrator of the scene. On both occasions he is seated or lying horizontally in a state of passivity and inertia. While in the latter case he suffers from thought-prophilaxis, in the initial scene he seems mentally healthy and conscious of the situation surrounding him.

Surprisingly enough, first-person narration coincides with scenes where Hal's psychological condition worsens to the point that he is apparently unable to communicate with other people in a

⁴ Avril's connection with anti-O.N.A.N. operatives such as M.DuPlessis and Luria P, has lead to an interpretative trail that links Hal's mother with A.F.R.'s invasion of the Academy at the end of the novel. We are inclined to agree with such a curious and intriguing explanation, although it does not lead to a definite and thorough explanation of the whole book, but rather hints at a critical issue that will be taken into consideration later in the study.

Wittgensteinian way, as Gavin Cobb notes in his essay “Alcoholics Polyphonous: Wittgenstein's linguistic philosophy in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*”: “

Hal has lost the ability to function in certain language-games” (Cobb,10).

Such an assertion counterbalances Charles Tavis' remark at the beginning of the novel, as he says to the Deans that “Hal here functions, you ass. Given a supportive situation. He's fine when he's by himself” (15).

It was mentioned before that “Ennui and jaded irony” is part of U.S. cultural inheritance, and it has long been employed by postmodern writers as a critical tool to study, analyse and understand contemporary society. In *Infinite Jest* irony and self-reference become the dominant force aimed at hiding Hal's constant sense of loneliness and causing him to fall into that form of stasis which lacks appropriate words and facial expressions to be openly and extensively uttered: “

Hal himself hasn't had a bona fide 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 - but in fact he's far more robotic than John Wayne” (694).

We discover that the relationship with Avril Incandenza and her sons is marred by the same stasis of which lack of communication is the most predominant form. Avril is the E.T.A. Dean of Academic Affairs and of Females. An “agoraphobic workaholic and obsessive-compulsive” (42), she is the center of the Incandenza family, “The Black Hole of Human Attention” (521). She has phobias about uncleanliness and disease and a pathological need to patrol the Academy and watch over her two youngest sons, Hal and Mario. Orin believes she runs the family with a dictatorial stance and gives them only the illusion of choice. Critics have also pointed out that James Incandenza secretly believed he could only connect with his children through her. Curiously, this character is the least one someone would consider to empathize with or relate to, due to her false and pretentious kind of openness that Avril shares with her half-brother Charles Tavis, with whom she is also apparently having a

relationship. She constantly strives to show compassion and hospitality, boasting an outer-directness that each member of her family (save perhaps Mario) immediately detects as artificial, a fake and superficial mask of earnestness. She aims to perform as an altruist and caring mother, nurturing her sons and paying attention to their personal needs; and yet she does not act according to her real feelings, but she is moved under the rule of an ideal image that is totally distant from the contingency of her limited vision. Avril's relationship with Orin is a kind of closed, encaging narrative that mirrors the same conflicted legacy experienced by Hal and J.O.I. Hal is aware of her affectation, as he angrily retorts that though she strives to show how much she appears to care about her sons, she does not know a thing about him and how he feels: “

One of his troubles with his Moms is the fact that Avril Incandenza believes 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” (694).

Avril's altruism and love for his sons appears to be misleading. Marlon Bain, an employee of Saprogenic Greetings who is affiliated with Hugh Steeply, cunningly compares her behaviour to that of a hideous philanthropist who “views the recipients of his charity not as persons so much as pieces of exercise equipment on which he can develop and demonstrate his own virtue” (1052).

Avril's self-reflexivity is one of the most developed and detailed in the novel, a psychological condition that is vastly shared by all the Incandenzas save Mario, and a source of paralysis that further exacerbates feeling of loneliness and inertia: “

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” (694).

I strongly believe that Hal, with his self-reflexivity, addiction and desire to hide is very similar to Orin, to the point that what they have in common is their pathological inwardness. Note 269 on page 1048 reports a response written by Marlon Bain to Hugh Steeply, disguised as the female reporter/journalist Helen Steeply. Excerpts from the response are particularly relevant in shaping the connection between the two brothers, as we soon discover that “Orin Incandenza is the *least open*

man I know” (1048). It is then revealed that Orin is not “a particularly skillful liar”, which is the reason, according to Marlon Bain, why he abandoned the use of drugs at an early age, because, “If you are going to do serious drugs while you are still a minor and under your parents' roof, you are going to have to lie often and lie well” (1048). Orin cannot lie with his mother, as Marlon recalls when he recounts the brutal death of the Incandenza family dog S. Johnson, caused by Orin under the influence of drugs while he was driving Avril's car. S. Johnson was hooked to the back of the car and no one of the two friends had noticed it, until it was too late. It is curious to notice that Avril cries more about S. Johnson's death than she does about her husband's. A famous womanizer, Orin's way of loving resembles more a form of vampirism than an effort at making connections and establishing an interrelated communication with the other. He depends upon the women he experiences sexual intimacy with and tends to objectify them. It is ironical that he labels them “Subjects”, a form of denial that bears the same meaning of Jim's self-proclaimed definition of “professional conversationalist”. It has been noted that Orin's romantic encounters are merely an attempt to achieve wholeness and reconnect with “an interior core that has been replaced/displaced” (153).

Molly Notkins, a minor character in *Infinite Jest*, hints at a possible sexual abuse committed by Avril against Orin when he was a child, a situation that could have lasted for several years. Do we have to trust Molly's allegations, given that she has been demonstrated to be an unreliable character? Readers are often left with this sense of doubt while they read.

Unsurprisingly, Orin shapes his relationship with women according to an artificial simulation of affection, exemplified by the following proposal: “Tell me what sort of man you prefer, and then I'll affect the demeanor of that man” (1048). Behind his desires, it has been noted, there lie feelings of weakness of oedipal nature, as his favorite intercourses are those with young mothers with sons. Orin's desire of fulfillment is narcissistic, a “craving for acceptance” that he has always tried to hide by showing a type of “sincerity with a motive”, a false artificial openness aimed at objectifying each one of the several “Subjects” with whom he shares sexual intimacy: “

It feels to the punter rather to be about hope, an immense wide-as-the-sky hope of finding something in each Subject's fluttering face, a something the same that will propitiate hope, somehow, pay its tribute, the need to be assured that for a moment he has her and is what she sees and all she sees... that for one second she loves him too much to stand it, that she must, she feels, have him, must take him inside or else dissolve into worse than nothing” (566).

Besides his phone call on page 32, we are given the opportunity to read about Orin for the first time after a brief dialogue between Hal and Mario, as the section documents a glimpse of his private life in his condominium. Orin is described as living in a state of disconnection and psychological precariousness: “He wakes up soaked, fetally curled, entombed in that kind of psychic darkness where you're dreading whatever you think of” (42).

The scene is filled with fearful images and nightmares. Giant tropical cockroaches sometimes come out of the drains in Orin's bathroom. He usually traps them inside big glass tumblers as a way to asphyxiate them: “

The yellow tile floor of the bathroom is sometimes a little obstacle course of glasses with huge roaches dying inside, stoically, just sitting there, the glasses gradually steaming up with roach-dioxide. The whole thing makes Orin sick. Now he figures the hotter the show's water, the less chance any small armored vehicle is going to feel like coming out of the drain while he's in there” (45).

It is relevant to point out how this obsessive resolution will be mirrored at the end of the novel, as Orin is being given a technical interview by members of the A.F.R., caged in an enormous glass tumbler. Apparently, his last apparition in the story coincides with him being interviewed by the A.F.R., because the terrorist group suspects that he knows where the lethal cartridge is hidden. Though Hal, at the beginning of the book, mentions that his Orin will survive, we are left with the doubt whether he manages or not to escape from the cage. The terrorist cell A.F.R. believes him to be a crucial target for uncovering the secret of the Entertainment. As a method of torture the interviewers gradually fill the cage with cockroaches, so as to terrorize Orin and force him to speak. Endnote 110 provides with a subtle and direct example of the kind of stasis of communication emerging from the absent relationship between mother and son. It somehow reflects the same one experienced by Jim and Hal. The endnote consists of four different sections. The first one is a letter from Avril to Orin so infused with love and care that it reveals Avril's disturbed, falsely outer-directed personality, which is mocked by the narrator from the beginning: “

A moving example of the sorts of physical-post mail Mrs. Avril Incandenza has sent her eldest child Orin since the *felo de se* of Dr. J.O. Incandenza, the sort of chirpily quotidian mail that – here's the moving part – seems to imply a context of regular inter-party communication, still” (1006).

Orin's answer is written as an icily-cold mail that is barely an acknowledgment of Avril's message. He is disguised as an Assistant Mailroom Technician named Jethro Bodine, and refers to himself using the third person, thus fostering the emotional distance between him and his mother. While dating Orin, Joelle Van Dyne came to meet Avril Incandenza, and she was immediately hit by Avril's affection. Hal's mother faked politeness in numerous occasions, as in the case of Joelle's first Thanksgiving with Orin's family. In the scene we discover that Avril “worked unobtrusively hard... to make Joelle feel like a welcomed and esteemed part of the family gathering – and something about the woman made every follicle on Joelle's body pucker and distend” (744).

As it has been previously implied, Avril tends to show behavioural similarities with another character in *Infinite Jest*, Charles Tavis. Headmaster at E.T.A., Charles is James Incandenza's brother-in-law. His openness and sincerity towards the others has long been deemed a way to hide himself. He is the one who runs the tennis academy after Jim Incandenza dies, and is described as a complex and annoying speaker because of “the pathological openness of his manner, the way he thinks out loud about thinking out loud” (519). Tavis constantly questions his own words and searches for a way to minimize himself so exhaustively that listening to him can lead to a sense of drowsiness, a numbing of reason which everyone of his interlocutors falls victim of: “He'd apologize profusely when you had no idea what that sentence meant and say maybe the obfuscation had been unconsciously deliberate, out of some kind of embarrassment [on his part]” (516).

Self-consciousness is one of the most predominant traits of Charles Tavis's personality: “

... the child C.T. had been too self-conscious and awkward to join right in with any group of the kids clustered around, talking or plotting or whatever, and so Avril said she'd watch him just kind of drift from cluster to cluster and lurk around creepily on the fringe, listening, but that he'd always say, loudly, in some lull in the group's conversation, something like “I'm afraid I'm really far too self-conscious to join in here, so I'm just going to lurk creepily at the fringe and listen, if that's all right, just so you know” and so on” (517).

Tavis' openness fails to inspire in others any form of empathy. It is no surprise, for instance, that one of Enfield students, confronted to reflect upon Jim's step-brother, says "that pathological openness is about as seductive as Tourette's syndrome" (1048).

The stasis of communication between Tavis and the others is due to his obsessive self-consciousness coupled with a maximalist style of speech, aspects that are frequently found in people who feel weak and insecure. To a certain extent, C.T.'s negative openness mirrors Hal's hiddenness on the grounds that both uncle and nephew are unable to open up and reveal their own feelings: "

Tavis is terribly shy around people and tries to hide it by being very open and expansive and wordy and bluff... Tavis is very open and expansive and wordy, but so clearly uses these qualities as a kind of shield that it betrays a frightened vulnerability almost impossible not to feel for" (517).

For Tavis, honesty is an empty form because he cannot be honest with himself. He can only talk about all the possible things he might be feeling, like Hal's apathetic pondering of the words "joie and value" (690), in a listless form that generates paralysis and an impossibility to establish meaningful connections: "

He wasn't in it for the Thank-You's, that a person who did a service for somebody's gratitude was more like a 2-D cut out image than a bona fide person, at least that's what he thought, he said what did Hal and Avril and Mario think? was he a genuine 3-D person? Was he perhaps just rationalizing some legitimate hurt?" (286).

His character considers all the implications that reacting for having done something without receiving a simple thank-you may produce. In fact, Tavis "wonders if he minds, wonders if he should mind, and wonders if his motives for the action that should have been thanked were honest in the first place" (Daverman, n.p.).

Addiction, narcissism, irony, cynicism and self-loathing are all static cycles belonging to the

corrupted and competitive E.T.A. institution, and therapy sessions do not provide the proper instruments to address the problem, as in the case of Dr. Rusk. Dr. Rusk, the staff therapist at the tennis academy, is the perfect example of a form of stasis that recurs throughout the novel. Her method of dealing with his students is very complex and intellectual, which is the reason why it is completely unhelpful. Dr. Rusk is “regarded by the kids as whatever’s just slightly worse than useless” (437). Nobody likes her approach, on the grounds that it is too analytical and intellectual, incapable of truly identify and empathize with people's emotions and feelings. It may suffice for our understanding of her a brief quote taken by one of the first encounter between Dr. Rusk and a student of the academy: “

On the level of objects and a protective infantile omnipotence where you experience magical thinking and 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” (550).

The student grows panicked to the point that he thinks counterphobia means fear of linoleum, but Dr. Rusk is unable to explain herself better. Stasis of communication is there shown as similar to that experienced by Hal in his one-way interaction with the grief-therapist or with his brother Orin. Stasis of communication cannot be overcome by any type of therapy for a simple and yet ineludible reason, an aspect that Books Daverman has pointed out as being symptomatic of the entire novel's structure: “

Therapy is too much like these other systems because it is based on success-failure dichotomy, it has hierarchal relationships, and it is full of over-intellectualized meaningless terms. Therapy is represented negatively because Infinite Jest is an attempt to use narrative systems to talk about very specific problems in the narratives of American culture. Therapy shares too many attributes of its narrative system with other American narratives, so it is not a good narrative form for Infinite Jest_to appropriate. Being founded upon a success-failure dichotomy, therapy, whether in the form of grief-therapy or disguised as a professional conversation or a medical consultancy, is always mocked and constantly parodied by the postmodern eye of the author, who refutes it and distrusts its formal, detached and artificial method” (Daverman, n.p.).

ENNET HOUSE STASIS OF ADDICTION

We have said that addiction is one of the key themes of the novel *Infinite Jest*. Throughout the story we come to meet hundreds of characters who suffer from a particular, specific, self-destructive form of addiction. We have also stated how broad and multifaceted addiction can be, as most of the characters are addicted to all those things that can offer them an escape from their suffering. Self-reflection, television and drugs are the predominant forms of addiction the reader encounters during her journey through the book, whose major plots demand to be read in light of one another. I would like to maintain the overall claim that the most important addiction in *Infinite Jest* is that to substances, as almost all the main characters have experienced drug dependence to a certain extent. Addiction is the principal issue at stake in the second major plot of the novel, which focuses on Don Gately and his process of drug-recovery at the Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House. It is no surprise that Ennet House is located at the bottom of the hill at whose peak is placed E.T.A., for the relationship between sport and drugs mirrors the subtle bond established by two forms of the same addiction (tennis competition and drug abuse). Although recreational marijuana is not typically associated with the pharmacological dependence characteristic of addiction related to heavy drugs, some characters in *Infinite Jest* seem to be addicted to it. Due to the enormous importance of his condition as a case-study for the portrayal of stasis in *Infinite Jest*, Ken Erdedy plays a crucial role as a subject for the depiction of a system of life that is entirely dominated by addiction. I am even inclined to argue that Wallace's treatment of this character has led to the most perfect, precious and precise representation of an individual suffering from addiction, a man to which both stasis of addiction and communication happen to befall. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator shows him, sick of his situation and willing to escape from it, as he waits for his dealer to deliver him 200 grams of marijuana. "Disgusted with himself" for being anxious to get a type of drug that has "stopped being fun anyway", he ponders why he does not like it anymore, and his body starts reacting with the evident signs of long-term addiction: his mouth is dry, his eyes are red and his face sags. Addiction to marijuana has left him bereft of his free will, a mental condition shared by many other characters in the novel who suffer from the same sickness. Unable to make any relevant and concrete choice for himself, he deliberately resolves to indulge in his addiction as a means to face the state of despair that shapes his inner workings and dominates his life.

According to Kierkegaard, the individual feels in despair every time he is offered a number of opportunities of existence from modern society and does not manage to make a concrete choice out

of any one of them. Believing that smoking the dose of marijuana will allow him to “shut the whole system down” (20), Ken Erdedy musters what remains of his will, his intellect and determination and states that, once the dealer is gone, the grams of marijuana will be the last ones he will ever consume. A steady resolution caresses his thoughts: he will smoke with such an impetus and energy that the experience will prove so dramatically unpleasant and repulsive to persuade him that he will never be tempted to repeat it again. In other words, he wants to kill his compulsive desire for drugs. It has taken the narrator almost ten pages to make Erdedy come to such a drastic decision. We are perfectly aware that his thoughts are those of a drug-addict caught in the process of self-reflective thinking. Though a noble and praiseworthy intent, this resolution will never satisfy his thirst. Then, all of a sudden, a change of situation stimulates the orchestration of what I would like to define as the most perfect enactment of stasis in the whole book. It is a brilliantly described state of despair, dramatic, intensely ferocious and almost unbearable to read. The phone rings at the same time of Ken's intercom to the front door's buzzer, and as soon as he tries to move toward the phone, he retracts and attempts to come closer to the intercom module, but then he moves back again to the phone, and then he tries “somehow to move toward both at once” (27), and stays there, paralyzed, if not catatonic, “entombed between the two sounds, without a thought in his head” (27). Before this critical point, the narrator makes subtle connection between the static figure of Erdedy and an insect keeping going in and out of a hole in the room. It is dark and has a shiny case. As the insect goes in and out of the hole, Erdedy keeps looking over at it, gradually turning his attention to its static, bulging and receding presence. “It didn't seem to do anything” he observes, “it just came out of the hole in the girder onto the edge of the steel shelf and sat there” (17). The insect lies on the shelf, as “pure presence”, and Erdedy feels they are closely associated, similar and desperately still as they both stand in the room in an infinite, crippling waiting loop.

Erdedy's despair is also mirrored by his inability to choose one among the several TP cartridges, as the narrator peculiarly insists on telling: “

He was unable to distract himself with the TP because he was unable to stay with any one entertainment cartridge for more than a few seconds. The moment he recognized what exactly was on one cartridge he had a strong anxious feeling that there was something more entertaining on another cartridge and that he was potentially missing it” (26).

This is a form of stasis closely resembling the kind of paralysis of infinite choices that Schwartz addresses as one of the most appalling issues contemporary society has to face. Too many choices to take care of and consider must inevitably mean that no choice can really be made, as the individual is caught in the desperate and vicious cycle of an infinite and restless pondering, from which there is no escape but lying motionless in a state of complete disconnection. It is undisputable that the second chapter of *Infinite Jest* provides with a precise and synthetic depiction of stasis, both of addiction and communication. In fact, Erdedy's static situation is fueled not only by an addiction to both substances and entertainment, but also by an "illness of the mind", provoked by lack of real communication and self-reflexivity that adumbrates the same kind of crisis that Hal will experience later in the book. We said that substance-addiction is strongly associated with addiction to thinking. In the case of Erdedy it is hard to believe that marijuana-addiction parallels this other kind of dependence, because, in fact, Erdedy shows no will or interest in examining the reason why he wants to shut down his life. For instance, it is said that "he was unsure what the thing inside him was and was unprepared to commit himself to the course of action that would be required to explore the question" (20). There is nothing that motivates his stasis but the addiction to a substance that does not generally leads to dependence. In fact, when Erdedy comes to Ennet House in order to recover from his marijuana-addiction, Gately "has a hard time identifying with anybody getting in enough trouble with weed to leave his job and condo to bunk in a room full of tattooed guys who smoke in their sleep" (361). And yet, Erdedy's paralysis stems from the same reasons that lie at the heart of some of the novel's most desperate addicts.

Though marijuana does not necessarily lead to addiction, as we have seen in the section dedicated to E.T.A. and its students, marijuana-induced stasis is one of the most predominant forms of stasis of the entire book, to the point that it even stimulates the creation of a kind of mental condition known as Marijuana Thinking: "

the increasing emotional abstraction, poverty of affect, and then total emotional catalepsy - the obsessive analyzing, finally the paralytic stasis that results from the obsessive analysis of all possible implications of both getting up from the couch and not getting up from the couch" (503).

