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# Abjection and Empathy: The Shared Spaces and Blurred Boundaries of Infinite Jest

Emily Washburn

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ABJECTION AND EMPATHY:  
THE SHARED SPACES AND BLURRED BOUNDARIES OF *INFINITE JEST*

by

EMILY WASHBURN

Under the Direction of Dr. Chris Kocela

ABSTRACT

In *Infinite Jest*, David Foster Wallace positions abjection in opposition to empathy. Both psychological phenomena derive from a relationship between two people, but abjection depends on a pushing away and empathy depends on a pulling toward. The experience of either phenomenon results in a blurring of interpersonal boundaries, but there is no intimacy in abjection. Instead, as made evident in the central family of Wallace's novel, the result of abjection is that an individual retreats into the self, rejecting any attempt at intimacy that might be interpreted as an effort to breach autonomy. This alienation is best countered by empathy, as modeled in *Infinite Jest* in the practice of "Identification" in Alcoholics Anonymous. To identify with a person is to empathize with him or her: to share perspective and emotion. Empathy, unlike abjection, lasts only for a moment, allowing for the reinstatement of the boundaries of self.

INDEX WORDS: Kristeva, Solipsism, Intimacy, Identification, Spatial analysis

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by

EMILY WASHBURN

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this thesis to my husband James, and to my sons, Jackson and Jess.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I am grateful for the guidance and inspiration provided by the members of my thesis committee, Chris Kocela, Calvin Thomas, and Paul Voss.

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## INTRODUCTION

Throughout *Infinite Jest*, David Foster Wallace uses metaphors of geometry and space. The use of such metaphors predates the novel, as seen in his 1990 article, “Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley,” in which Wallace develops the idea of the tennis court as a physical and psychological space, a rectangle of 2,106 square feet, with multiple intersecting lines defining the limits of play. As a “near-great junior tennis player,” Wallace found that he “felt best physically enwebbed in sharp angles, acute bisections, shaved corners,” shapes echoed across Central Illinois where “anally precise squares of dun or khaki cropland [are] cut and divided by plumb-straight tar roads” (3, 8, 6). Against this order and precision, Wallace juxtaposes a tornado, which he conceives of geometrically, referring to it as the “z coordinate” to break up “the Euclidian monotone of furrow, road, axis, and grid” of the surrounding terrain (17). A tornado, in Wallace’s description, is “a circling of the square, a curling of vectors,” a force not governed by the right angles of tennis courts and Midwestern plains (17). Wallace recounts his experience of an afternoon practice interrupted by a tornado’s near descent, a moment when he became aware of the “dimensionless point at which parallel lines met and whirled and blew up” (17). Order confronts entropy, embodied.

Wallace’s interest in the metaphorical reading of space and boundaries, according to Paul Giles, is reflected in Wallace’s admiration of the work of the poets Philip Larkin, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and John Donne, all of whom were “interested in both formal limits and their transgression, in the conflict between free play and closed structures” (335). In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace continues to work with shapes, made evident to the reader through the inclusion of calculus equations, represented graphically, to analyze a player’s

performance on the tennis court, as well as an illustration of the complicated chemistry of annular fusion (1091, 1092, 502). Wallace, it seems, even conceived of the structure of *Infinite Jest* geometrically: he identified it as a “Serpienski Gasket,” a triangle formed by internal triangles, a shape capable of infinite expansion (qtd. in Hering 89).<sup>1</sup>

Wallace’s interest in shapes is particularly apparent in the narrative line associated with O.N.A.N., the Organization of North American Nations, a political entity that includes the United States, Canada, and Mexico. Although the organization appears to be a testament to international cooperation and interdependence, Wallace reveals that the United States is coercing its neighbors into serving U.S. interests. Long overwhelmed by waste, the U.S. had previously converted New Hampshire, Vermont, and upstate New York into a colossal dumping ground. Then, the U.S. seduced Canada and Mexico into O.N.A.N. with promises of a collective power that could yield greater international influence. With O.N.A.N. established, the U.S. then manipulated Canada into accepting control over the wasteland, the name of which depends on one’s perspective: in the U.S., it is known as “The Great Concavity,” while in Canada it is known as “The Great Convexity.” Here, Wallace conveys political disagreement through the language of geometry and perspective.