No one can escape from this form of stasis, as Carlisle maintains: "

Anything that inspires addiction or obsession - substances, entertainment, beauty, secrecy - is dangerous in that it can lead to isolation, self-absorption and disconnection, to paralyzed stasis: an immobility that gathers like a force” (Carlisle, n.p.).

An attendant of an AA meeting said that when he was drunk he craved for sobriety and when he was sober he wanted to get drunk. He lived in this paralyzing mood for years, in a state of "death in life" so similar to the fate suffered by Ken Erdedy in his room. I will return to the world of AA meetings and their offering a potential escape from stasis later on: “

Some substance dependent persons...have been so broken by the time they first Come In that they don't care about stuff like substitution and banality, they'll give their left nut to trade their original dependence in for robotic platitudes and pep-rally cheer” (707).

Pamela Hoffman-Jeep, a peripheral character, provides a living example of the effects that stasis of addiction can produce, as the author depicts her as “horizontal, curled fetal on something soft, with all the hot slack facial intensity of a sleeping baby” (924). There is nothing that we as readers can deduce from Pamela's personal story, more than what the simple passage aforementioned says.

With regard to addiction in the limited perimeter of Ennet House, it should be mentioned the moment when Don Gately and Gene Fackelman watch “a recursive slo-mo loop of some creepy thing Fackelman liked that was just serial shots of flames from brass lighters, kitchen-matches, pilot lights, birthday candles, votive candles, pillar candles, birch shavings, Bunsen burners, etc” (935). They are both on drugs, (particularly on Dilaudid, which is a prescription painkiller) and spend day after day in a binge that makes them achieve a drug-induced stasis. Their lack of activity, ignoring "the ringing of the front door intercom" and that of the phone, mirrors the same paralytic stance of Ken Erdedy, at the beginning of the novel. Jim Incandenza's *Kinds of Light* plays in the background.

As a former addict, everytime Don Gately takes depressants he is described as becoming “this totally taciturn withdrawn dead-like person... sitting for hours real low in his canvas chair, practically lying in this chair whose canvas bulged and legs bowed out, speaking barely at all” (893). On the same page of the book, we get a totally opposite glimpse of his personality, as he is “a great and cheerful stand-up jolly-type guy off the nod” (893). As in the case of many recovering addicts' stories, taking drugs makes him crave for stillness, for a complete lack of action. Near the end of the novel, having been hospitalized as a consequence of gunshot wounds, Gately is recovering without the help of

painkillers, as he accepts suffering as a way to become a better man and accept the serenity that suffering necessarily involves. Ironically, his immobility derives not from the use of depressants, but as a consequence of a brawl in which he saves the life of Randy Lenz and gets shot in an arm. It is his inborn altruism and sense of duty, which, while being irrelevant in thwarting him from reaching his personal “bottom”, have forced the former addict to deal with stasis and eventually accomplish a spiritual acquiescence, thus becoming what Hal hails as the hero of contemporary age, “the hero of non-action, the catatonic hero” (142).

STASIS OF COMMUNICATION
GATELY AND THE WRAITH OF JAMES INCANDEZA

In order to find one of the most relevant scenes in which stasis of communication is given its strongest grip in *Ennet House*, we have to look at the dialogue between Gately and the wraith of James Orin Incandenza. Wounded by a gunshot accident, Gately is bedridden in the hospital room, constantly going in and out of consciousness as a result of the wound and the pain inflicted by the gunshot wound. As he lies on the bed, he gazes at the “bulging and receding” ceiling as if it were the reflection of his own personal condition and signalling the imminent interaction with the wraith. The scene starts at page 828, with Gately opening his eyes and realizing that he has just had a recurring dream, which features an Oriental woman looking down at him and a barking dog in the distance. As the paragraph progresses, Gately “opens his eyes again”, realizing he has fallen asleep again and had another dream just before waking up to the sound of crying which comes from the patient lying in the bed next to him. Announced through a series of apparitions as he flickers in and out the room, the old wraith “stays in one spot long enough for Gately to really check him out” (829). The wraith “could move at the speed of quanta and be anywhere anytime and hear in symphonic toto the thoughts of animate men, but it couldn't ordinarily affect anybody or anything solid” (831). The only way for the old ghost to communicate is to “use somebody's like internal brain-voice”, as the wraith “exist... in a totally different Heisenbergian dimension of rate-change and time-passage (so that) normal animate men's actions and motions look, to a wraith, to be occurring at about the rate a clock's hour-hand moves, and are just as interesting to look at” (831). Later on we discover that, due to the Heisenbergian dimension of time, for humans to see a wraith, the wraith has to stand still for long periods of time, static and paralyzed. The ghost of Incandenza, in order to interact with Gately, says that he has been sitting on the chair by Gately's bedside for three weeks. It is curious and relevant that stasis is the sole means by which the wraith manages to communicate with Gately. In fact, the communication between the ghost and the former drug addict cannot be considered a proper conversation among peers. There is no exchange of words, for Gately has a tube in his throat that prevents him from speaking and the wraith has to put words inside his brain “in a sort of lexical rape”. As a result, Gately's head gets progressively filled with words he is unfamiliar with such as ACCIACCATURA, CHIAROSCURO, ANNULATE, PIROUETTE, “which term Gately knows for a fact he doesn't have any idea what it means and no reason to be thinking it with roaring force” (832), BRICOLAGE, CIRCUMAMBIENTFOUNDDRAMALEVIRATEMARRIAGE and several others.

There is, in fact, one moment of connection and reciprocal understanding, set in the precise moment when Gately's shoulder “sends up a flare of pain so sickening Gately's afraid he might shit the bed”, and the wraith “gasps and almost falls off the monitor as if he can totally empathize with the dextral flare” (839). Aside from that brief exchange of impressions, the relationship remains surreal and complicated, to the point that we as readers are entitled to ask ourselves: what is then the main reason of Incandenza's apparition in the room by Don's bedside? What does the author of the movie *Infinite Jest* want from him? Apparently, the wraith wishes to communicate with his son. He keeps mentioning him throughout the course of the monologue, and Gately does not know why he talks with him, instead of “holding very still for wraith-months and trying to have an interface with the fucking son” (840). We, too, as readers of *Infinite Jest*, are interested in the narrative possibilities that such a curious scene can lead to. Is it plausible that the brief encounter between the wraith and the other major character of the novel might provide a leap forward, a movement toward a possible plot resolution, inspire a development in the overall structure of the story, reinforce the relationship between Hal and Gately, or become exactly the same sort of static communication that almost all the characters in the book share with one another?

JOI's presence as a wraith has previously been mentioned and hinted at several times during the course of the story. He is responsible for a series of creepy disturbances inside E.T.A., strange happenings aimed at prefiguring his future apparition. He moves Ortho's bed, for instance, and hovers around the rooms of Enfield making eerie sounds. Gately is skeptical about the wraith's real intentions, and wonders whether he is “a message from a Higher Power about sobriety and death” (840) that came to give him support and aid for his battle against addiction. We too are entitled to agree with Elizabeth Freudenthal's perplexity: If the wraith can move objects, why not grasp a pen to write more useful and specific verbal warnings? Why choose only some of Enfield's players and not those who may believe him, such as his unfazeable son Mario? Why focus on objects with no logical relationship to the Quebecois threat or to those who may head it off?” (204).

J. Karnicky in his “Kinds of stasis in David Foster Wallace” claims that the real reason why the wraith chooses Gately as the ideal interlocutor of the conversation, is to be found in Gately's immobility. We have pointed out that, in order to talk with a human being, wraiths have to stand still for long periods of time. The ghost of Jim Incandenza has spent three weeks of his time by Gately's bedside. He knows that the former drug addict is unmoving in his hospital room due to the gunshot wounds suffered during the A.F.R. attack and is constantly in and out of consciousness, haunted by recurrent dreams and unable to confer with anyone who approaches him with the intention to talk. Gately questions if the wraith is real or “a sort of epiphanyish visitation from Gately's personally confused understanding

of God, a Higher Power or something, maybe sort of like the legendary Pulsing Blue Light (...) that turned out to be God telling him how to stay sober via starting AA and Carrying The Message” (833). What if the ghost might be the pain itself, the suffering that Gately has to face in order to remain himself and avoid falling again into the “womb” of addiction, a vicious cycle in which he could be imprisoned should he accept Demerol just once? This could be viewed as a correct interpretation if we consider that Gately is not on painkillers and has to suffer unendurable pain that may generate a sort of hallucinatory state of mind. But the wraith, reading his thoughts, smiles sadly and "says something like Don't we both wish, young sir” (833). Gately wonders how does it feel, for a wraith who is able to “quantum off anyplace instantly and stand on ceilings” (833), to not be able to really affect anything or create conscious and active connections with anybody, “having nobody know you're there, having people's normal rushed daily lives look like the movements of planets and suns” (833) and especially how does it feel to have to sit patiently like a statue in one place for a very long time, if not ages. Gately's stasis is perceived by the former Demerol-addict like "some combination of invisibility and being buried alive, in terms of the feeling. It's like being strangled somewhere deeper inside you than your neck” (833). And yet, even for a glimpse and just as a form of pure potential, Gately tries to identify with the wraith, asking himself what it would be like if he talked to someone and “have the person think it was just their own mind talking?” After all, having revealed that for a drug addict the second most meaningful relationship is always with his domestic entertainment unit, whether it is TV/VCR or HDTP, he “knows a thing or two about loneliness” (833). We have seen that Gately is one of the most genuine and altruistic characters in the novel. His refusal of taking painkillers that could mitigate the excruciating pain he feels has been widely regarded as one of the bravest choices ever made by a recovering addict. The wraith is perfectly aware of it, and acknowledges that Gately is the only person out there who may nurture his words and empathize with the story he is so anxious to tell. Therefore, we should not be surprised when the wraith “responds vehemently that No! No. Any conversation or interchange is better than none at all” (839), to Gately's attempt at avoiding the bearing of “uninvited memories” whose contents can only be approached and accepted by a mind that is willing to endure any sort of pain, as long as it helps him in his process of becoming himself. Allard Den Dulk recognizes that the former addict and the ghost of Incandenza share a moment of “direct communication”, as the wraith seems to be “inside Gately's consciousness” (Den Dulk,). Driven by the teachings and dogmas of AA meetings, Gately has come to understand that even “the worst kind of gutwrenching intergenerational interface is better than withdrawal or hiddenness on either side” (839), as the wraith has to claim. This is the principal reason why the ghost of James Incandenza has been looking at him to establish a meaningful connection. However, as the wraith tells his story, it seems as if he tried to earn Gately's piety, a task that the former drug-addict

does not seem to approve: “

Gately's not too agonized and feverish not to recognize gross self-pity when he hears it, wraith or no. As in the slogan 'Poor Me, Poor Me, Pour Me a Drink.' With all due respect, pretty hard to believe this wraith could stay sober, if he needed to get sober, with the combination of abstraction and tragically-misunderstood-me attitude he's betraying” (839).

Though direct and earnest, we are left with the doubt whether the communication between Gately and the wraith has actually been fruitful enough to be considered “direct” and productive.

It is on the basis of the ambiguity of this scene, that critics and readers alike cannot avoid being caught in another form of stasis that I would like to term “stasis of interpretation”, that is, the paralysis of infinite types of analyses, ideas and understandings of the novel's inner structure and its hidden associations, characters, themes, topics, according to which it is impossible to come to a positive, definitive solution. We will give this argument a broader insight at the end of the study.

KATE GOMPERT AND THE DOCTOR

Greg Carlisle divides chapter 10 of his study “Elegant Complexity: a study of David Foster Wallace Infinite Jest” in five sections all depicting a form of “paralyzed stasis”. The first section begins with a conversation between Kate Gompert, a girl who comes to Ennet House as a marijuana addict, and a doctor. Kate suffers from chronic depression, and has attempted suicide three times. What is relevant to remember is that she does not necessarily want to die. As it appears, all she wants is to be put into a coma, telling her doctor to help her reach a state of unconsciousness for at least a month. Depression devours her mental workings and inhibits her reasoning. Caged in herself, trapped inside her body by the horror of depression, she gives one of the most detailed descriptions of how depression can produce a state of “paralyzed stasis” (72). Kate, as a unipolar depressed patient, is chronically afraid of what she feels everytime she falls into the net of her pathology. It must be underlined that, as a

marijuana addict, she does not feel the horror when she smokes but right after she stops smoking it. Once she quits using marijuana depression hits her as a reminder of the impossibility to escape from her addiction. The communication between doctor and patient shows no real sign of development nor connection, as Gompert's doctor keeps asking her questions that fail to empathize with her situation. We feel this detachment with an unbearable sense of solitude and paralysis. As many other characters in *Infinite Jest*, Kate is the responsible for her own despair. Believing that the only solution for her constant state of depression is catatonic sleep, she aims at a drastic means through which to be put out of consciousness, so as to avoid having to perceive the appalling “sick to your stomach” (74) that she later explains in details. Encapsulated in a static cycle originating from her addiction to marijuana, so typical of *Jest's* characters, Kate is one of the most lucid interpreters of the symptoms of depression, as she describes it: “like every cell and every atom or brain-cell or whatever was so nauseous it wanted to throw up, but it couldn't, and you felt that way all the time, and you're sure, you're positive the feeling will never go away, you're going to spend the rest of your natural life feeling like this” (74). The therapist does not say anything, as he limits himself making minimal responses: “The doctor's small nods were designed to appear not as responses but as invitations to continue, what Dretske called Momentumizers” (72). Instead, the M.D. seems obsessively concerned with superficial appearances. He takes handwritten notes because he believes laptops give “a cold impression” (73). His detailed self-consciousness does not allow the enacting of any productive communication. “Katherine Anne Gompert probably felt that here was another M.D. with zero sense of humor. This was probably because she did not understand the strict methodological limits that dictated how literal he, a doctor, had to be with admits on the psych ward” (71). The therapist's interior state is so hidden that Kate doesn't think it exists. As it has been noted by Daverman: “The interaction is, like television, one-way; only the patient is up for discussion; the therapist is the spectator (...) Unfortunately, Kate already suffers from feeling alone, and her interaction with the M.D. can only encourage the feeling since there is no way Kate can break through the glass of the formal hierarchical situation of therapy” (Daverman, n.p.).

As the doctor asks her if drugs are the principal factor of her crisis, she angrily retorts that her suffering stems from “stopping” taking drugs, more than using them, an assertion that the doctor fails to understand. He tries very hard to hide the fact that he does not know the meaning of “Bob Hope”, for fear that her reaction, should she ever discover his lack of awareness about the relationship between withdrawal from marijuana and depression, would be too harsh for her to bear: “

Classic unipolars were usually tormented by the conviction that no one else could hear or understand them when they tried to communicate” (75).

Therefore, the conversation is illusory, the doctor not even pretending “to try to take notes on all this” (78). Kate's confession seems to strike him as insincere and atypical, for he has never read anywhere in clinical literature cases in which withdrawal from marijuana could be related with unipolar depression. Such a consideration mirrors Gately's surprise in finding out that Ken Erdedy is a marijuana addict no less viciously tormented and paralyzed than the girl. In other words, the doctor does not believe at all that Kate's withdrawal is really “the feeling (which) makes the fear of the feeling way worse” (77), as she is just pretending to be sick and addicted as a way to avoid taking responsibility over her illness. It is not by chance that the scene ends with Kate “weeping for real” (79), as the dialogue has failed to meet her hopes, and there is no leap forward, no resolution that will put her into any month-long coma, nor shock-treatment, no real and useful progress for her clinical condition. The doctor has carefully used only those words that could reassure the patient that she was not alone in her psychological pain, and yet his anxiety of a possible failure to empathize with Kate is relevant, for it betrays a state of self-consciousness and uncertainty which could be viewed as the main reason why the dialogue is unsuccessful.

NARCOTICS ANONYMOUS

Another relevant example of stasis of communication and addiction is provided by Narcotics Anonymous. NA is a drug addicts recovery meeting that Hal takes part to near the end of the novel. As he approaches the room of the meeting, he finds ten bearded men sitting in the same position. The group leader, called Harv, and another man named Kevin, are described as holding a teddy bear: “

Every one of the men has a beard, and each wears chinos and a sweater, and they all sit the same way, that Indian cross-legged style with their hands on their knees and their feet under their knees, and they all wear socks, with no footwear or winter jackets anywhere in sight” (799).

Kevin Bain experiences total infantile regression. Images of cages recur abundantly throughout the section, as we read that Harv makes “a cage of his hands” and Kevin feels his “Inner Infant standing holding the bars of his crib” (802). The purpose of the group, says Harv, is to “work on our dysfunctional passivity and tendency to wait silently for our Inner Infant's needs to be magically met”

(802). A typical collective therapy session, NA serves to support each member's need to “nurture his Inner Infant by naming and sharing his needs out loud with the group”. Words and phrases, in the language-game of the group, are used to construct meaning out of the addicts, for whom psychical stasis stems from a lack of maternal and paternal love. As everyone in the meeting looks “deadly serious”, Hal questions whether such dedication and the obsessive, monotone repetition of “needs, needs, needs” and “Please, Mommy And Daddy, come love me and hold me” (804) work for the addicts to be “substance free”. The young Incandenza recalls being continually “held and dandled and told at high volume that he was loved, and he feels like he could have told K. Bain's Inner Infant that getting held and told you were loved didn't automatically seem like it rendered you emotionally whole” (805). Although he does not seem to fit in the atmosphere of the meeting, Hal appears to have made a step forward with regard to his self-awareness, for he “finds he rather envies a man who feels he has something to explain his being fucked up, parents to blame it on.” (805) Noticing implicitly that he has always been loved and taken care of by his mother, Hal cannot exactly ascribe his despair and suspected addiction to a parental lack of affection. Thus his presence in the NA meeting does not fit, producing a kind of stasis in which Hal admits that the reason for his suspected addiction and despair must originate from something other than a lack of love. The section concludes with “Bain's looking back and forth between Harv and Jim, chewing his finger indecisively” as the addict is crawling “on all four on a Dacronyl rug (...) his face unspeakable” (808) just like the situation of icily non-communication and detachment that Hal is experiencing as he examines each one of the bearded weeping males.

O.N.A.N.

STASIS OF COMMUNICATION

In the world of *Infinite Jest*, O.N.A.N. (Union of North American Nations) is the name of a state formed by a forced coalition imposed by the United States to Canada and Mexico. In order to attract funds to invest on the forced union, the Gregorian calendar has been replaced by the Subsidized Time Calendar. As a result, each year has the name of a particular sponsor, from Year of The Whooper, to Year of The Trial-Size Dove Bar, to Year of Glad. Most of the major plot-lines are set in the Year of The Depend Adult Undergarment (YDAU), which should correspond to either 2008 or 2009. Johnny Gentle, a member of the Clean U.S. Party, is the winner of the American elections. His most relevant set of political reforms has turned most of North-East United States into a wide and massive waste dump that has been ceded to Canada, (a primary source of despair and political tension), widely known as the Great Concavity, that huge dumping ground of the U.S.A., a radioactive area that is subject to an infinite loop of creation and destruction of waste, a cycle of seasons in which the environment is “so fertile lush it's practically unliveable”.

Gentle's obsession on contamination and cleanliness has consequences that heavily impact the life of all the O.N.A.N.I.T.E.S., turning compulsion into “a perpetual cycle of nuclear fission and waste that structures daily life throughout all of North America” (Freudenthal). It is ironic that Gentle's fear of uncleanliness and waste leads to the development and proliferation of his worst fear, as in the case of Avril Incandenza. Such waste is never eradicated, but recycled in order to produce and fuel the energy that sustains the American country. The Gentle administration throws its waste into the Concavity, without realizing that such waste will inevitably come back to plague O.N.A.N. and denying its nature to such an extent, that it will lead to a natural catastrophe. As a result of the forced coalition and Gentle administration, several Quebecois separatist groups developed. Les Assassins en Fauteuils Roulants (A.F.R.), known in English as the Wheelchair Assassins, is the most extremist and dangerous association. They want Canada to secede from the imposed coalition. The dialogue between Hugh Steeply, a spy in the ongoing terrorist war between O.N.A.N. and the Quebecois separatist, and Remi Marathe, a member of A.F.R., takes place on the night between the 30th of April and the 1st of May of The Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment, is set in Tucson, Arizona. A clue that is particularly helpful in giving us a first hint of the way communication as stasis works, is how Wallace has decided to structure the conversation. If we consider that this is the only scene in *Infinite Jest* that takes over five hundred pages to conclude, as the dialogue is divided in fourteen sections scattered randomly

throughout the novel, we will notice that such a fragmented exchange of opinions is static and sterile from the start. What lies at the heart of the conversation? Freedom, that is, two different and diverging conceptions of freedom that each of the interlocutors tries to explain to the other one. In reality, both Steeply and Marathe are more willing to truly express themselves than they are to actually stand for the ideas concerning liberty they claim to follow. As they discuss, there is some sort of hidden sense of dissociation and fear that lurks like a wraith between their exchange of words. According to Adam Kelly, dialogue is one of the key aspects of almost all fiction, and there is no writer who does not use it to expand, express, and reflect upon particular themes through the lens of the speakers involved in the conversation. Wallace is no exception: “

Speakers in Wallace's fiction are often depicted as desperate for genuine reciprocal dialogue, but find that their overwhelming need to predict the other's response in advance blocks the possibility of finding the language to get outside themselves and truly reach out to the other” (Kelly, 7).

This explanation is helpful as it enables us to circumscribe the perimeter of stasis as non-communication and track down all those elements in the novel where discussions, conversations and debates result in a state of unfruitful inertia. Steeply and Marathe incarnate two divergent ideals: the former follows an individualistic idea of freedom, something totally opposed to the communitarian ideology that guides the latter. One crucial obstacle to a genuine and clear conversation between the speakers is the fact that Marathe's mother tongue is not the English language, but French as spoken by the Quebecois. His inability to fully understand Steeply's words is accentuated by the cigarette that Hugh is keeping in his mouth at the beginning of the conversation, and the author even mentions that “Steeply's Quebecois was better than Marathe's English” (89), a detail that has long been the subject of a passionate debate: why does the conversation take place in English?

Critics and readers have come to the same conclusion, as they believe the main reason for such a choice lies in Marathe's role with regard to his loyalty to A.F.R. As the dialogue progresses, we discover that the wheelchair assassin is a “quadruple agent”, claiming that “have I merely pretended to pretend to pretend to betray”. In other words, Marathe is betraying his superior and the A.F.R., although his ideology is in line with that of the terrorist group and he does not agree with the system of values that O.N.A.N. promotes. Hence, the use of English, which he embraces as if it were the superior cause he has always been looking for in his life. Steeply's reaction to Marathe's misuse of the English language is reflected by the spy's behaviour, as he sets his critical stance by “nodding in

a way that indicated willing patience with someone whose wits were not too speedy”.

In the third section of their static and fragmented dialogue (105-108), they are discussing over the subjects of love and choice. Marathe, who chooses to be a citizen, argues that “You are what you love. No? You are, completely and only, what you would die for without, as you say, the thinking twice” (107), an assertion that Steeply acknowledges by watching the dark landscape in front of him, showing an expression of boredom. The A.F.R. member says that “Your nation outlives you. A cause outlives you” (107), whereas people “change, leave, die, become ill” (107) and may betray the individual who chose so carefully to put his trust on them, in an act of bad faith. Marathe's assumption is the enactment of the engagement that lies at the core of Camus's philosophical thought, as we have seen. In order to become “himself” Marathe chose to serve the nation of Québec and respect its rules and laws. By doing so he is committed to the ideology of A.F.R., which is, as we now, a Canadian secessionist association. Steeply strongly rejects Marathe's assumptions as he replays, later in the discussion: “But you assume it's always choice, conscious, decision” (108). Love cannot always come as the result of a conscious choice. It is not something that one can decide upon, nor it is sage to sacrifice oneself for a higher cause or principle or authority. “What if sometimes there is no choice about what to love? What if the temple comes to Mohammed? What if you just love? without deciding?” (108). Marathe's reply shows no sign of remorse in asserting that Steeply's vision will inevitably bind him to the chains of individualism and loneliness, unrespectful of community and doomed to become a “Citizen of nothing”. Steeply's philosophical stance is grounded upon the idea of individualism and the peculiarity of each specific circumstance we get to experience day by day. Marathe is one of the fiercest critics of U.S. contemporary society. He does not agree with Steeply's definition of the ideology of O.N.A.N. as “enlightened self-interest” (428).

American culture promotes personal freedom and immediate satisfaction, allowing every individual to be freed from any form of ethical constrain save those imposed by the law. When the model of “do what you want” is broadly accepted, the individual becomes a consumer constantly persuaded that spending and buying things is the only way he can manage to achieve the freedom he deserves. The A.F.R. member is strongly critical of the excesses of neoliberalism and the horrors of a media-driven society. In denouncing them he shares Wallace's considering them as promoting drug-culture and immediate, passive entertainment. And yet, though Marathe seems to incarnate the purest form of fundamentalism and respect for a higher authoritative power, he will accept to pursue a different path later in the novel. In fact, he does contradict himself as he will betray the cause of the A.F.R. for the love of a woman who is, curiously but meaningfully, incontinent and deformed. Some time before,

he had condemned Rodney Tine for doing exactly what he eventually will do later in the novel. Apart from that specific circumstance, the conversation on the hilltop in Arizona is one of the most powerful and important examples of stasis of communication in the book, a scene in which the lack of real connection between the speakers, thwarted by linguistic differences, is replete with moments of silence and suspension. The motive behind the A.F.R.'s plan to distribute the Entertainment seems to Steeply a resolution of which he cannot see any meaning outside a mere desire to hurt the O.N.A.N. state. Marathe rejects such a limited, distorted view, asserting that Steeply's organization is too rotten and individualistic to recognize the real purpose of A.F.R. and the eventuality that the Entertainment's dissemination may not prove as catastrophic as the spy thinks: “

But of these types of your persons—the different types, the mature who see down the road, the puerile type that eats the candy and soup in the moment only. Entre nous, here on this shelf, Hugh Steeply: which do you think describes the U.S.A. of O.N.A.N. and the Great Convexity, this U.S.A. you feel pain that others might wish to harm? [...] Are you understanding? I am asking between only us. How could it be that A.F.R. malice could hurt all of the U.S.A. culture by making available something as momentary and free as the choice to view only this one Entertainment? You know there can be no forcing to watch a thing. If we disseminate the samizdat, the choice will be free, no? Free from force, no? Yes? Freely chosen?” (430).

The two speakers discuss over a multitude of themes, and yet they never clash against each other or let their ideological differences lead to an inevitable conflict. All they do is exchanging words by standing still upon the peak of an outcropping, both caged inside their own psychological stances. For instance, Steeply is disguised as a female journalist. He wears a wig and “gigantic prosthetic breasts pointed in wildly different directions” (89). Marathe sits still, compelled to remain in his wheelchair and pondering on various topics and digressions that broaden the limits of the conversation, which increasingly becomes similar to the flatland that stretches in front of the outcropping: “

Someone taught that temples are for fanatics only and took away the temples and promised there was no need for temples. And now there is no shelter. And no map for finding the shelter of a temple. And you all stumble about in the dark, this confusion of permissions. The without-end pursuit of a happiness of which someone let you forget the old things which made happiness possible” (541). The last section of the discussion (638-648) revolves around Steeply's remembrance of his father's addiction to M.A.S.H., a stasis within a stasis with almost the same relevance of the last exchange of words between the secret agent and the terrorist, which is made up of an opposition of terms. As

Steepley describes his father as empty, Marathe suggests that he may have felt “Misplaced. Lost”, then Steepley replies “Misplaced” and Marathe says “Lost”, and the scene ends immediately after Steepley's “Misplaced” is followed by Marathe's remark “As you wish”. In the end we are left with a couple of monologues that fail to connect: “

This is what happens: you imagine the things I will say and then say them for me and then become angry with them. Without my mouth; it never opens. You speak to yourself, inventing sides. This itself is the habit of children: lazy, lonely, self” (321).

Marathe is constantly left with a sense of uneasiness and suspicion every time Steepley interacts with him, to the point that he “could not determine whether Steepley was truly revealing emotions about himself” (422). Moreover, “Part of Marathe always felt almost a desire to shoot persons who anticipated his responses and inserted words and said they were from Marathe, not letting him speak” (428).

The communication between their two opposite thoughts and ideologies fails to find a common ground on which to develop as a sincere dialogic discourse, and even the narrator seems conscious of the artificial nature of such an encounter, as he dedicates numerous paragraphs to the description of the environment surrounding the two spies and engages in digressions related to superfluous details. Both speakers avoid looking at one another, as they prefer to give a glance at the wide and open land that stretches beyond the hill. Moments of silence, almost imperceptible noises and embarrassing stillness follow through each of the thirteen sections, with neither Marathe nor Steepley willing to get out of the outcropping: “

Their specular perspective, the reddening light on vast tan stone and the oncoming curtain of dusk, the further elongation of their monstrous agnate shadows: all was almost mesmerising. Neither man seemed able to look at anything but the vista below. [...] Their speaking without looking at one another, facing both the same direction – this gave their conversing an air of careless intimacy, as of old-friends at the cartridge viewer together, or a long-married couple. Marathe thought this as he opened and closed his upheld hand, making over the city Tucson a huge and black blossom open itself and close itself” (91).

There is but a significant detail that needs be traced and brought out of the sterile discussion, a clue so masterfully crafted, that it can easily be left unnoticed. When Marathe meets Kate Gompert in a pub later in the novel, he engages with her in a conversation that gives the reader a better and deeper explanation of his apparently contradictory decision. He claims that he sacrificed his own aspirations and ambitions for a cause that was, in fact, larger than himself. He found that cause not in the secession of Canada from the United States, nor in the rejection of America's forced gift of the highly toxic "Great Concavity", nor in the will of the terrorist group to which he is affiliated as a quadruple agent. That cause was the survival of his wife. Shall we conclude, then, that Steeply's speech about loving and pursuing an "enlightened self-interest" has managed to capture Marathe's attention to such an extent, that he eventually decides to follow its precepts? If so, then the conversation between the spy and the wheelchair terrorist has proved to be fruitful enough to encourage a different interpretation of the scene. Marathe confesses to Kate that he often felt "chained in a cage of the self, from the pain. Unable to care or choose anything outside it" (777), lamenting the grief produced by the loss of his legs and "wishing for my death, locked inside my pain in the heart". An caged individual, maimed by his physical handicap and unable to truly connect with his group's principles, Marathe is the perfect counterpart of Steeply in the static language-game developed outside the perimeter of Ennet House and E.T.A. The conflict between them, as we have seen, is far from being as harmful and threatening as the inclinations of A.F.R. are against the O.N.A.N. As we know, stasis is a state of discord between two opposite forces. At the end of the opposition lies the possibility that Marathe has really absorbed Steeply's words, adapting the enlightened self-interest to the A.F.R.'s belief in a superior cause, mingling the two extremes with the aid of his future wife. "She with one blow broke the chains of the cage of pain at my half a body and nation... I became, then, adult" (778). Marathe's wife was "born without a skull, from the toxicities in association of our enemy's invasion on paper" (779). It is for the love of that woman that Marathe internalizes Steeply's suggestions and manages to escape from the cage of his personal sorrow. It must not be forgotten that, despite the seemingly happy ending of Marathe's final resolution, the wheelchair assassin's future wife is dying. Her only assurance of a longer existence is provided if she receives a "Jaarvik IX Exterior Artificial Heart" thanks to which she can "live for many more years in a comatose and a vegetative state" (780).

Stasis of communication reemerges through the dialogue between Kate Gompert and Marathe, with the former who does not seem to be willing to understand or empathize with the assassin's decision to love his wife. Ironically, what Marathe considers indisputable, "Choosing Gertraude to love as my

wife was necessary for the others, these other choices. Without the choice of her life there are no other choices.”(781), is readily dismissed by Kate as a “gun to your head” type of choice. Despite Marathe's tenacious assertion that his decision was conscious and ended up being his way out of the chains of his personal cage, Kate retorts that the entire situation seems to her as if he were actually “chained to his wife”.

A possible answer or interpretation for the kind of stasis produced by a lack of real and empathetic communication is provided by the narrator in his description of the advent and fall of videophony as a means of interaction between individuals: “

It turned out that there was something terribly stressful about visual telephone interfaces that hadn't been stressful at all about voice-only interfaces. Videophone consumers seemed suddenly to realize that they'd been subject to an insidious but wholly marvelous delusion about conventional voice-only telephony. They'd never noticed it before, the delusion — it's like it was so emotionally complex that it could be countenanced only in the context of its loss. Good old traditional audio-only phone conversations allowed you to presume that the person on the other end was paying complete attention to you while also permitting you not to have to pay anything even close to complete attention to her” (145).

The illusion of the other's attentive presence at the end of the wire would let both the speaker and the listener to lower the tension that such a form of interaction might produce, by entering them in “a kind of highway-hypnotic semi-attentive fugue: while conversing, you could look around the room, doodle, fine-groom, peel tiny bits of dead skin away from your cuticles, compose phone-pad haiku, stir things on the stove; you could even carry on a whole separate additional sign-language-and-exaggerated-facial-expression type of conversation with people right there in the room with you, all while seeming to be right there attending closely to the voice on the phone” (146).

The highly detailed description of the listener's activities during the audio-only conversation is then compared with the delusional experience of video telephony, whose use compels the interlocutor to think obsessively about how he looks, how he appears, if his face is being interpreted by the other the same way in which he is interpreting his, in a direct enactment of the Sartrean concept of the “Look” as discussed in *Being and Nothingness*. According to him we experience shame when we are aware of being observed by another conscious self. This is a process of objectification, made by the other toward ourselves, as the subject becomes the object from another subject, who in turn is objectified by the look of the former. It is obvious that such a cyclical exchange of “looks” leads necessarily to

a state of conflict, a stasis of communication in which both the interlocutors fail to address each other in a genuine way, just like the videophone users, petrified by their self-consciousness: “

Even with high-end TPs' high-def viewer-screens, consumers perceived something essentially blurred and moist-looking about their phone-faces, a shiny pallid indefiniteness that struck them as not just unflattering but somehow evasive, furtive, untrustworthy, unlikable” (147).

The solution adopted by the telecommunication industry to this “Video-Physiognomic Dysphoria” is less effective than disheartening. As each video phone user is equipped with a High-Definition Mask, he can face the challenge posed by videophony when he perceives his being looked at by the interlocutor. However, by wearing a mimetic-mask, he hides his real face under the guise of an avatar whose look suits perfectly with his traits, thus letting him play again the role of the “ogler” who can fake real attention to the other speaker or listener and avoid self-reflexivity. However, as with any technological renewal, the process quickly gets out of control, for: “

High-def mask-entrepreneurs ready and willing to supply not just verisimilitude but aesthetic enhancement — stronger chins, smaller eye-bags, air-brushed scars and wrinkles — soon pushed the original mimetic-mask-entrepreneurs right out of the market” (148).

People begin using masks so perfectly produced that result in better-looking avatars than their real faces, which are then replaced by still images of attractive actors serving as substitutes for people's faces. As a result, enormous “psychosocial stress” occurs, with phone-users growing reluctant to leave home and share personal interactions with people for fear that, being these people now accustomed to the better-looking masks shown on the phone, they might suffer so deep and grave a delusion to impact the attempted communication and increase self-conscious despair. As videophony comes to an end, phone-users return to “aural-only” communication, but the vice of hiddennes and passivity, coupled with the reluctance to leave home, still manages to get through the average American

consumer's psyche: “

Even then, of course, the bulk of U.S. consumers remained verifiably reluctant to leave home and teleputer and to interface personally, though this phenomenon's endurance can't be attributed to the videophony-fad per se, and anyway the new panagoraphobia served to open huge new entrepreneurial teleputerized markets for home-shopping and -delivery, and didn't cause much industry concern” (151.)

In the world of O.N.A.N. entertainment usually takes place at home. Being sponsored by the communication entrepreneurs as “the truly empowering US style choice” for the manifold viewing opportunities it offers the consumers, the Interlace System allows its customers to decide upon a wide array of options that can be downloaded and cozily viewed at home. Narcissism, infantilism and addiction are the principal effects that such a form of entertainment produces in the inner workings of the individual. Infinite choices are a source of stasis, as we have seen before with the case of Erdedy and Hal. The choices offered by Interlace contribute to the creation of a community of paralyzed people that would be easy (and to a certain extent incorrect) to compare with the birth of the catatonic hero foretold by Hal. Interlace customers are: “

a pathological fixedness: the coming of seated man or, worse still, couched man'. Nevertheless, this fixedness inevitably produces “a progressive loss of relations with the external environment... a form of coma... [that] leads to the 'vegetative state' of home inertia” (Virilio, 2000: 68-70).

The individual is constantly shaped through the choices he makes and the actions he takes. But in *Infinite Jest*, the overabundance of choices leads to inaction, as the self cannot make a conscious and impactful decision over his life. E.T.A. students are trapped under the rules and dogmas of an authoritative academy in which they are taught that the tennis game is infinitely complex and admits so many decisions, angles and lines that need to be mastered, in a persistent and repeated effort at the end of which the self should supposedly learn to acknowledge his own limits and cope with the others in the “shared community of victims” hinted at by Den Dulk. Similarly, Ennet House residents are required to abide to the peculiar type of addiction that make them fall and discover their personal bottom, thus adapting to a new existential condition where the self surrenders to a higher power and accepts to be part of a common “aloneness”. As we have examined, the majority of the novel's

characters do not manage to escape from the feeling of emptiness and anhedonia that following the patterns of sincerity should allow.

STASIS OF ADDICTION

As Steeply tells Marathe the story of his father, who had at some point in his life become obsessed with the series "M.A.S.H", we are shown the process of addiction as stasis in a setting which belongs to neither Ennet House nor E.T.A. and involves flat characters who are merely mentioned by the main ones. The show M.A.S.H. offered to Steeply's father a fantasy world to identify with, thus breaking the distinction between fiction and reality. Even if his liking for the show was, at first, an innocent form of spending time and having fun, it soon developed into an engaging addiction. As Steeply's father became more and more dependent on the show, he purchased a VCR to catalog every episode broadcast, taking notes and quoting gags at dinner. He even wrote letters to the characters of the Tv series and used names of the show's various location to label his own daily surroundings. Was his compulsive obsession the reason that killed the old man? As Steeply has to declare to Marathe's conviction of such an improbable assertion, "It was a transmural infarction. Blew out the whole ventricle. His whole family had a history: the heart" (646).