Similarly, Wallace uses language that conveys spatial dimension to describe human experience. In the idiomatic language of *Infinite Jest*, a person’s “map” is his face. To “demap” is to kill someone; to deprive that person of a face. “Demapping” also suggests the removal of someone’s symbolic representation. Another word in the *Infinite Jest* vernacular is the verb “interface,” which means either “to see” or “to talk to,” but the composition of the word suggests more about physical proximity than communication.

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<sup>1</sup> From this gasket, Wallace stated that he removed some of the internal triangles, resulting in a structure that – as readers can attest – is defined as much by absence as by presence.

“Interface” brings to mind computers – the transfer of data – but does not suggest intimacy. Similarly, Wallace invents the verb “X” to communicate that two people have sex. The shape of the letter reflects two vertical entities coming together, visually representing the act of intercourse. As such, the verb “X” implies a focus on the physical, rather than the emotional, dimension of sex. Outside of *Infinite Jest*, to “X” something means to mark it out, to delete it. An “ex” is slang for a person with whom one previously had a relationship. The multiple meanings of “X” merge in Orin Incandenza’s memory of romantic love: “not he or she but what was between them, the obliterating trinity of You and I into We” (567). Orin sees love as the eradication of self, and in this way, Wallace pits the drive toward intimacy against the need for autonomy.

This tension between autonomy and intimacy animates Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection as articulated in her 1980 book *Powers of Horror*. According to Kristeva, the abject “is something rejected from which one does not part,” resulting in a blurred line between the subject and the abject (4). The Latin roots of the word “abject” communicate the spatial dimension of the word’s meaning: the root “ject” means “to throw,” and the prefix “ab” means “away from” or “outside.” Under Kristeva’s theory, the subject wishes to expel the abject, but at the same time feels some element of desire (2). The result is that the abject remains a part of the subject, but only at the emotional periphery, in a liminal space, defined by “the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). In *Infinite Jest*, the dynamics of abjection play out in the Incandenza family, particularly in the relationships between the mother Avril and two of her sons, Orin and Hal. Avril Incandenza, the Dean of Academic Affairs of Enfield Tennis Academy, is known for “engaging in sexual enmeshments with just about everything with a Y-chromosome,” and

Wallace hints that she would like to include her sons Orin and Hal on her list of sexual partners (791). Any such desire would come tainted by the incest taboo, resulting in an environment of emotional ambiguity, the interpersonal space where abjection thrives. In a 1999 article, Katherine Hayles observes that there are “hints that Avril participates in the same dynamics of abjection that drives” O.N.A.N., a tendency that manifests in Avril’s fear of rats, insects, and all that is unclean (691). The first goal of this thesis is to extend Hayles’ scholarship by demonstrating that Avril takes part in the cycles of abjection in the context of her relationships with Hal and Orin.

The second goal of this thesis is to link abjection to each character’s experience of emotional isolation. Many scholars, including Stephen Burn, Petrus van Ewijk, and Catherine Toal, have identified *Infinite Jest* as a novel concerned with alienation and solipsism. These feelings, perhaps counter-intuitively, are byproducts of abjection. When one conceives of abjection spatially, the blurred boundary between two entities might appear to suggest intimacy: the two bodies are at least partially coextensive. But Kristeva makes clear that although the object “lies there, quite close . . . it cannot be assimilated” (1). Instead, the object “beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire” but the subject “does not let itself be seduced” (1). Nevertheless, “from its place of banishment, the object does not cease challenging its master,” and the resulting dynamic is a form of connectedness defined by continual rejection (2). I will show that the blurred boundaries of abjection result in a defensive emotional posture for both Orin and Hal, and that each son quests for a way to fill the self he conceives of as hollow.