But Steeply's father did not die because of the degenerative impact of the TV series on his brain. He eventually died in his "easy chair, set at full Recline" (646), due to heart complications. It is interesting to notice how Steeply's father's escape into a fantasy world does not necessarily link his fate to that of the medical attaché nor anyone of those who watch the Entertainment. His regression to an infantile state is evident and explicitly described, but his stasis is not as passive as the one that hits the unfortunate watchers of *Infinite Jest*. Although he evades in an alternative reality, he is nonetheless able to intervene upon the fugacious and horrid reality of his precarious health. Knowing that little if nothing can be done to prevent him from facing the same fate of his forefathers, he resorts to an alternative world where he strives to actively "reconfigure the world". He uses stasis and addiction to M.A.S.H. as a means to achieve another meaning for his life, bringing the show's world into the real one that has decided he must die from the same fate that befell his forefathers. As he begins to theorize a new world with the tacit complicity of his wife, Steeply's father commits a tremendous effort in facing the brutal reality of his illness, thus giving stasis the potential to be viewed not only as a negative and sterile psychophysical condition, but also as a propulsing force for further

resolutions, in other words: a reason for rebellion. In other words, thanks to the tv series, Steeply's father managed to find an alternative reality in which to escape and avoid the horrible plight of making choices and taking responsibility, resting on his couch and elaborating a new, better and alternative world in which no sort of illness can prevent him from living as he used to. Surely, this is not how Camus would have thought rebellion must be like when he addressed it as the sole form of political action that can be employed against the absurdity of existence. In O.N.A.N., as we have said before, stasis of addiction usually takes place at home and is mostly determined by tele-entertainment. It is a form of solipsism where people, regressed into a sort of “womblike” infantile condition, are reduced to a catatonic state. There is no need to mention again Wallace's stance with regard to TV and commercial culture in general, as we know very well how much he sees them as the principal cause for narcissism, hyper self-reflexivity and addiction. What encourages the medical attaché to “unwind for the evening” and sit on his “special recliner” watching *Infinite Jest* to the point that he eventually dies of starvation and dehydration? His case is crucially interesting in the way the narrator treats the attaché's progressive encagement within the bars of self-consuming pleasure. Chapter five of *Infinite Jest* begins with the description of the medical attaché coming home to relax and watch, as we are told, some “Entertainment”. A scene of stasis from the start, every time he comes back home after the evening prayers, everything is prepared by his wife so as to meet his needs, as he “wants the living room's teleputer booted and warmed up and the evening's entertainment cartridges already selected and arranged and lined up in dock ready for remote insertion into the viewer's drive” (34). When the medical attaché sits down in his electronic recliner, his wife takes care of him by “adjusting the room's lightning, fitting the complexly molded dinner tray over his head so that his shoulders support the tray and allow it to project into space just below his chin, that he may enjoy his hot dinner without having to remove his eyes from whatever entertainment is up and playing”. They do not exchange a word, as the medical attaché enters in the recursive loop of eating, watching, eating, watching, until he falls asleep and the special electronic recliner automatically reclines horizontally, while the TP continues running at low-volume a “recursive loop of (...) light rain on broad green leaves” (34). Such occurrence happens on a daily basis, except on Wednesday nights, when his Arab wife goes with members of Arab Women's Advanced League to play tennis at Mount Auburn Club. Being deprived of her worldless care, imprisoned in his empty Boston apartment where no entertainment cartridges have been selected, the medical attaché searches for them in the U.S.A. postal delivery, where the lethal Entertainment lies hidden in an untitled mailer whose address box “has only the term 'HAPPY ANNIVERSARY!' with a small drawn crude face, smiling, in ballpoint ink”. The attaché feels disappointed by the item, which is just a black entertainment cartridge bearing no name. However, he decides to test its contents, and by the time he sits down on his special recliner and begins viewing

the cartridges, “the TP's viewer's digital display reads 1927h” (37). A few pages later, at 20.10h, the medical attaché is still watching the unlabelled Entertainment. In another section of the novel, we discover that, at 00.15h, 2 April, the medical attaché's wife comes back home and finds him still viewing the cartridge, completely absorbed, having wet both his pants and the recliner. The last time we are given information about the medical attaché is on page 87, where we discover that he, his wife and a number of personal assistants and security guards are all watching the lethal cartridge, sitting or standing “still and attentive”. The fate of the medical attaché is the sole case in which we experience a thorough and direct description of the horrid effects produced by the Entertainment. Stasis here is depicted as the extreme consequence of addiction to tele-entertainment. Communication is also thwarted, the medical attaché's wife does not share any word with his husband, but merely obeys to his implicit orders by looking after his needs once he comes back home from work. Moreover, neither one of those who come to meet the medical attaché will be able to identify themselves through language, as they remain petrified from the very start. As Stefan Hirt remarks, “consumption shares many traits with narcissism and addiction, and it is related to TV by its infantilizing advertisement strategies. The objects of consumption promise comfort, passivity and escape from responsibility, yet are unable to permanently supply the consumer with inner fulfillment” (Hirt, 35). Should we subscribe to Holland's point of view that contemporary culture is “a culture of consumption that pretends to fill the void that it steadfastly creates?” (Holland, 223). If so, such an assumption shows that contemporary society dwells in a cultural stasis, in a perpetual ebb and flow that is impossible to reverse. As we discover through the awkward conversation between Steeply and Marathe, A.F.R. projects to track and catch the master copy of the film *Infinite Jest*, in order to use it against the American people in what has long been defined from critics a sort of revenge plot. What stands apart in the description of the Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents is the fact that such a criminal organization consists in crippled, maimed, deformed terrorists: they all use wheelchairs to move, as a result of a hazardous childhood game in which the competitors, lined next to a train track, have to jump across the path of an oncoming train. The last one to make the jump is the winner. It is ironical that one of the novel's most feared terrorist groups is made up of mutilated men who cannot make any movement without the aid of a wheelchair. In this very specific case, stasis does not belong to communication or addiction, but rather stems from a physical disability.

Though we do not get a detailed description of the terrorist organization, we acknowledge their plans on the basis of a lengthy and philosophical conversation between Marathe and Steeply. Both will try to reclaim the lost copies of the Entertainment, each in a different place: while Marathe enters Ennet House in order to talk with Joelle van Dyne, who acted as a main protagonist of J.O.'s *Infinite Jest*, Steeply infiltrates E.T.A. disguised as a female journalist, trying to gather information through the

Incandenza family.

Everything is connected in the world of *Infinite Jest*, even the least predictable objects and figures seem to share some sort of connection with each other in a net of references that is extremely hard to detect. As the novel is made up of a series of infinite returns, it would be interesting to ask ourselves whether the recursive loops of *Infinite Jest* are to be connected to one another and why. Is there a unity inherent in the book that we have to unveil? Is there a kind of *telos* Wallace wanted us to aim for, under the net of such complexly interwoven strands?

JIM INCANDENZA

Jim Incandenza inherited from his father, a failed tennis player and alcoholic, the same form of distress that Hal will deliberately deny at the very beginning of the novel, that is, its chronological end. The movie *Infinite Jest* was a sort of final resolution against the paralyzing tradition of self-reflexivity experienced by the Incandenza's family, something stemming from Jim's troubled relationship with his father, as two distinct flashback sequences in the novel make clear. In the first one, Incandenza's father is giving ten-year-old James a tennis lesson. A failed actor, he expresses his extremely contagious frustration by focusing on how far Marlon Brando, one of the most recognized and rewarded celebrities of his era, with whom Jim's mother was briefly in love at the time she had a bit part in one of his movies, came to ruin two generations of actors: “

Your mother is a shover and a thruster, son. She treats bodies outside herself without respect or due care. She's never learned that treating things in the gentlest most relaxed way is also treating them and your own body in the most efficient way. It's Marlon Brando's fault, Jim. (...) Marlon Brando was the archetypal new-type actor who ruined it looks like two whole generations' relations with their own bodies and the everyday objects and bodies around them” (157).

Brando's way of acting and interacting with the world is the equivalent, to Jim's father, of “high-level quality tennis across sound stages all over both coasts”. Jim's father's jealousy toward Brando addresses an important aspect of the actor's personality and, conversely, of his own: “trying to dominate objects, showing no artful respect or care, yanking things toward him like a moody child and using them up and tossing them crudely aside so they miss the wastebasket and just lie there, ill-used” (157).

If the scene appears an innocent tennis lesson intended to make Jim understand that this sport requires a total dominion over one's own body, it is also perfectly clear that in his speech there is more than meets the eye. The progressive objectification of the body, the gradual misuse of things in order to keep dominion over them and dictate one's own will is contemporary man's most impressive achievement: “

Son, you're a body, son. That quick little scientific-progidy's mind she's so proud of and won't quit twittering about: son, it's just neural spasm (...). Head is body” (159).

Jim's father aims to instill in his son a haunting awareness, the same that will obsess and consume Hal's cogitations throughout the story to the point that he will attempt to revolt against it, at least mentally: “ 'you're a machine a body an object, Jim, no less than this rutilant Montclair” (159).⁵ Instead of being the classical enactment of stasis of communication so frequently found in the book, we are allowed to consider the monologue of Jim's father not only as the origin of Jim's personal communicative crisis, but also as mirroring the relationship between Jim and all his sons, with the exception of Mario, as we will discuss in the next section of chapter 3.

In the second section of the flashback, stasis of communication is surrounded by hideous “squeaking” sounds of a damaged mattress, which Jim and his drunken father are trying to fix. I claim that such is a static situation mainly because the problem of the squeaking sounds lies unresolved and the broken bed continues to enrage Jim's father. As the scene with Jim's father suddenly vomiting blood and falling out of consciousness (perhaps, due to the effort and alcohol abuse), Jim walks into his room

⁵ Hal's grandfather shares a view that reminds the one hold by a consistent number of contemporary scientists and researchers: “Biomedical approaches to identity are steadily increasing throughout contemporary culture. Indeed, as Hacking notes, we view our body parts – including our brain – as machinelike, controllable, in a neo-Cartesian light. Contemporary literature and theory, together with cognitive sciences, psychology and cultural studies, have begun to address selfhood in relation to new elements taken from neuroscience, biotechnology and genetics. They intend to reshape their disciplinary methodologies according to the most crucial discoveries in these years” (Freudenthal, 193). Nearly all these studies suggest, according to Freudenthal, a collective movement toward “the voluntary objectification of personality” (Freudenthal, 193).

and hits a lamp which provokes a concatenation of circular movements that the boy promptly defines as “cycloid (...) the curve traced by a fixed point on the circumference of a circle rolling along a continuous plane” (502).

We know that Jim's obsession originates from his father's benumbing preachings and lessons, as the following passage subtly expresses: “

Have a father whose own father lost what was there. Have a father who lived up to his own promise and then found thing after thing to meet and surpass the expectations of his promise in, and didn't seem just a whole hell of a lot happier or tighter wrapped than his own failed father, leaving you yourself in a kind of feral and flux-ridden state with respect to talent. Here is how to avoid thinking about any of this by practicing and playing until everything runs on autopilot and talent's unconscious exercise becomes a way to escape yourself, a long waking dream of pure play” (373).

Jim's refusal of his father teachings will lead him to pursue several professions, from optical physics to cinematography, caught in a crippling loop of not satisfaction. Indeed, on page 949 we discover that he usually “remained obsessed with something until he became successful at it, then transferred his obsession to something else” .

The next and latest chapter of the research will focus on all the most important scenes in which Infinite Jest appears to provide a solution to the types of stasis we have come to identify.

CHAPTER III

OVERCOMING STASIS: AN INFINITE ENDEAVOUR?

Is it true that the same effort of escaping from the static opposition between immediacy and transcendence, addiction and withdrawal, stillness and movement, resulting in an infinite and reiterate endeavour which foregrounds no resolution, should itself be considered a static cycle of action vs non-action without any profitable solution as well? According to Karnicky, this effort does not have to lead the self to avoid the responsibility required by living in society, however rotten or corrupted it might be: “

Infinite Jest suggests a more constructive approach when it shows that the idea of an autonomous liberal subject can be a recipe for disaster in a world densely interconnected with interlocking complex systems. Authenticity in this vision is not about escaping from the realm of the social, but rather about recognizing the profound interconnections that bind us all together, human actors and non human life forms, intelligent machines and intelligent people. We escape from Entertainment not by going to the woods but by recognizing our responsibilities to one another” (696).

Reading, by forcing the reader to engage actively with the book, becomes an act that potentially drives the individual to become responsible and social-aware. The reader acknowledges that he is part of a wider and complex world, in which he has a role to play, tasks to accomplish and the power to choose whatever suits best the balance between his will and that of the society to which he belongs. Paradoxically, stasis (whether of communication or of addiction) implies that a potential movement forward is never denied, as every character has the opportunity to change and approach the paralysis of his condition from another existential perspective: “

Moving toward stasis in Wallace's fiction is to undergo transformation. Stasis alters consciousness and provides a way out of subjectivity that has become too much to bear. As the sheer variety of kinds of stasis shows, the production of stasis is always local. Every breakdown is unique, and every breakdown gets assembled from its own components, be they tennis rackets and court lines, movies, drugs, television shows, fantasies, comas, or novels and literary criticism” (Karnicky, 121).

Breaking the cage of stasis is a challenge that several characters of *Infinite Jest* are tempted to take on, even if most of them merely consider the idea by pursuing the infinite pleasure granted by the

Entertainment, rather than coping on a daily basis with their own despair. When Steeply describes to Marathe a particular experimental procedure through which electrodes are planted in the “p-terminals” of the brain, causing feelings of relief, delight and rapture when activated, people volunteer to try the experiment and take the risk, for the perspective of living in a state of perpetual pleasure means for them the only opportunity to escape from the cage of their unhappiness. Why should one dismiss the chance of experiencing constant pleasure, “the purest, most refined pleasure imaginable...thousands of times an hour, at will” (473) even though it is a highly risky surgery, if he had not been sure that there is no other way he could actually break the cage of his personal stasis? The movie *Infinite Jest* is the ultimate instrument conceived to offer its viewers this perpetual pleasure, letting them escape from one stasis to another one. At the end of the last chapter I mentioned that, here and there, potential escapes from stasis of addiction and communication are visible. Where do we have to find them? Where do they lurk? I would like to start my response by conforming to the claim of those who consider Addicts Anonymous as the ideal place in which the self is given the opportunity to make the Kierkegaardian leap forward and lead an ethical life out of the encaging borders of one's static condition.

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

There is no doubt that the presence in the text of Alcoholics Anonymous meetings is used by Wallace as a means to provide a narrative form in which to “create a set of limits or rules that structure meaning” (Daverman, n.p.) and attempt to break the vicious cycle of which stasis feeds itself. Brooks Daverman, in his essay named “The Limits of The Infinite: The Use of Alcoholics Anonymous in *Infinite Jest* as a Narrative Solution after Postmodernism”, clearly explains that, in AA, “what does connect the fragment of the story is a certain sensibility applied to the description of all the different groups” (Daverman, n.p.).

Unlike the grief-therapy sessions or nearly all the conversations described in the novel, AA meetings

provide the individual with a set of values and dogmas which inscribe him inside a well-defined structure where he can feel protected, limited so as not to feel too free to choose; free so as not to feel too secluded: “

There is a delicate balance to be struck between having enough formal constraints to provide a meaningful structure and having too many constraints so the individual has no freedom at all. The self has to be bounded enough so that the individual is not lost to solipsism, but not so bounded that the self becomes insignificant, just an identityless cog in the narrative system. There must be a goal for the group that is meaningful, not arbitrary. It can't be a merely self-serving goal, but it can't be completely unconnected to the self either. Most importantly, the group must provide a structure for communication between equal members” (Daverman, n.p.).

The AA slogan is “Ask For Help”, and addresses all the characters in the novel who are caged in one of the paralyzing cycles of addiction and non-communication. It is only when the individual admits and accepts that solipsism and self-reflexivity can inevitably lead to paralysis, that a true connection between him and the community is liable to occur. AA slogans, though trivial and simple and mostly based on clichés, are extremely helpful in giving drug-addicts a way to escape from their crippling, desperate and obsessive state, stimulating them to make an effort and open up to others as honestly as they can. At first Don Gately does not seem to adhere to the meeting's dogma, something which is mainly founded upon the self-conscious will to surrender to a higher power, or authority, a concept that resembles to some extent Marathe's faith in the A.F.R. cause. The most obvious difference between A.F.R. and AA is that all the visitors and members of the group are free to decide whether or not to attend the program, as they wish. AA stimulates its members to learn how to become responsible citizen in contemporary society. Therefore it is crucial to point out that AA meetings do not stress the causes that led the individual to become addicted to the source of his own despair. Each member of the group is free to talk about his personal story and be openly sincere about his emotional involvement, dreams, thoughts, anxieties, and so on. AA members learn to accept themselves and acknowledge the stasis in which they dwell. Inertia and anhedonia are two of the most relevant aspects of stasis as a psychological condition, and, as we have discussed, nearly all the characters in *Infinite Jest* live more or less struggling with this situation.

In AA meetings those aspects are counteracted by the repetition of simple actions and the following the group's slogans. Are we entitled to claim that the author aims to tell us that AA's purpose is to be a resourceful post-postmodern solution to defy and defeat the pangs of narcissism and cynicism and allow the individual to become responsible for his self-becoming? There is nothing that prevents us from following such a clue. It is an obvious and reasonable consequence, as AA meetings, together with the figure of Mario Incandenza, are the sole sources of positive meaning and human connection of the entire novel, because they are based on genuine vulnerability and pure emotional responses. On a daily basis, honesty and empathy are avoided as they often signify weakness and are used to mask hypocrisy under the guise of political correctness. The author of *Infinite Jest* is perfectly aware of such a consideration: “

since to be human... is probably to be unavoidably sentimental and naive and goo-prone and generally pathetic, is to be in some basic interior way forever infantile", empathy, sincerity and identification are the only and most important elements needed in order to let someone interact with some other in a shared atmosphere of feelings, ideas, and suffering” (695).

The struggle to become a coherent self and lead a meaningful existence in the fragmented plurality of the contemporary Western world is a task that Gately, in the end, appears to have achieved. And yet, as in the case of Hal, we cannot ascertain whether the former drug addict has actually accomplished the task of self-becoming and eventually improved his living conditions, freeing himself from the paralysis in which we find him throughout the novel.

Unlike Hal, Gately stands at the opposite side of character development in the novel. At the end of the story, he has been off drugs long enough to hope for a significant and decisive improvement of his living conditions. In order to do so and acquire such a balanced, static and horizontal new life, he was forced to surrender “His values, language, and understanding of his own life” (Daverman, n.p.) to a higher power, that is the AA group. As we met him for the first time as an alcoholic who was afraid of becoming an active alcoholic, we leave him as a reborn individual. As soon as Gately gets over his fears and follows through AA's dogmas and clichés, he begins the path towards self-realization and improvement that will lead to his epiphanic awakening. At the end of the process, in fact, he will experience a sort of metempsychosis toward a new self, abandoning the chains of his old desires. By doing so, he chooses to surrender to a higher power, an authority that may resemble the Kierkegaardian concept of God, the ultimate will to which man must give himself away: “

In the AA world, all long-term decisions are no longer under the jurisdiction of the self. They are handed over to another entity: a higher power, a personally defined god figure” (Daverman, n.p.). And yet, the AA authority is merely an instrument against those vices of the individual that put him in the crippling net of despair, thus condemning him to paralysis. This instrument is necessary, though, as it sets the limits for the recovering alcoholists toward which they have to tend. By submitting to a fictional higher power, addicts are required to cope and deal with their own personal problems, praying to remain sober day by day. As if the only way for a recovering addict was to start over again with his difficult tasks of becoming himself, AA provides him with the opportunity to make small decisions one at a time, so as to be involved in a slow, but steady and gradual progress against the paradox of infinite choices: “

He told Gately to just imagine he’s holding a box of Betty Crocker Cake Mix, which represents Boston AA. The box had directions on the side any eight-year-old could read... It didn’t matter one fuckola whether Gately like believed a cake would result, or whether he understood the like fucking baking-chemistry of how a cake would result: if you just followed the motherfucking directions... a cake would result” (469).

The recovering alcoholic does short-term physical tasks, like not drinking alcohol at a specific time or praying and attending meetings. It is a continual and repetitive process, something that can be apparently static and paralyzing. However, the AA meeting shows no interest in chasing a successful recovery. Being the process a continuous and recursive work, a system that knows no ending, AA allows its members to avoid thinking about the future and all the uncertainties that future holds. It prevents them from falling into anxiety and despair, so typical of the students at E.T.A. In fact, E.T.A. stands at the opposite pole of the ladder. As we have previously considered, it is an institution grounded upon a success-failure system so perfectly arranged and demanding that it renders it highly competitive and its students prone to stasis. Conversely, the AA is dedicated to the present moment, as Gately notes: “

Feeling the edge of every second that went by. Taking it a second at a time. Drawing the time in around him real tight. Withdrawing. Any one second: he remembered: the thought of feeling like he’d be feeling this second for 60 more of these seconds -- he couldn’t deal. He could not fucking deal. He had to build a wall around each second

just to take it. The whole first two weeks of it are telescoped in his memory down into like one second... An endless Now stretching its gull-wings out on either side of his heartbeat. And he'd never before or since felt so excruciatingly alive. Living in the Present between pulses" (859-860).

By living in an environment that focuses on the present, Gately feels more alive than ever before. He is even concentrated on living on the second. His awakening shares no similarity with Hal's paralysis at the chronological end of the story. Jim's son has stopped being motivated to succeed in tennis and academy. He does not live in the present, second by second, step by step, but rather indulges in a state where time is diluted and almost non-existent.

What lies at the heart of AA's empathetic success is the fact that the group is founded on a non-hierarchical reciprocal relationship. We have seen that tennis at E.T.A. is so highly competitive that the athletes are always prone to fall into despair or paralysis as a means to cope with it. Television is a one-way interaction, as grief-therapy and nearly all the types of dialogic interactions in *Infinite Jest*. By contrast, AA is the triumph of a type of democratic communication, a relationship among people belonging to the same social condition. Moreover, honesty and naiveté are among the most important traits that AA meetings promote and encourage. The importance of the other that is strongly and persistently advocated in the group is closely connected to Sartre's view of engagement. The individual can make a concrete choice to establish himself in the world, an act that Sartre claims to be the highest form of freedom one could aspire to: choosing a goal, establishing convictions and ideals, as well as limits, contingencies, necessities. For the French philosopher this resolution knows no God or higher authority to which man should kneel down and obey. The self must discover its limits in the immanent contingency of the world and not, according to Kierkegaard, in a greater metaphysical entity, a recognition that is closely associated to that one shared by AA. But how does he manage to do so? By relating with other individuals, as Sartre seems to suggest. Being the object of the "look" of the other, the self becomes aware of the other's consciousness and his objectification. This acts at the same time as a recognition of the other's subjectivity. Thus, individuals need to relate with the things outward themselves and not inwardly, if they aim to yet they constantly evade this task, therefore being caught in the never ending and addictive cycle of anxiety. In the Rebel Camus explains that every individual action is necessarily mirrored by the effect it will produce on the community to which the individual belongs: “

I have need of others who have need of me and of each other. Every collective action, every form of society, supposes a discipline, and the individual, without this discipline, is only a stranger” (147).

This discipline guides every member who comes to the meetings in order to pierce the veil that hides his need of overcoming addiction. In AA groups, no individual has power nor authority nor claim over another individual, and even in formal meetings, “*they can't kick you out. You're In if you say you're In. Nobody can get kicked out for any reason*” (352).

Inside the group no sort of power is exerted, and the author seems to imply that a democratic sharing of stories and experiences among members coming from different walks of life is perhaps the sole solution to the falling into the womb of solipsism that hovers over Infinite Jest's characters and prevent them from having a satisfying and healthy interaction with one another, as we have previously discussed. In fact, the only form of power that AA exerts over its members is their fear of a possible relapse into alcoholism. During the AA meetings every member has the occasion and the duty to recount his or her story. Some of them are horrendous and cruel and disheartening, others are too surreal to be taken without a smile or a grins. And yet, no grins nor smirks nor hideous smiles are tolerated, as the group strongly discourages any form of irony and cynicism due to the damage these rhetorical tools can impart on the recovering addicts, whose psychical strength is delicate and frail and may collapse into nervous breakdowns as soon as something hurts its balance. Slowly, by taking part in the meetings, each new member becomes aware that AA is a place in which no sort of prejudice or bias or hatred can last. Is this democratic but gentle approach to be considered a form of stasis of communication? Actually, every story is told with earnestness and that kind of naïve sincerity which the author of the novel stigmatized as being rejected by contemporary society. Every member knows that he can fully express his personal despair, as no one of the attendants will judge him for what he did or what he felt in the past. AA meetings are founded upon trust and a sense of community that prevent stasis of communication from happening. We are clearly at the opposite side of the kind of sincerity promoted by Narcotics Anonymous, which acts as a sort of ironical counterbalance. There stasis of communication coincides with the comical and grotesque desire of the NA members to rediscover their inner infant.

For the individual to be able to accept the nature of his addiction and assume responsibility for his task of self-becoming, the AA narrative system must follow a repetitive pattern, a circular route that may resemble the cyclical nature of addiction itself but is not as conciliatory: “

The narrative of AA is well suited to *Infinite Jest*'s situation. AA style becomes a new set of criteria for fiction, a counter against the deadening complete caprice and flux that Wallace ascribes to postmodernism. *Infinite Jest* inculcates its AA-influenced aesthetic by repetition of the AA narrative form, just like actual AA meetings do. There are seven complete AA narratives quoted at length in *Infinite Jest*, and a few more rendered indirectly. Each AA narrative works as an example of the AA way to tell stories and hear stories” (Daverman, n.p.).

AA's directives are not as easy to follow as every newly admitted resident of Ennet House might think. Den Dulk admits that the group's members' utmost success “is about choosing to do, to act according to these guidelines, to live them. One does not have to be absolutely convinced, to choose to do something.” (Den Dulk, n.p.)

Tellingly, all AA members are genuinely interested in the stories told by each of the recovering addicts. There is room for everyone's personal past, as the attendants show they are willing to empathize with one another by following AA rules, something that people outside the group do not appear to make.

The non-AA characters in *Infinite Jest* are truly terrible listeners. Each is solipsistically alone, unable to make interpersonal connections. Brooks Daverman argues that “Within AA meetings listening is a skill that is consciously worked on” and the true potential antidote to stasis of communication. As Gately learns in AA that “it's hard to really hear” (365), he understands the difference between hearing and listening, with the latter being a mere mental repetition of the words being said by one of the AA members. The real and key element of empathy is listening, and must be considered the constant and conscious effort at entering in a connection with the other recovering alcoholics. There are other forms of empathy that Gately gradually learns during his time at AA. One of them is the concept of identifying, described as the acknowledgment of the similarity (if not sameness) “between the listener's story and a speaker's story”. At the opposite pole of identifying lies the act of comparing. Comparing is a vicious cycle, because it puts the listener in an infinite loop, where he is left comparing

the story he hears with his own personal story. If the stories do not share any common ground, the person who compares rejects the story as different and inconsistent, in other words: useless. Gately says of his progress in AA: “I remember for like the first fifty days or so I couldn’t hear shit. I didn’t hear nothing. I’d just sit there and Compare, I’d go to myself, like, ‘I never rolled a car,’ ‘I never bled from the rectum’” (365). Stasis of communication can be overcome by the listener's empathetic act of hearing, a conscious resolution that is allowed by the group's impartial and democratic system: “Identifying, unless you’ve got a stake in Comparing, isn’t very hard to do, here [in AA]. Because if you sit up front and listen hard, all the speakers’ stories of decline and fall and surrender are basically alike, and like your own” (345).

It is the sameness of each story that allows a complete and sincere act of empathy, as the recovering addicts learn how to identify by listening to pieces which are always similar in narrative form. AA meetings help people mingle with the speaker and become a shared single group identity. No one of the story told at AA meetings are told with an ironic stance. In fact, the only one time a speaker tries to use irony, he ends up embarrassing the audience: “

[The speaker] is dreadfully, transparently unfunny; painfully new but pretending to be at ease, to be an old hand, desperate to amuse and impress them. The guy’s got the sort of professional background where he’s used to trying to impress gatherings of persons. He’s dying to be liked up there. He’s performing. The White Flag crowd can see all this. Even the true morons among them see right through the guy. This is not a regular audience. A Boston AA is very sensitive to the presence of ego. When the new guy introduces himself and makes an ironic gesture and says ‘I’m told I’ve been given the Gift of Desperation. I’m looking for the exchange window,’ it’s so clearly unspontaneous, rehearsed... that just a few polite titters resound, and people shift in their seats with a slight but signal discomfort... Speakers who are accustomed to figuring out what an audience wants to hear and then supplying it find out quickly that this particular audience does not want to be supplied with what someone else thinks it wants” (367).

A postmodern rhetorical element, irony is everywhere in *Infinite Jest*, and is also the habitual form that most of the characters use. Still, *Infinite Jest* cannot be read, as it has long been disputed, as a

totally ironical book. This would counteract the entire section of AA world, where irony is banished as toxic for a healthy connection among the recovering alcoholics. As it has been argued before, *Infinite Jest* follows some of the rules and norms posed by postmodernism with regard to formal innovation, but it does not adhere completely to it, as the example of the AA world clearly suggests: “

The disputed position of irony in *Infinite Jest* is part of a larger question about form and communication. *Infinite Jest* is at the confluence of two narrative systems. Postmodernism is form-conscious and concerned with formal innovation and exploration. AA narrative form is not innovative. AA form attempts to be as unremarkable as possible, so that it does not detract from the listener's attention to Identifying with the story.(...) *Infinite Jest* is still very innovative in its form, but it retains the idea from AA that narrative should have a purpose beyond itself” (Daverman, n.p.).

Sameness and repetition lie at the heart of a form of stasis that is aimed at creating empathy and discouraging the type of non-communication which is predominant outside the AA meetings: “

AA members go to meetings daily to hear stories that all have roughly the same form. They do this because the stories are all structured for the purpose of allowing Identification. Identification is more than just communication. It is an experience in which the listener forgets him or herself and fuses identity with the speaker. Communication becomes the purpose of good narrative in *Infinite Jest*, and every formal innovation must have communication as its purpose” (Daverman, n.p.).

It must be remarked that such emphasis on identification and hearing does not necessarily means that all the members of the group will automatically manage to overcome the paralysis of their personal condition. As Den Dulk claims, “words can never offer a pure, complete signification of the world, if only because word and world do not coincide” (Den Dulk,). AA teachings are merely based on words. Fiction has always been considered a narrative system based on “preserving the illusion of reality”, something that the reader has to believe in order to accept. This is precisely the way in which AA dogmas work for those who attend the meetings. The illusion of reality provided by their slogans does nothing but expose the necessity of having to believe in a fictional entity (whether God or the self) as a means to overcome one's addiction. AA words and phrases are clichés who may sound dull and senseless for many of the newcomers. And such a naivety has been the main reason at the core of Gately's rebuttal of AA meetings. He initially shares the same perspective of Joelle Van Dyne, who

says: “

Her trouble is that ‘But For the Grace of God’ is a subjunctive, a counterfactual, she says, and can make sense only when introducing a conditional clause, like e.g. ‘But For the Grace of God I would have died on Molly Notkin’s bathroom floor,’ so that an indicative transposition like ‘I’m here but But For the Grace of God’ is she says, literally senseless, and regardless of whether she hears it or not it’s meaningless, and that the foamy enthusiasm with which these folks can say what in fact means nothing at all makes her want to put her head in the Radarange at the thought that Substances have brought her to the sort of pass where this is the sort of language she has to have Blind Faith in” (366).

It is relevant that several newcomers, including Gately, slowly become empathetic with the stories told by AA veterans, and they begin to accept and follow their suggestions and remarks. Gately makes a slow and gradual “leap of faith” that lets him take the suggestions and surrender to a “higher power”, as we have seen and are about to investigate more deeply.

HAL AND GATELY

In *Either/Or* Soren Kierkegaard insists that “the point is still not that of choosing something; the point is not the reality of that which is chosen but the reality of choosing” (176). It is only when the individual realizes that he is suffering from a particular form of despair, and ceases to believe in the autonomy of his own reason as a means to distance himself from that form of suffering common to all mankind, that he can manage to overcome his sickness. This task takes a constant commitment and is not sufficient to ensure the individual a definitive success in his quest. The self realizes that he is the origin of his own illness, an “active offender”. He exists as long as he is able to choose for himself, and even if he refuses to commit himself to such an infinite endeavour, such refusal is still a choice. Barry Schwartz argues that a choice, any choice indeed, requires a careful and conscious thinking as well as self-awareness. In other words, one must know himself and the limits of his desires and needs, in order to be able to make a decision he will not regret. Know yourself is the mantra that each member of AA tacitly tries to respect. What is crucial for the individual is the task of avoiding falling prey to self-reflexivity (as in the case of Hal) or narcissism (as in the case of Orin) or apathy (as exemplified by Erdedy's case). Hal's condition can easily be associated to that experienced by the Kierkegaardian aesthete who, devoid of his former ability to choose, lies in a state of paralysis that

encages him inside an illusory world. According to the Danish philosopher, aesthetes use self-consciousness as a way to hide from themselves. If we consider the distribution of the two main characters of the story, Hal and Gately, we have a relevant element that can be used as a starting point for a further analysis of stasis as it is related to the overall structure of the novel. We know that *Infinite Jest* opens with Hal, and ends with Don Gately, even if the real ending of the book does not coincide with the chronological ending of the story. Both are still, Hal is seated in a chair and Don lies horizontally on the beach, surrounded by the ebb and flow of the tide. Such a perfect mirroring cannot but be intentional, if we take for granted Wallace's perfectionism and obsessive attention to details. I will consider the initial scene of *Infinite Jest* as a way to understand whether Hal's stasis manages or not to change and develop into something potentially positive, an attempt at making a movement, a leap forward the Kierkegaardian idea of self-becoming. Due to its ambiguity, the initial scene of *Infinite Jest* has long been open to a set of different interpretations. Hal Incandenza, eighteen, is at a college admissions meeting at the University of Arizona. It is November in the Year of Glad. Hal is an excellent junior tennis player and is currently ranked third in an annual tennis tournament called the WhataBurger Southwest Junior Invitational: “

I am seated in an office, surrounded by heads and bodies. My posture is consciously congruent to the shape of my hard chair” (3).

As the first paragraph makes clear, Hal Incandenza is perfectly self-conscious and connected to the contingent situation of the imminent interview. A prodigious son, he is able to quote from photographic memory several pages of the Oxford English Dictionary, and consume libraries:“

I do things like get in a taxi and say, 'The library, and step on it” (12).

Marshall Boswell notes that 'Hal's problem is that everything he “feels” and “believes” is mediated somehow, compromised by words, by what deconstructionists call “textuality”. Hal is a linguistic genius, as we have seen. Ironically, he cannot express himself, nor with his face nor with his words, as he is caught in the fear of “feeling misperceived”. His smiling face, which he is trying to make as pleasant as possible, is perceived as a sort of painful and suspect grimace: “

Hal himself hasn't had a bona fide 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 here, inside his own hull, as a human being - but in fact he's far more robotic than John Wayne" (694).

Hal's problem with communication does not originate from lack of knowledge or a linguistic inability. He actually uses his skill with words as a way to relate with a world in which he does not possess sufficient will to participate. Being a linguistic prodigy does not make him able to connect with other people nor with the inner workings of his mind. He craves for pure human emotions and feelings throughout the novel, and even his father's suicide does not instantiate in him a genuine reaction of grief. In fact, when Hal attends a therapy session with a "grief-therapist" following the funeral of his father, he says "I seemed to have been evincing shock and trauma" (251), feelings that people close to him must have noticed. Indeed, the failed conversation between him and the grief-therapist is another example of how the stasis of communication addresses nearly all the characters in *Infinite Jest*. The therapist asks Hal "how do you feel when I ask how it feels?", to which Hal does not attempt at giving a profitable answer, as he is worried that what he says might be marred and corrupted by being forced to be expressed in words. The grief-therapist seems more worried about how his questions will impact the psychological condition of the boy. The dialogue is too blunt and ironically monolithic to resolve anything. At the next session, Hal is well prepared to face the grief-therapist's questions, for he has read the entire "Copley Square library's grief section" and is ready to address the imminent conversation with the eyes of a professional lecturer: "

I went in and presented with textbook-perfect symptoms of denial, bargaining, anger, still more denial, depression" (253).

However, this ironic trick does not seem to appease the grief-therapist, who “was having none of it”, and Hal “tried telling him Himself was miserable and pancreatic and out of his tree half the time by then anyway, that he and the Moms were basically estranged, that even work and Wild Turkey weren't helping anymore, that he was despondent about something he was editing that turned out so bad he didn't want it released. That the... that what happened was probably kind of a mercy, in the end” (253).

Hal does not use the therapy session to address his feelings in a way that would help him sincerely grieve his father's loss. He merely plays with the grief-therapist, pretty much in the same manner he would act were he to play tennis or write an academic essay. It will take the entire novel to have him admit he is not an inanimate object. When being interviewed in Arizona, he insists at asserting the “illusion of autonomy” of his crippled, desperate and static existential condition: “

I am not just a boy who plays tennis. I have an intricate history. Experiences and feelings. I'm complex. (...) I'm not a machine. I feel and believe. I have opinions. (...) I'm not what you see and hear” (11-12). If we assume his words to be true, we cannot doubt that Hal is perfectly conscious of himself and his (humanity) as opposed to the oppressing world of E.T.A. and family” (11-12).

His answers to the deans seem to prove it, as he deliberately admits he is not a machine, but a human being who feels, believes, has opinions. He has been coached to err on the side of neutrality, a condition that inevitably leads to passivity, the inability to adopt a critical reading of what one is supposed to learn, and anhedonia. Having never committed himself to anything outside playing tennis, consuming libraries and smoking heavy doses of marijuana, Jim Incandenza's most hidden son has been deprived of those peculiar human traits that make it possible for him to be an active part of a community.

According to the lexical prodigy's recalls, his father claimed that Hal was not speaking when they both were sitting one in front of the other. As we have seen, Hal is unable to express himself in a way that may let other people truly understand his words. Greg Carlisle claims that “(this) is surely caused by his retreat into himself-his isolation. Hal's withdrawal from marijuana triggers and intensifies a realization that he has felt isolated since childhood” (??). Near the end of the novel Hal feels hollowed out and comes to realize that he has been playing tennis without any pleasure, though he still clings to it, for fear that resigning from the Academy would lead to a complete loss of his identity. And yet, how can we interpret the comic and pathetic disconnection between Hal's attempt at being sincere

with himself and the others, and the overexaggerated reaction that his words are responsible to have produced? For what reason do the Deans interpret the verbal result of his psychical effort as “subanimalistic noises and sounds”?⁶

It could be argued that, at the end of the story portrayed in the beginning, what lies within Jim's idea of making movies has finally come to a positive end, that a sort of connection between father and son has been successfully made, for Jim's thoughts and worries about helping his son avoid the thrust into the womb of solipsism are then reflected by Hal's responses “I'm not a machine. I feel and believe. I have opinions”. The wraith's desire appears to have been realized, as the son of Jim Incandenza has finally become aware of his “goo-prone” humanity. And yet his words will soon be misinterpreted by the Deans as “‘Undescribable.’ ‘Like an animal.’ ‘Subanimalistic noises and sounds’” (14). Should it be audacious to consider the possibility that Hal, in the end, has been possessed by the wraith of his father, who puts his words inside Hal's brain voice in a final and desperate attempt at creating a connection with him? The reaction of the Deans would perfectly fit the description of someone who had just seen a ghost appear in the room: “

I look out. Directed my way is horror. I rise from the chair. I see jowls sagging, eyebrows high on trembling foreheads, cheeks bright-white. The chair recedes below me” (12).

⁶ A potential interpretative route considers Hal's condition at the beginning of the novel to be the effect of an hallucinogenic drug known as DMZ, which is based on a mold that Hal ingested as a child. Narcotics Anonymous describes the effects of the drug as: “Social isolation, anxious lassitude, and the hyperself-consciousness that then reinforced the withdrawal and anxiety – the increasing emotional abstraction, poverty of affect, and then total emotional catalepsy – the obsessive analyzing, finally the paralytic stasis that results from the obsessive analysis of all possible implication of both getting up from the couch and not getting up from the couch” (503). We will see whether following this interpretative trail can lead to a potential plot-resolution in the next chapter.

In fact, the narrator describes an atmosphere of ghastly suspension. Everything turns cold and pale. The eyes of the Deans become “blank discs that stare at whatever they see”. As Charles Tavis tries to persuade the Deans that Hal is not damaged at all nor he needs any care, the only thing they keep on noticing are the strange “series of bleats” that he is accused of making: “

'Good God' whispers Athletics.

'Please, don't worry' I say. 'I can explain.' I soothe the air with a casual hand.

(...) What's wrong?

I say ' Nothing is wrong'

'It's all right! I'm here' the Director is calling into my ear” (12).

The Deans call help and immobilize Incandenza's son, while he, at the same moment, is trying to “be perceived as limp and pliable”, thus persisting on behaving under the rules of hyper-self-reflexivity. There is nothing his reproaches can do but be mistaken for feral sounds and noises, and even his request of paying attention to what he is saying is dismissed by the Deans as “those sounds”.

In the scene, stasis of communication is enacted by the enormous disproportion between two different groups of speakers: on the one hand there is Hal, who sits on a chair with a fixed expression, self-conscious and fully aware of the reason he is being interviewed. His desperate attempt at making the Deans believe he is not a machine, but a human creature who is able to feel and think and have opinions about a plethora of various arguments and themes, has long been indicated might be seen as the successful result of the wraith's effort to establish a connection with his son. As we have discussed, Hal's words reverse those pronounced by Jim's father with regard to the tennis game. We see clearly that the genealogical tree of anhedonia is broken down, the mindless body of “pure potential” is missed, the monologue eventually comes to an end. Hal's self-awareness as exemplified by his response 'I am not what you see and hear' (13) might thus be considered a spiritual awakening similar to that experienced by Don Gately at the end of the novel. It took them a thousand pages filled with experiences, crises, grief and self-denial to finally achieve a better understanding of their personal condition.

On the other hand, what prevents the scene from being read as an happy ending is the overreaction of the Deans, unable to communicate with Hal except in a conventional, institutional way, “speaking more or less to these pages, smiling down”. Charles Tavis, a hero of hideous sincerity, acts as a biased intermediary of the impossible dialogue. He is neither given credit by Hal nor by anyone of the Deans,

even if he does his best to convince them that “Hal is right as rain”.

Tellingly, the middle section of the first chapter ends with Hal saying one last phrase to the uneducated ears of the Deans, a phrase that sounds close to a possible wraith-induced interpretation of the scene:

“

'I am not'" (13).

Does it mean that Hal, in asserting his freedom of will and ability to choose, feel and make opinions, has acknowledged the lack that had formerly led him to retreat and hide from the others, preventing him from establishing connections and identifying with anyone but Mario? Are the last words he utters to be considered the utmost and inevitable effect of his inability to communicate with other human beings?

We have discussed that communication between a wraith and a human being cannot be established if the former does not impose to stand still for as long as it takes for him to be seen. It took three weeks of his time for the ghost of Incandenza to actually manage to communicate with Gately. And even if he does not make any subanimalistic sound, its words appear inside Gately's brain-voice with “roaring and unwilled force” and “then all the way up to a sound like a mosquito on speed”. Of course, the Deans gaze at Hal and do not notice anything strange or peculiar in him as long as he remains still and does not speak. The sole instant in which we can assume the wraith has taken possession of his son starts from the very moment of his speech: ' I am not just a jock'. He talks slowly and distinctly, as he already knows that nobody can really understand what he says. With his eyes closed, he argues that the reason of his inability to be understood may lie in “something I ate”, that is, the mold he ingested when he was a kid and led his father to create something that could remove its symptoms.

Unlike the bureaucrat of his father's movie *Wave Bye-Bye to The Bureaucrat*, Hal does not manage to make a choice. He remains at E.T.A., feeling incapable of imagining a life outside the system of the academy, despite his acknowledgment of the fictitious nature of material success and competitive playing. I am inclined to argue that the predominant model of dialogue in *Infinite Jest* is the monologic

one, according to the distinction posed by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. The monologic speech is the affirmation of an established and fixed truth, transmitted from the speaker to the interlocutor without him being questioned by the latter. It is the opposite of the Socratic dialogue, which is grounded on the assumption that truth is something to be worked for in an active interaction between people, each contributing in the process according to his specific knowledge and sensibility. As we have previously discussed, Marathe and Steeply do not adhere to the norms of the Socratic dialogue, nor do Orin and Hal when the former tries to persuade his brother to address the suicide of their father. In fact, there is no single character who appears to interact with another one in an equal, democratic way. Joelle Van Dyne, disguised as Madame Psychosis, hosts a radio show where the beauty of her charming voice entertains and hypnotizes those who listen to her. As she is approached by Steeply, she becomes involved in a question-answer conversation that gradually evolves in responses that frustrate the very intentions at the heart of the spy's investigation. Hal and Orin, Hal and Jim, Hal and Avril, Hal and the Deans, all suffer from the same kind of broken communication. When Jim Incandenza visits Gately in his hospital room, they converse without speaking, that is, they become involved in what could be regarded as the perfect description of monologic speech. Each of the visitors in the hospital room uses Gately's static condition as a mirror on which to project all their frustrations, feelings and thoughts, so that the former drug addict becomes against his will the main interlocutor and silent listener of all those stories.

In the closing pages of *Infinite Jest*, Don Gately feels disembodied. He slowly loses consciousness due to excruciating pain and fever that lead to hallucination. He sees his personal "Bottom", and "figured he might die. It wasn't calm and peaceful as alleged" (973). He associates this awareness with Lyle's admonishment at E.T.A. students: "never try and pull a weight that exceeds you". It is particularly interesting that Gately suddenly remembers Lyle's words, if we consider the fact that the old sage lives at E.T.A. and has never met the former drug addict. Self-conscious as he is, Gately claims that it is impossible to imagine a world without himself in it, and in the "bulging and receding" air of the room, which then becomes the "very air" of the seaside, he "looked out at open sea", aware that he is still paralyzed but awake, haunted by family history and memories lurking beneath the surface of his consciousness that may threaten to come out. Gately is a hero of non-action, just like Hal. Nevertheless, his final stance is clearly different from that of Incandenza's youngest son. It has long been argued that Gately is the only character in *Infinite Jest* who manages somehow to exert an active and concrete choice to face the reality of his static condition. Do we have to follow the interpretative path led by those who find in Gately's resolution an authentic and profitable way of breaking stasis and develop as a human being? Does Gately actually manage to become himself? Again, the

resolution at the end of the book is too ambiguous to appeal to such an observation. Death and rebirth are closely linked at the end of the last section of *Infinite Jest*. As Greg Carlisle notes, Gately's final state of inertia symbolizes an image of birth, as he lies "flat on his back on the beach" (973) while recovering from the gunshot wounds. The entire scene is depicted as if it were a hallucination experienced by the former addict while refusing to take Demerol and easing the pain of the wounds. Does he survive? Will he eventually give up his resistance and accept the drugs? A new kind of stasis must come through all these questions, as we become increasingly aware that the entire novel is moulded and structured so as to mirror the sense of entrapment that blocks and annihilates each character's will.

It is sufficient a brief and superficial reading of the book to notice that *Infinite Jest* lacks resolution, a common trait of all postmodern literature as well as a rhetorical trick that has traditionally been used to address contemporary society's lack of meaning and values. But we also do not have to forget that *Infinite Jest*'s apparent lack of resolution does not limit itself to a mere enunciation of contemporary crisis. In the form of AA meetings and Don Gately's progressive awakening, the novel seems to attempt a step toward a possible positive ending. We have said that the book points out ways of depicting stasis that seem unescapable, from non-communication to addiction. In AA, stasis of communication is overcome by allowing every member of the group to tell his or her story. No judgment can be expressed, as all the hundreds of members create an equilibrium in which nothing stirs, people do seek recovery living in the present, in an infinite, repetitive loop of short-term physical tasks. Time is thus interdicted and stasis acquires a positive status. Nevertheless, from page 176 to 181 the author includes a section which is made of twenty fragments that express the various impressions and thoughts of several Ennet House members. Each one belongs to an atmosphere where stasis of communication is the result of twenty different soliloquies aimed at preventing connection among the recovering addicts. Each snippet tells of a particular need or fear: “

I fear I do not stop when I admit I am Alfonso, powerless... My head it is crazy from this fearing of no power... Is hope of power the bad way for Alfonso as drug addict?”
(178)

The fear of being unable to overcome their substance dependency mingles with paranoid thoughts

and complaints about meager details and unimportant nuisances. No one of those Ennet residents actually gets the attention he needs or is asking for. It is worth stressing that the last sentence bound to end the section of chapter 15 is less a simple statement than a request for help and conscious consideration: “

First just let me say one thing” (181).

In AA, we have seen that Identify is set at the opposite pole of Compare, which means that every member of the group does not have to bother whether his story will be judged or blamed or misunderstood, as long as he accepts to adapt to its dogmas and tacitly follow its overall rules. The necessity of limits and rules as a way to avoid falling prey to chaos and the worst forms of stasis mirrors Wallace's own belief that the main difference between good and bad art is played by how much the author aims to open up and talk about himself, in an act of love to his readers that, in order to be pure and true, must avoid at all costs to seek their pleasure, if pleasing them means losing even the slightest bit of autonomy and independence of thought that a novel has to pursue:

I'm not saying I'm able to work consistently out of this premise, but it seems like the big distinction between good art and so-so art lies somewhere in the art's heart's purpose, the agenda and the consciousness behind the text. It's got something to do with love. With having the discipline to talk out of a part of yourself that love can instead of the part that just wants to be loved. I know this doesn't sound hip at all. I don't know. But it seems like one of the things that the really great writers do... is 'give' the reader something...What's poisonous about the cultural environment today is that it makes this so scary to carry out. Really good work probably comes from a willingness to disclose yourself, open yourself up in spiritual and emotional ways that risk making you really feel something. To be willing to sort of die in order to move the reader, somehow. And the effort to actually do it, not just talk about it, requires a kind of courage that I don't seem to have yet. (McCaffery, 150)

The following passage is crucial in explaining the idea of how AA actually manages to help its members. We, together with the most skeptical newcomers of the group, are perfectly aware that AA's logic works with clichés and an almost religious-based repetition of naive slogans that do not mean to be anything more than salvific beacons: “

Addiction is either a disease or a mental illness or a spiritual condition (as in 'poor of spirit' or an O.C.D.-like disorder or an affective or character disorder, and that over 75% of the veteran Boston AAs who want to convince you that it is a disease will make you sit down and watch them write DISEASE on a piece of paper and then divide and hyphenate the word so that it becomes DIS-EASE, then will stare at you as if expecting you to undergo some kind of blinding epiphanic realization, when really (as G. Day points tirelessly out to his counselors) changing DISEASE to DIS-EASE reduces a definition and explanation down to a simple description of a feeling, and rather a whiny insipid one at that" (203).

AA members have learned to acknowledge the artificial nature of the slogans, rules and directives repeated at every meeting. They have to, if they want to subscribe to the group's philosophy and ascertain recovery from the stasis of communication and addiction in which they dwell. Newcomers are much less prone to justify the group's fictitious language, as in the case of Geoffrey Day: “

'So then at forty-six years of age I came here to lean to live by clichés,' is what Day says to Charlotte Treat... 'To turn my will and life over to the care of clichés. One day at a time. Easy does it. First things first. Courage is fear that has said its prayers. Ask for help. Thy will not mine be done. It works if you work it. Grow or go. Keep coming back"” (270).

It must be recalled that the lives of AA recovering addicts are those of men who have reached their personal “bottom”. Having been the sole reason of their current static state of despair, they must have faith in an authority higher than themselves, as we have seen. It is on the basis of such a powerful “subversion of will” that Alcoholics Anonymous manages to become a potential doorway to personal healing.

At the end of *Infinite Jest* we are left with a series of questions pertaining to the main characters' fate. Given the therapeutic measures of the AA meetings, one may come to the conclusion that the author's belief in honesty and faith on a higher power as beacons for becoming oneself and successfully defeating stasis has been finally expressed. But is this resolution what Wallace is really asking us to accept?

Needless to say, Wallace's purpose follows a route that cannot avoid taking into consideration the

crucial role played by Postmodernism and Existentialism in their constant attempt at deconstructing fictional values and rooting for alternative forms of truth regarding both the individual and reality itself. As a writer, his concern has always been : “how to follow postmodernism without merely rejecting it and returning to the mode of the prepostmodern, or even the premodern” (Boswell, 18).

Denial of the sickness is, according to Kierkegaard, part of the sickness itself. It is a form of conscious despair that refuses to surrender to the abhorrent truth of its condition. It must be pointed out that at the opposite end of such a denial stands a type of clinical condition, shared by several depressed characters, which cannot be considered by any means an escape from stasis: “

Moreover, what is crucial is the fact that nearly all the depressed characters usually consider themselves as the ones who suffer most, as they refuse to accept that other people may be tormented by the same clinical conditions, perhaps suffering more than them. One of the least pleasant things about being psychotically depressed on a ward full of psychotically depressed patients is coming to see that none of them is really psychotic, that their screams are entirely appropriate to certain circumstances part of whose special charm is that they are undetectable by any outside party. Thus the loneliness: it's a closed circuit: the current is both applied and received from within” (696).

In order to acknowledge whether the novel's most iconic symbol manages to offer escapes or solutions from both stasis of addiction and communication, I would like to analyse the movie *Infinite Jest*, also known as the lethal Entertainment.

JIM INCANDEZA'S THE ENTERTAINMENT

Infinite Jest is the lethal cartridge whose master copy is being hunted for by the Québécois terrorists. Its plot is so obscure that we never get a total and satisfying knowledge about it. We only know that it features a veiled woman, played by Joelle Van Dyne, who is seen in the first scene as she follows somebody in a revolving door. She does not manage to reach him, as she endlessly circles around the door and misses the chance to interact with the individual. In the second scene she is being recorded while pronouncing the phrase “I'm sorry” in an infinite loop. During the wraith's monological speech by Gately's bedside in the hospital room, J.O. Incandenza 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 (Hal) could simply converse. (...) 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. (..) 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” (838-839).

It was necessary to quote this paragraph in almost its entirety, because it leads to questions regarding whether the old Incandenza's effort has proved effective or not. Did he manage to connect with his son through his latest and most desperate attempt, that is, the creation of the lethal Entertainment? Did he know that watching the movie would have the opposite effects of what it was intended to do? Does Hal become a victim of the cartridge, at the end of the story, told in the first chapter? Are we entitled to consider the lethal Entertainment an effective solution to the kinds of stasis we have seen and discussed before? We shall start by answering the question on the nature of the lethal cartridge: what is Entertainment? The word, according to Philip Sayers, is used by the author in three different senses. The first relates entertainment to popular culture, including movies and television. The second sense refers to specific movies or shows, from Incandenza's works to M.A.S.H. to Cheers. The third sense defines the lethal cartridge, preceded by the definite article: The Entertainment, which is also known as Infinite Jest. Christopher Bartlett, in his “An Exercise in Telemachry: David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest and Intergenerational Conversation” in treating the role of the Entertainment poses an interesting question: “

Why would a novel whose main purpose is commenting on and attempting to provide solutions to escape solipsism take its title from an object that does just the opposite?”
(Bartlett, n.p.).

In fact the book's title refers to the lethal cartridge. We know that the movie *Infinite Jest* was originally meant for Hal, to help him avoid withdrawing into himself and retreating into the womb of solipsism. It was meant to cure the paralysis that Jim saw reflected in himself through the eyes of Hal. What once was designed to be a noble idea, an ennobling act, in the end becomes exactly what the same idea was intended to fight against and neutralize. Therefore, the addictive pleasure provided by the lethal cartridge is not different from the passive entertainment that television has come to give to its viewers over the years. The desire to catch and capture the cartridge is fanatical, an unending spring. The overall result leads to a sense of stasis which is developed by the novel itself, as it is structured

according to a plot that “bulges and recedes”, like the ceiling seen by Don Gately when he is hospitalized for the gunshot wound. Critics and readers have long been inclined to consider *Infinite Jest* as the story of the attempt at overcoming the stasis of a failed relationship: that between Jim Incandenza and his son Hal, with Jim's efforts being all directed towards discovering a way to properly communicate with the young tennis prodigy. Though intriguing, this is quite a common and easily conceivable interpretation. The Entertainment stresses a narcissistic identification with an infant, as the wraith of James Incandenza maintains, admitting to Don Gately that the viewer and the infant must identify with one another. Nevertheless, one of Jim's main purposes with the movie was to create a “magically entertaining toy to dangle at the infant still somewhere alive” in his son.

Steepley describes the viewers of Incandenza's film as “Not inanimate. More like the opposite. More as if... stuck in some way. (...) Stuck. Fixed. Held. Trapped. As in trapped in some sort of middle. Between two things. Pulled apart in different directions” (647).

Having to acknowledge the impact of the film *Infinite Jest* according to an outsider's perspective is hardly a reliable source. It is a never-ending process marked by stasis where nothing essential and profitable is allowed to happen. According to Joelle Van Dyne, we do not have to follow blindly all that Jim said, for “Jim's humor was a dry humor”. During a technical interview conducted by Steepley as he plays a female journalist, Joelle Van Dyne reveals that Jim Incandenza “had a thing about entertainment, being criticized about entertainment v. nonentertainment and stasis” (940), asserting that the founder of E.T.A. had never conceived any antidote to the lethal cartridge, as he had always been ironic about its existence: “

He talked about making something quote too perfect. But as a *joke*. (...) He used to refer to the Work itself as “entertainments”. He always meant it ironically” (940).

Karnicky considers James Incandenza's entire filmography as a long and slow movement toward stasis that culminates with the lethal final movie, *Infinite Jest*. There is no doubt that the lethal Entertainment is the source and principal producer of a kind of stasis that is both communicative and addictive. Addiction to the movie suggests that the eponymous novel itself refers to Jim's filmography as a “Cinema of Chaotic Stasis” and the article “Some Analyses of the Movement Toward Stasis in

North American Conceptual Film” clearly indicates that stasis is the most predominant element of Incandenza's entire cinematic work.

It should be noticed how detailed each film listing is, with information stressing the film's year of release, its length, the actors involved in the project, a brief synopsis as well as a critical commentary. It is no surprise that such a massive list is filled with details to the point of excess. The films are intended to be taken as real and existing ones, as if they had really been directed, published and studied, argued and discussed by spectators, lecturers and critics; we are even given the opportunity to witness important and raging debates surrounding the obscure (and almost mysterious) meaning of Incandenza's operas, first of all the eponymous film whose cartridge is sought by A.F.R.

As Incandenza's production comprises nearly any possible genre, the list of his works includes "industrial, documentary, conceptual, advertorial, technical, parodic, dramatic noncommercial, nondramatic, noncommercial, nondramatic commercial, and dramatic commercial movies". All of them are postmodern in the way they sound as parodies of an existing canon and are self-reflexive.

Anti-figurant is Incandenza's term for his film style of multiple speaking parts. He talks about it as a response to the show Cheers! where bit-actors called figurants would fill the tables of the bar set and mime talking but not actually speak: “

[In reaction Jim] goddamn made bloody well sure that either the whole entertainment was silent or else if it wasn't silent that you could bloody well hear every single performer's voice, no matter how far out on the cinematographic or narrative periphery they were; and it wasn't just the self-conscious overlapping dialogue of a poseur like Schwulst or Altman, i.e. it wasn't just the crafted imitation of aural chaos: it was real life's egalitarian babble of figurantless crowds” (835).

If we take into consideration a few of the movies in the list, we will immediately notice that stasis is the main aspect at the core of each work. *Low Temperature Civics* is told by a narrator who, having an encounter with Death, becomes "irreversibly catatonic". *Cage II* is the story of a blind convict and a deaf-mute convict who are put into "solitary confinement" and attempt to find a way to communicate with each other. *The Desire to Desire* explores the love of a man for a corpse and her "paralyzed sister". *Cage III - Free Show and The Medusa Vs the Odalisque* both show an audience who makes a movement toward total stasis. The public of the latter turns to stone after watching two mythological

females dueling while their surfaces are reflected on stage. The audience of Incandenza's movies is generally “rapt and clearly entertained to the gills...” as the act of watching implies passivity and a paralyzing abandonment to the object of the movie.

During the technical interview Joelle angrily refutes the idea that Incandenza's work is the product of a genius. Joelle's assessment of Incandenza's work shows no room for empathy nor understanding of the intentions behind Jim's production: “

The man's Work was amateurish, she'd seen... More like the work of a brilliant optician and technician who was an amateur at any kind of real communication” (740).

Though a work technically amazing and captivatingly sublime, Incandenza's filmography is no more, for Joelle, than a bunch of special effects and tricks that fail to make “narrative movement toward a real story”. Consequently, “no emotional movement toward an audience” can be achieved.

Eventually, Incandenza's work is penned by Madame Psychosis as the opera made by a “very smart person conversing with himself... mordant, sophisticated, campy, hip, cynical, technically mindbending; but cold, amateurish, hidden: no risk of empathy” (740).

Having inherited from his father but the negative personality traits of hollowness, self-reflexivity and non-communication, Jim has failed to find a way to overcome his stasis with the only kind of tool he could use to express his urge. Tennis failed him, optic science failed him, and as the only remaining discipline in which he became involved in his later years ends up being merely the enactment of his troubled relationship with others, we are instinctively driven to acknowledge the reason behind his final resolution to “remove his own map”.

MARIO INCANDENZA

Mario Incandenza is one of the few characters that the author puts in a positive light. He appears early in the novel and is seen in the third from last section on page 971. He is not a major figure, though his presence occurs often, especially in the middle of conversations with some of the main characters, from Avril to Orin to Hal. His birth was a surprise, being premature and described as something animalistic: “

He had to be more or less scraped out like the meat of an oyster from a womb to whose sides he'd been found spiderishly clinging, tiny and unobtrusive, attached by cords of sinew at both feet and a hand, the other fist stuck to his face by the same material” (313).

As the story progresses, we learn that Mario shares very few similarities with his family. He is different from everyone. A handicapped man, he is the middle child of the Incandenza sons. Most of all, it is Mario's mild and happy personality that makes him a positive character. He is an excellent listener and a “semi-walking miracle”. Due to his openness and sincerity, something that may be mistaken as flatness of spirit, every one in his family adores him. Avril Incandenza considers him “the family's real prodigy, an inbent 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 hart, the smile he puts on each A.M. without fail since the suicide of their father makes her wish she could cry” (317).

Mario possesses an inborn ability to read through others' inner feelings. And even if he fails to fully acknowledge the sorrow that is gradually disconnecting his younger brother, he still manages to deduce something that no grief-therapist nor M.D. could even grasp in years of professional conversations: “

He can't tell if Hal is sad. He is having a harder and harder time reading Hal's mind or whether he's in good spirits. This worries him. He used to be able to sort of pre-verbally know in his stomach generally where Hal was and what he was doing, even if Hal was far away and playing or if Mario was away, and now he can't anymore. Feel it. This worries him and feels like when you've lost something important in a dream and you can't even remember what it was but it's important. Mario loves Hal so much it makes his heart beat hard. He doesn't have to wonder if the difference now is him or his brother because Mario never changes" (590).

His openness is very similar to the kind of straightforward sincerity that AA members are required to follow. It is no surprise then that Mario finds the atmosphere at Ennet House pleasurable and alluring: “

Mario's felt good both times in Ennet's House because it's very real; people 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 that they were worried inside" (591).

Hal's relationship with Mario is tender and human and as far from being artificial as Mario's innocent earnestness. Each conversation between them, mostly happening by night, shows a deep and inextricable bond based upon reciprocal affection, a kind of love that Hal does not share nor feel for anyone but his older brother. Every time they converse, Hal gives Mario several advices and provides him with answers on various topics and subjects. He is always ready to comfort him and look after his needs, as we discover near the end of the novel that “Mario was involuntarily incontinent up to his early teens. His father and later Hal had changed him for years, never once judging or wrinkling their face or acting upset or sad” (768).

Mario is a static character. He never changes throughout the story and remains the same naïve and innocent boy to the point that, sometimes, he makes his younger brother lose his patience: “

Be a fucking human being for once, Boo. I room with you and I hid [my drug abuse] from you and let you worry and be hurt. Be a fucking human being for once, Boo. News-flash at almost fucking nineteen, kid. It's called being a person. You can get mad at somebody and it doesn't mean they'll go away. You don't have to put on a Moms-act of total trust and forgiveness” (784).

Mario plays a crucial role in *Infinite Jest* for a specific reason. He is the only character with which Hal manages to actually say what he really thinks and feels. He is free to express himself without having to resort to drugs or dictionaries, nor does he have to boast his culture and omnivorous taste for knowledge as a way to hide himself from being a real human being. For instance, during a late night conversation with Hal, Mario praises him, saying “Boy were you on today. Boy did you ever make that guy look sick. When he hit that one down the line and you got it and fell down and hit that drop-volley Pemulis said the guy looked like he was going to be sick all over the net, he said.” Hal's response is filled with earnestness and compassion, as he retorts, “Boo, I kicked a kind's ass is all. End of story. I don't think it's good to rehash it when I've kicked somebody's ass. It's like a dignity thing”. His choice is not to delight too much in one's victories, as the individual has to “learn to care and not to care.” When Hal confesses to Mario his former drug addiction, he does admit he feels worried about the inevitable implications that his withdrawal will produce. As he trusts Mario, Hal asks him for help, and Mario readily responds that “I think you just did it. What you should do. I think you just did” (785). Hal's openness is checked by Mario's instinctive grip on human feelings, whose “alternative attitude” is addressed by Den Dulk as showing how sincerity and good faith can work inside contemporary society 's cynical and hidden structure.

The interaction between Hal and his older brother, as long as it involves a mutual and honest interaction, is a potential escape from the encaging perimeter circumscribed by stasis of communication that threatens multiple times the relationships among *Infinite Jest's* characters. At Ennet House “nobody notices anybody else or comments on a disability...”, making it an ideal environment for a deformed man to live in. As the Ennet residents have reached their personal “Bottom” they are no more afraid to open up themselves and talk about things that may make them persist in suffering. They are at the opposite pole of E.T.A. students, whose self-consciousness and narcissism, combined as we have seen with the highly competitive system of the academy, strikes him as something obscure and hard to conceive: “

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 is 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 coincides with the type of human figure in the text that, by being “unavoidably sentimental and naïve and goo-prone and generally pathetic”, is so exceptional and rare, that he might embody Wallace's remedy against postmodernist irony and cynicism. What is interesting is that Mario's deformity and physical stasis act as propulsive engines toward a potential positive resolution. The world of E.T.A. and Ennet House share no common ground in terms of aestheticism. Mario Incandenza is one of the very few characters to actually move from the academy to the recovery house and viceversa. This is no accident, as the deformed boy, thwarted in his movements and being mentally slow, is the only person who is able to connect with other people. His deformity is not so different from the several types of deformities spread all around the world of *Infinite Jest*. We have seen that E.T.A.'s main purpose is to turn its students into professional tennis players and successful people. The quest for physical perfection is another telos which Enfield students are required to reach and achieve. But the very nature of tennis reveals that such physical perfection is impossible to obtain. Why? Because in this particular sport tennis players grow asymmetrically, developing one part of their bodies more than the other as they show “heavily muscled legs and usually shallow chests and the two arms of different sizes”.

And deformed are also the two Incandenza brothers, Hal and Orin. Hal's forearm is “distended” and Orin, a professional football player, shows “an unusually large knee from repetitive punting”. In order to achieve physical greatness they have accepted to deform their bodies. In fact, Hal falls prey to a condition of stasis that impedes any kind of connection and Orin lies imprisoned in the glass-walls of his own narcissism.

It has been mentioned that Mario's body prevents him from being “wildly successful as a professional athlete”, and yet he does not suffer from his physical deformity. His personality is kind and gentle and he is constantly engaged in spreading love and friendliness to others. In other words, he is the perfect embodiment of Sartrean view of sincerity, as Allard den Dulk explains: “

Mario's existence seems to be based on the intuitive awareness that the self is something that comes into being outside himself, not in some immanent, private sphere, but in what transcends his consciousness: in the world and through his actions” (212-213).

The only time when Mario fails to be part of a meaningful interaction is the brief scene of his first and only romantic encounter with U.S.S. Millicent Kent. As Hal's older brother strolls through bushes on the E.T.A. fields, he is approached by Kent, a girl whom he has managed to film several times in different occasions for documentary purposes. Their size difference is particularly relevant, being Kent “two hundred kilos” and Mario a disabled man affected by a form of dwarfism. Kent begins flirting with Mario and confides to him details about her childhood life. As she tries to approach him the sexual intercourse is thwarted by Mario's “vest with extendable police lock (Mario) used for staying upright in one place”: “

What Mario perceived as a sudden radical drop in the prevailing temperature was in fact the U.S.S. Millicent Kent's sexual stimulation sucking tremendous quantities of ambient energy out of the air surrounding them. Mario's face was so squashed against the U.S.S. Millicent's thorax that he had to contort his mouth way out to the left to breathe” (125).

What should be the preliminary steps of a sexual intercourse end up being more a comic and grotesque gag than a serious and satisfying mutual connection between two people: “

Kent's attempt at undoing Mario's vest and stimulating his body gets continually frustrated by “the complex system of snaps and fasteners at the bottom of his police lock's Velcro vest”, with the result that Mario starts laughing vehemently as soon as she discovers that he is very “ticklish in the area of the bellybutton and directly below” (125).

It is crucial to understand that Mario is well accepted both at E.T.A. and in Ennet House, connecting together two places otherwise so different to one another that no possible union can be made. Self-reflexivity and community may finally be combined to form a whole, a balanced stasis aimed at leading to a positive ending. Mario works as a redemptive force that could help Hal escape from the stasis of communication and addiction in which we find him caged throughout the novel. I stressed the word “could” because, in fact, we do not know whether Hal has managed or not to overcome the paralysis of his “inner workings”, and the end of the story appears to point toward a stark and negative answer.

CODA

Originally, the title intended for David Foster Wallace's most popular and influential book was meant to be *Infinite Jest: a failed entertainment*. It has already been argued that the novel works where the movie fails. It is easy to subscribe to such a critical perspective. And yet, for those who have shared an experience similar to mine, reading *Infinite Jest* can be as addictive as watching the lethal cartridge. During the narrative adventure experienced throughout the book, we come to perceive the same sort of despair and addiction suffered by the various characters, from the main protagonists to the figurants. Moreover, the experience of reading such a complex and ambiguous work of fiction leads us to acknowledge a fundamental aspect by which the distinction between the movie and the novel acquires a definitive and ineludible meaning. Since viewing the Entertainment offers a release from self-consciousness and an occasion to escape into an infinite loop of pure pleasure in which the self is eventually suppressed, the movie *Infinite Jest* is the triumph of all those aspects of contemporary culture that Wallace strongly attempted to discourage with the aid of an in-depth study. The book *Infinite Jest*, while apparently pursuing the same route pioneered by Incandenza's movie, gives its readers the opportunity to address stasis of addiction and communication under the light of a new awareness. Each reader is equipped to sustain the unbearable weight of the novel's most painful scenes, adapting her limited perspective to stories, worlds and situations so different from one another that it takes a godlike figure to actually keep them on track and nurture their precious depositions. Consequently, we have learned to be able to identify with addicts like Geoffrey Day, whose case is crucial in showing how stasis of communication can mainly be the result of "language's limitations":

“

[I]t was as if a large dark billowing shape came billowing out of some corner in my mind. I can be no more precise than to say large, dark, shape, and billowing” (649).

Expressing one's personal sorrow is far from being a simple task. In fact, no single character in *Infinite Jest* can be said to have truly expressed what does it mean to be a suffering human being, an issue that is indicative of Wallace's debt to the thought of the German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. In fact, Wittgenstein has been vastly influential for David Foster Wallace, as the author of *Infinite Jest* has never appeared to deny: “Wittgenstein's conclusions seem completely sound to me, always have”. Interviewed about his thoughts on the work of the German philosopher, Wallace answered that:

“

Wittgenstein’s argument, which is admittedly very complex and gnomic and opaque, basically centers on the fact that a word like pain means what it does for me because of the way the community I’m part of tacitly agreed to use pain.

Wittgenstein argues that, for language to be possible, it must work as an active and coherent relationship between people, devoid of the “self-consciousness that philosophical reflection chronically produces” (Greene, 275-276).

The inability to access other selves lies at the core of solipsism and self-reflexivity, two of the dominant motifs of Wallace's prose. In *Infinite Jest* people dissociate themselves from social ties and settle on living in a static, repetitive existential condition in which they are unable to make any relevant choice or commit to anything worth an effort. Such inability to access and interact with other selves is a problem concerning every aspect of contemporary society. As we will investigate further, stasis results both from lack of communication and a benumbing multiplicity of choices, crisis of traditional values and ethics, hyper self-reflexivity, irony and cynicism. As it has been hinted in the introduction, self-reflexivity is one of the principal rhetorical tools used by Postmodernism, along with parody and cynicism. In the works of Wallace hyperreflexivity features as a highly relevant item of contemporary existence. Self-reflection causes the individual to objectify his “internal processes”, that is, feelings and thoughts. Wallace finds himself close to the Wittgensteinian solution to the paralyzing threat of nihilism, that is solipsism and lack of communication. Praising Wittgenstein's “*Philosophical Investigations*” as “the single most comprehensive and beautiful argument against solipsism that's ever been made”, he argues that language is a conscious relationship between persons. According to the German philosopher, a word has a certain meaning as a consequence of the use it has been imposed upon it by language. Consequently, language is always a collective issue, something that exists for as long as the relationship between man and the other is relevant enough to be meaningful. This is the reason why all the characters who experience stasis of communication are the ones who suffer most from lack of a prolific, direct and empathetic connection with one another.

If we compare Hal's anhedonia with Erdedy's paralyzed stasis, or Kate Gompert's suicidal thoughts with Joelle's hiddenness, we will come to the conclusion that each one of them tends to conceal his feelings under a mask either metaphorical or literal. Geoffrey Day knows that everyone translates the word pain according to his personal story and feelings, and a complete understanding of the pain experienced by a suffering individual is far from being achievable: “

I understood what people meant by hell. They did not mean the black sail. They meant the associated feelings” (651).

Teddy Wayne, in his essay named “Addiction to itself: self-consciousness in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*”, gives a brilliant explanation on the way that we, as readers, can perceive the lack of communication among *Jest*'s characters and empathize with the suffering of the addicts: “Since the imagery itself is irrelevant, the reader can potentially understand the “associated feelings” through the experience of reading *Infinite Jest*, a reading that recreates the sensation of addiction” (Wayne, n.p.).

As Cioffi argues, the reader of Wallace's prose, especially *Infinite Jest*, becomes a sort of addict who is caught in an alternative form of stasis, albeit a new and propositive one. The reason must be ascribed to the fact that reading “*Infinite Jest* is, in some way, to become the pathologically ambitious tennis player, the desperate show-off, the helpless addict- and to know it” (Cioffi, 170). In other words, one does not limit himself to simply getting involved in the emotional investment of the scene or the character he tends to empathize with, but realizes that the compulsive reading of *Infinite Jest* does not give him any escape from self-consciousness. And yet, we, as readers, though addicted to the book and the structural stasis on which it stands, do not turn to figural stones nor we are doomed to experience the same paralyzing fate of the medical attaché or Hal. Rather than being approached with the promise of escaping from our own self-consciousness and despair, we are given a chance to discover an extremely telling truth, that stasis can stem from lack of self-awareness and outer-directness as well as from addiction and non-communication. We are given the highest form of power and independence from the very moment in which we come to the conclusion that no sort of consolation will be waiting for us at the end of our reading activity, as Boswell maintains: “

Entertainment is soothing, entertainment concludes, solves problems, offers self-forgetting; nonentertainment unsettles, remains incomplete, remains static” (Boswell, 175) .

There is no real escape from the kind of stasis in which each of all the characters in *Infinite Jest* live,

no breaking point, no sense of rupture, no definite release, save death or a form of Camus-like rebellion aimed at connecting with the others, something that Wallace himself defined as: “

An acclimatic ending that could resonate best with themes of stasis, annulation, paralysis, undecidability, clarification of question” (D.T. Max, 193)

The novel's morale shares no common ground with any kind of “soothing ending”, as it provides us with the horrid awareness that human nature is damned to live in a “bulging and receding” condition based upon a static conflict between two opposite poles of an infinite axis: self and the other, addiction and recovery, rebellion and despair. In fact, we are told by Boswell that: “

The false escapes offered by entertainment and drugs only create more cages, whereas this novel confronts the inescapability of the interior by leaving all the major characters still trapped inside themselves without any exit, without even the ability to speak” (Boswell, 176).

Therefore there is no need to deny that a clear and feasible resolution, at the end of *Infinite Jest*, is far from being achieved. Conversely, the conclusion of the novel unfolds without resolving any of its numerous plot strands. We have seen that the first section of the novel coincides with its chronological conclusion, as the novel's structure follows a circular path where the beginning is the end and the end is the beginning. Hal's interview at the University of Arizona marks the initial sequence of the book after a year-long gap in which we are not given any useful information that may help us with our enquiry for a linear resolution. What happens during that year-long narrative void? The author of *Infinite Jest* develops Hal's gradual descend into horizontal stasis by enhancing the disproportion between what other E.T.A. students notice about his ambiguous behaviour and Hal's own perception of himself; Don Gately lies paralyzed in the hospital bed at Ennet House; Orin Incandenza is being interviewed by terrorists and is trapped inside a glass cage; A.F.R. appears to have secured a copy of the lethal cartridge; everytime each of the countless plot twists attempts to make a step toward a potential resolution, the story pauses and the author floats to another spot that he believes must be addressed. Critics of Wallace's prose have been battling and arguing for years to find out whether a linear ending in *Infinite Jest* is possible to discover or not. Wallace himself, being questioned in an interview about a possible ending to be found inside the book, showed an almost sadistic kind of humour as he answered: “

There is an ending as far as I'm concerned. Certain kind of parallel lines are supposed to start converging in such a way that an "end" can be projected by the reader somewhere beyond the right frame. If no such convergence or projection occurred to you, then the book's failed for you" (Wallace, n.p.).

Stasis of interpretation is the sole reward left to the reader for his investigative effort, his in-depth inquiry. This is the very purpose that Wallace believes a work of serious art should adopt and strive to assert. In a world replete with choices the purpose of real art, according to him, is: “

To force you to work hard to access its pleasures, the same way that in real life true pleasure is usually a by-product of hard work and discomfort. So it's hard for an art audience, especially a young one that's been raised to expect art to be 100 percent pleasurable and to make that pleasure effortless, to read and appreciate serious fiction. That's not good. The problem isn't that today's readership is "dumb," I don't think. Just that TV and the commercial-art culture's trained it to be sort of lazy and childish in its expectations. But it makes trying to engage today's readers both imaginatively and intellectually unprecedentedly hard" (Burn, 22).

Constant interpretation is the only critical instrument that we as readers can afford. By adapting to such a hard and seemingly infinite effort, we are given the opportunity to properly address the encyclopedic novel and counter all the challenges and threats posed by abstract subjects, technical language and plot- twists interruptions with the awareness that, to reprise Schwartz's assertion that "too many choices are better than no choice at all", too many possibilities of interpretation are always better than no possibility at all: “

I guess a big part of serious fiction's purpose is to give the reader, who like all of us is sort of marooned in her own skull, to give her imaginative access to other selves. Since an ineluctable part of being a human self is suffering, part of what we humans come to art for is an experience of suffering, necessarily a vicarious experience, more like a sort of "generalization" of suffering. Does this make sense? We all suffer alone in the real world; true empathy's impossible. But if a piece of fiction can allow us imaginatively to identify with a character's pain, we might then also more easily conceive of others identifying with our own. This is nourishing, redemptive; we become less alone inside" (Burn, 21-22)

And yet, stasis of interpretation does not have the same unfruitful value of the other types of stasis covered by the research. It is rather a critical stance that works under the rules of what Greg Carlisle has formulated as the condition of being “able to choose, to contribute, not caught in a cycle of stasis and passivity” (Carlisle,) , that such a complex novel constantly creates. The initial scene of *Infinite Jest*, together with the various snippets that constitute the public language of Ennet House and AA meetings, obeys to Wallace's aim to convey “the sense of terrified isolation that is key to the story, the worry that what we feel we can never express” (193). In telling a story, the author of *Infinite Jest* places a series of hints and clues here and there that may lead to a possible and valid explanation of the book's overall plot. Choosing among the various trails is a gesture that, in the end, can produce the same type of despair which Schwartz addresses as the major issue faced by contemporary society when confronted with an unlimited set of choices. If each interpretation bears the same weight and has mainly the same relevance of a thousand others, then it means that all the interpretations at stake are null. As we already know, stasis stems from a state of discord between two opposite forces. It is clear that too many opposite interpretations of a common subject do not lead to any movement forward, no definitive solution or understanding. Stasis of communication is an unproductive exchange of words belonging to two antithetical individuals whose efforts are too feeble to be really taken as an attempt at creating a fruitful connection. There is no third way or synthesis to consider, because dialectic is made of too many possible interpretative strands to result in anything meaningful and concrete. If one follows one inquiry instead of another, he has no reason to actually believe his investigation to be more accurate or appropriate than all the others he could have chosen, had he decided to take other paths. Sheena Iyengar has brilliantly illustrated the sense of paralysis that may impact the individual's inner workings every time he has to choose among more than two different options: “

When someone can't see how one choice is unlike another, or when there are too many choices to compare and contrast, the process of choosing can be confusing and frustrating. Instead of making better choices, we become overwhelmed by choice, sometimes even afraid of it” (Iyengar, n.p.).

If we substitute the word “choice” with “interpretation”, we will notice that Schwartz's assertion can describe attempting a critical approach to *Infinite Jest*. For instance, as Marshall Boswell suggests, a possible and interesting interpretation of Incandenza's ghostlike appearance can be pursued according to the threat of Quebecois terrorists. If we accept that the wraith's apparition appears to be motivated by the urgency to warn Ennet House residents and E.T.A. students of Avril Incandenza's possible involvement with the separatist cause, we will probably end up reading the story under a completely different light. The novel abounds with hints of Avril's alleged involvement, starting from her Quebecois origin. Avril is also engaged with Hal's tennis rival, John “No Relation Wayne”, who is a Quebec native. We do not even have to forget the question Jim, disguised as a professional conversationalist, poses to his youngest son, as he accuses him to be “affiliated with the pan-Canadian Resistance”. The medical attaché who watches the lethal Entertainment is described by the author as one of over thirty Near-Eastern medical attachés with whom Avril has been allegedly involved. Is it a subtle hint at Jim's tacit and cruel vengeance against his wife's apparent adultery, given also that the medical attaché enters into a catatonic state on the first of April, whose French translation is Avril? If we think of Hal's fate at the chronological end of the novel, we do not get to know whether his isolation has been accentuated by the effect of DMZ, a drug based on a mold he ate as a child, or whether his mother has failed to come to give him moral support when he was scared after eating the mold as a child, or because his father committed suicide in such a cruel way that it might have heavily contributed to his psychological condition. There is an interesting theory which argues that Jim Incandenza created DMZ as part of an attempt to undo the crippling and poisonous effects of the mold that Hal ate as a child. But DMZ is a mold that grows on a mold, in the same way as the annular fusion, a process in which waste is fed on waste. How can it be considered an escape from the poisonous mold? We are also aware that James Incandenza's wraith has been haunting ETA in search for something, moving objects and making creepy sounds. Is he searching for the mold? Pemulis had hidden the DMZ right above his ceiling, but one day he found that someone or something had moved “the relevant panel” of the ceiling, and the DMZ was gone. Does it follow that the wraith has managed to acquire the drug and is planning to give it to Hal? Prior to the initial scene of *Infinite Jest*, Hal was still able to communicate with other people, from E.T.A. students to his brother Mario. Later in the story, as we witness his fall into the static womb of solipsism, he will not longer properly

communicate his feelings, save to himself. And yet, as we have seen, by the time he is being interviewed he has never felt so aware of his personal feelings and human traits. Does it mean that the wraith has made him eat the mold and Hal's apparent recovery (or his definitive disconnection from the world) is the result of the assumption of DMZ?

Similarly, how do we have to consider the ambivalent ending scene of the novel? How strong is our conclusion that Gately's potential positive escape from stasis has actually happened? Carlisle argues that Gately's recovery is fuelled by the intervening force of a spiritual entity, namely AA authority: “

Gately's consistent physical action of getting on his knees to pray leads to the recovery of his memories and his mental stability. Gately's mind-body interconnection is presumably triggered by a spiritual force” (Carlisle, 192).

AA members' living in the moment shares no connection with living for the sake of pleasure, a state which requires that man be imprisoned in a present moment devoid of any link with past or future, a condition of eternal disappointment and decay. The latter is the fate experienced by tv-viewers and all the addicts in *Infinite Jest* who do not follow the process of self-abandonment prescribed by the Alcoholic Anonymous. They constantly hover “between present and future, always hoping for the arrival of the desired satisfaction, the filling of a void that was created in the past”. As we have discovered in the previous sections of this research, AA recovering addicts learn to give up all their hope for the future and concentrate on the present moment, the one by which their concrete existence and mental stability heavily depend.

Gately's choice of not taking any painkiller forces him to live each of his painful conscious moments to the full. He does not refuse to accept his suffering, and he even ends up considering “a real gift” the endless moment between cramps that the gunshot wound forces him to perceive. Though bedridden and lying at the very end of the novel in a state of horizontal stasis, we come to discover that Gately feels “less high than disembodied” (981) for the feeling provoked by his suffering “...was obscenely pleasant” (981). As the book ends in a dreamlike experience where it becomes hard to figure out if the former drug addict has managed to distance himself from the encaging stasis of his addiction, or he has eventually taken Demerol and died experiencing a drug-induced reverie, we are left with hypotheses and interpretations that fail to give us a definitive, all-encompassing answer. All we have learned about Gately through the reading of *Infinite Jest* seems to lead to a positive ending. He has reached the “bottom” as a means to engage in the Kierkegaardian “leap” into self-renewal or oblivion, and yet we do not exactly know whether he has successfully entered recovery or he simply

died out of exhaustion from excessive pain or due to a return to drug-addiction. In other words, we are left in the same stasis of interpretation that comes from Hal's final and eloquent stillness as a result of chronic non-communication with a world that fails to connect with his feelings and ambitions. Interpretation of a character's ambiguous past is also doomed to be on hold. Is Joelle Van Dyne disfigured or not? Does she wear a veil because her beauty is so appealing that it can damage the others or because her mother, in a whim of jealousy, threw acid on her face? As for nearly all the plot-lines and stories in the book, the narrator does not clearly point toward a satisfying answer. We are only allowed to imagine what we unconsciously want to believe. It is curious that she is also identified as a Medusa figure, a woman whose beauty is able to transform anyone into an inanimate object. Joelle Van Dyne is also one of the most isolated characters in the novel. Her radio show "Sixty Minutes More Or Less With Madame Psychosis On YYY-109, The Largest Whole Prime On The FM Band" is hosted within the recesses of the M.I.T. student union, in an enclosed nook "hidden from all view by a jointed triptych screen of cream chiffon that glows red and green in the lights of the phone bank and cueing panel's dials and frames her silhouette" (183). Being impossible for anyone to see her, the audience knows of her existence through her voice only. Each episode of the show begins and ends with five minutes of dead silence. The radio show conducted by Joelle Van Dyne creates an intimate connection between her and the audience. Disguised as Madame Psychosis, she entertains his listeners with religion-driven themes, acting as a kind of preacher figure whose voice is so compelling that she almost induces a sense of numbness, if not protection and reassurance, in those who hear it. Madame Psychosis is also the name of DMZ, the drug based on mold created by Jim Incandenza, apparently to help his son. Apparently they share the same effects of reducing the individual to a state of total inactivity. It is now broadly accepted that Madame Psychosis' name is a play on metempsychosis, a role that she shows to take in James Incandenza's film *Infinite Jest*, as she represents the figure of Death incarnate. In one of the latest scenes of the novel, Madame Psychosis comes to Don Gately in a dream and "is Death. As in the figure of Death, Death incarnate... Death is explaining that Death happens over and over, you have many lives, and at the end of each one (meaning life) is a woman who kills you and releases you into the next life" (850). Her presence is blurred by Gately's "unfocused and wobbly" vision and "it's as if he's seeing her through a kind of cloud of light, a milky filter that's the same as the wobbly blur through which a baby sees a parental face bending over a crib (850-1), and Gately is himself in a hospital bed with rails that make it distinctly crib-like. His vision is exactly like the effect Jim Incandenza achieves in *Infinite Jest* with a wobbly lens, which he uses to make the viewer feel like a baby in a crib. The idea of Madame Psychosis relates to Freudian psychology. According to Freud, humans are driven by two opposing drives: the life drive, acknowledged as libido/eros and the death drive, also called thanatos. Eros is

generally associated with creativity and lust, while the death drive aims to lead the individual toward a condition of total stasis. Freud believed that, as pleasure increases and stimuli decreases, the highest and most satisfying experience of pleasure would be produced by absence of stimuli. According to such an assumption, death becomes the ultimate form of pleasure for the individual. In the world of *Infinite Jest*, as we have seen, all the characters seek out this form of static pleasure by tending towards something to which they are more or less addicted: tv-viewers, drug addicts, the watchers of the lethal Entertainment, tennis players.

What sort of conclusion can we safely draw? Is it true that stasis of interpretation is the sole relevant form of critical insight available for those who aim to analyse fictional works as long and complex as *Infinite Jest*? Reading the novel forces the reader to be brave and well prepared for anything to come, adapting to each page with a special care. Having to adopt the personal perspective of a hundred of characters, each of whom being thwarted by a particular form of stasis, we are given the opportunity to investigate “elaborate portrayals of contemporary Western existence” (Den Dulk, n.p.), as Den Dulk affirms. Through the years, nearly all the studies of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* have never appeared to put that much emphasis on the theme of stasis, considering that particular topic not as relevant to the economy of the novel as more trodden, popular ones. Focusing on themes such as addiction or irony or narcissism alone, though pertinent and appropriate they might be, would have hardly added new elements to the critical debate surrounding Wallace's fictional prose, which nowadays has become massive in size and specificity.

A contributing factor of the general dismissal of the theme I have come to analyse is due to the fact that a term like stasis implies so vast a set of meanings and definitions, and can be used to address so many disciplines, that it is easy to feel discouraged and prefer to focus on much less ambiguous subjects. And yet, such a wavering theme cannot be set aside. Nothing is casual in the world of *Infinite Jest*, but what lies beneath the text must be worked out page after page by an indefatigable reader who has to be aware that she may not find any fruitful solution at the end of her interpretative journey. We have seen that Wallace's treatment of stasis in the figures of Gately, Mario and AA meetings serves as the book's fuel to attempt a potential leap forward, “providing a harrowing portrayal of individuals who have become caged in themselves and make clear that there is only one direction for meaningful existence: out of the self towards the world and the other” (Den Dulk, n.p.).

CONCLUSION

In this research I attempted to prove that stasis is the author's most precious and important resource to employ for a thorough exposition of contemporary society's values, that Wallace handles both by following and rejecting Postmodernism's rhetorical tools. I have previously asserted that such an inquiry could have never happened without the aid of the book's philosophical premises, as stasis can be easily associated with the existential concept of despair. In fact, we do not have to forget the influence of Existentialism on the novel's philosophical stance, which derives its core from the intertwined thoughts of the principal intellectuals who shaped the nineteenth-century European thought: Kierkegaard, Sartre, Camus and Wittgenstein. At the beginning of the research, I made clear that one of the main purposes of identifying stasis in an oeuvre like *Infinite Jest* is to explore what it means to live in a paralyzed world as paralyzed selves, caged in static states of mind, and how difficult, painful, slow and demanding the process to become a human being is. We have seen that Schwartz's *The Paradox Of Choice* claims that the ability to choose rightly is mostly a matter of responsibility. It is through choice that the self manages to emerge and realize itself. It was through a responsible choice that Gately managed to improve his living conditions, if we are to follow this linear, if not predictable, interpretative trail. As in the case of AA duties, self-becoming is an infinite effort, made up of tedious, repetitive tasks that require the abandonment of old beliefs and the acceptance of boredom and suffering as means for our self-becoming.

Under the guide of such premises I have considered all those scenes in *Infinite Jest* that could provide the most relevant examples regarding the theme of stasis of addiction and communication so predominant in *Infinite Jest*. I am also aware that, despite my in-depth research and the structure I gave to this work, there still could be some parts and scenes or characters whose peculiar stories I might have forgotten to mention or properly analyse. As Karnicky asserts, "A catalogue of kinds of stasis in David Foster Wallace could go on and on, from the 'static, momentumless music' (...) to the stasis of seizures, withdrawal stasis, the stasis of the recovery moment'" (Karnicky, 119). In other words, the book is so massively filled with examples of stasis and elements betraying static features, that the same effort at keeping track of them would result in the same paralyzing outcome experienced by Ken Erdedy in the room of his apartment block.

I would have never attempted to begin the inquiry, had I not been reminded that novels like *Infinite Jest* compel us to admit a fictional perimeter inside whose borders we should be recommended to remain, carving an order out of an apparently infinite disorder of data and information.

We as readers are compelled to start the book by the very beginning, conscious that reading *Infinite Jest* is to approach the endless, recursive stasis implicit in the novel's narrative mechanisms. In fact, we end up with the same sense of frustration and powerlessness shared by most of the characters both at Ennet House and at E.T.A. Our search for an ending, whether positive or negative, is fatally doomed to force us to return to the first chapter, that is chronologically the last event of the story.

By page 900, the reader, whose fundamental objective still is to identify unambiguous literal meaning instead of a diverse interpretative meaning, expects a 100 Watt epiphany, only to find out, at the end, he has to start reading the novel over again from the very beginning knowing he will not be any wiser after a second or third time through the novel.

We have hinted at the fact that *Infinite Jest's* endnotes cover subjects as various as theoretical math, pharmaceutical chemistry, tennis, history and plot digressions, providing plenty of singular information for the reader as well as playful jokes and parodic lines that disrupt and ridicule our expectations of relying upon a trustworthy encyclopedia. Mendelson argues that encyclopedic novels

“attempt to render the full range of knowledge and beliefs of a national culture” and *Infinite Jest* is no exception. On the other hand, it must not be forgotten that Wallace's intent at creating such an ambitious work is by far much more ambiguous than that of the encyclopedic novels written by his precursors. What is the purpose of putting such an incredible amount of data, given that most of the notes do not contribute to a better understanding of *Infinite Jest's* plot-lines, but rather entrap the reader in an addictive ebb and flow from page to page and paragraph to paragraph, in a gradual and inevitable intricacy of notions, names and numbers?

And so, “What are we to do, then, with all the vast data presented by (...) *Infinite Jest*?”(156-157), asks David Letzler in his essay *Encyclopedic Novels and the Craft of Fiction: Infinite Jest's Endnotes*, before providing a relevant and resourceful answer that leads to the awareness that “many (notes) are basically pointless”. Marshall Boswell shows no room for doubt when he writes that “Readers can, and even must, devise some way to read through the book that allows them to keep their focus on the story while also mining the notes for all their information, comedy, and readerly pleasure” (Boswell, 78).

Handling information and data surplus is one of the most demanding tasks that a reader of contemporary society has to face, especially in the digital age, as Letzler claims: “

If one really wants to understand any of the important political issues of our time, each tangled in such a dizzyingly complex web of global relations, one would have to pore over so much specialized economic, historical, and sociological research in search of the core problems that 'you'd simply drown. We all would" (Letzler, 173).

The amount of information and data to process and acquire is so great and overwhelming that the reader's attention is always challenged and needs to be nurtured, fueled and motivated, in order to make the "leap forward" through which the issue of stasis becomes bearable and acts as a propelling agent for self-improvement: "

To develop this ability, one must seek out pointless text and learn to work one's way through it" (Letzler, 162).

Some endnotes require that the reader possesses a general knowledge of pharmaceutical chemistry, in order to approach the information, as in the case of Note 8. For those who have a sufficient preparation to discriminate between one drug and another, the note, as Letzler points out, is "entirely redundant", as there is nothing new for them to learn. We are entitled to process all the data and skim through "a tremendous amount of cruft" in order to avoid falling prey to the same stasis of addiction experienced by the Entertainment viewers, being totally connected to the eventuality that an important detail, a productive message might appear. Endnotes abound and raise the stakes in the process of coming to a satisfying conclusion with regard to the novel's overall purpose. As we have discussed, there are no definitive solutions to the major plots interwoven within the narrative text, no easily detectable clues through which we can properly assimilate all the data and information included in over a thousand pages. Nevertheless, stasis of interpretation does not have to discourage the reader from coping with the task of approaching *Infinite Jest* from a critical standpoint, though hard, boring and frustrating it might be. Reading Wallace's prose means that we have to handle it with care and dedication, accepting its inherent complexity and nurturing its intricacy with the repetitive acts of association, comparison and connection among its many narrative threads. Our fate is not dissimilar

to that experienced by Sisyphus, as Camus points out. As soon as he understands that nothing can be done to prevent him from rolling the rock up to the top of the bottom in a futile, infinite loop, Sisyphus is able to "conclude that all is well", and even approach his task with a sense of joy, if not serenity. Likewise, the absurd man, once he contemplates and acknowledges his torment, might feel close to happiness as he discovers that there is no hope and our life is merely what we make of it. Life is a constant struggle without hope nor promise of otherworldly happiness. As we may notice at a brief glimpse, this final consideration stands at the opposite side of the Kierkegaardian's solution to despair. The latter's "leap of faith" into God cannot coincide with the absurd man's consciousness of the meaninglessness of existence. According to Den Dulk, repetition is viewed by Kierkegaard as an ethical category, as it "entails a commitment that constantly recurs and that, because of that constant repetition, is not new and interesting, which is what the aesthetic mind wants everything to be" (Den Dulk, n.p.).

If we extend the category of the aesthete to comprise the whole of contemporary society, we will get to the ready-made conclusion that the post-modern individual is afraid of being bored, as the characters in *Infinite Jest* never cease to show, for they seek to escape into a realm of infinite pleasure through which they aim to avoid the horrible plight that "the uncertain and seemingly meaningless existence" inevitably procures. As we approach *Infinite Jest*, we are able to identify all the ways in which stasis appears as an agent of despair, and shield ourselves by an act of ethical self-recognition and responsibility, perfectly aware that no sort of cheering, soothing ending will wait for us. Since reading is an act that implies physical stillness (that is, the absence of movement) and a considerable mental effort made up of repetitive tasks and infinite concentration, reading becomes quite obviously the only remedy that we can count on if we aim to escape from the forms of stasis of pleasure, addiction and communication that Wallace so acutely believed to be the predominant issue at stake in the contemporary world.

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