With abjection in mind, I will turn to the dynamics of empathy. As it is commonly understood, empathy means “feeling with” another person, a definition consistent with the

Greek root “path,” which means “feeling,” and the Latin prefix “em,” which means “in” or “into.” Like the word “abjection,” the word empathy conveys a sense of motion. In his work on the subject, Dominick LaCapra suggests that movement is an implicit part of the phenomenon, characterizing empathy as “tak[ing] one out of oneself toward the other” (76). Empathy is distinct from “sympathy,” a word commonly defined as “feeling for.” This distinction is significant according to Suzanne Keen, author of the 2010 monograph, *Empathy and the Novel*. Empathy occurs when “we feel what we believe to be the emotions of others,” and as such, the empathic experience can be “considered as an emotion in its own right” (Keen 5). Sympathy, on the other hand, occurs from a distance: it is a “more complex, differentiated feeling for another,” often associated with pity (4). The person who sympathizes maintains the self as the emotional center instead of shifting the focus to the other. “Empathy,” though certainly an ancient phenomenon, is a fairly young word in the English language. It is a translation of the German word *Einfühlung*, a word that suggests not only “feeling with” but also “‘finding’ or ‘searching’ one’s way into the experience of another,” according to Michael Franz Basch, M.D., in his article, “Empathic Understanding: A Review of the Concept and some Theoretical Considerations” (110-111). Empathy, as such, denotes affiliation. One person responds to another with an “understanding so intimate that the feelings, thoughts and motives of one are readily comprehended” (qtd. in Basch 103). Just for a moment, two people believe that they feel the same emotion, and the result is an experience of intimacy.

As psychological phenomena, both empathy and abjection involve crossing an interpersonal boundary. Empathy, though, allows feelings of communion, and abjection creates feelings of renunciation. In this way, empathy functions as the converse of

abjection. The third goal of my thesis is to illustrate that Wallace positions empathy in opposition to abjection in the context of the Incandenza family.

Wallace argues in *Infinite Jest* that empathy occurs only in relationships in which interpersonal boundaries are well defined. When empathy occurs, it does so “without eliminating or assimilating the difference or alterity of the other” (LaCapra 76). Empathy, for this reason, does not constitute a threat to identity. The shared feeling bridges the gap between two separate selves, but only for a moment: “the impermanence of the empathic state” is an accepted characteristic of the phenomenon (Basch 105). In *Infinite Jest*, the term “Identification” appears frequently in the plotline tied to addiction. During meetings of Boston’s Alcoholic Anonymous, or AA, members are encouraged to practice empathy, and as the narrator indicates, “Empathy, in Boston AA, is called Identification” (347). When listening to the stories of a fellow addict, AA members should try to “identify” with the speaker, to share the same point of view. Considering the debate over the Great Concavity/Great Convexity, point of view can be considered spatially. To see the same thing from the same perspective implies coexistence in the same space, both physically and psychologically. In *Infinite Jest*, intimacy comes not from the blurred boundaries of abjection, but from the shared perspective of empathy.

Recently, several scholars who focus on empathy have turned their attention to David Foster Wallace. In his work, Toon Staes argues that Wallace relies on a reader’s sense of empathy to extrapolate missing plot points from the data given in the narrative, particularly in the plotline associated with Canadian terrorists. For her part, Kathleen Fitzpatrick has studied how Wallace’s sincere exploration of existential pain engenders reader empathy for the characters in *Infinite Jest*, and she posits that the extent of this

empathy also facilitated the creation of a community of readers through the website, *Infinite Summer*. These scholars have analyzed the role of empathy in the reader's experience of *Infinite Jest*, but how empathy plays out in the diegetic world of the novel, particularly in the Incandenza family, remains largely unexplored.

Also relevant to the relationship between abjection and empathy is scholarship addressing the significance of boundaries in the novel. In "The Work of Play in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*," Mark Bresnan points to the novel's condemnation of drug abuse and the collapse of the Eschaton "as an argument for structures and limits" (63). Additional critics, including Timothy Jacobs, Catherine Nichols, and Tom LeClair, have reached similar conclusions. In his work, "Sentimental Posthumanism," Paul Giles interprets the "erasure of safe domestic boundaries" as evidence of "Wallace's own sense of the relationship between the human and spatial" (341, 339). Boundaries are also important in the work of Katherine Hayles. She argues that though a character may appear autonomous, he cannot exist in isolation because he must function in a human network that requires interdependence. In *Infinite Jest*, Hayles sees that Wallace criticizes the ideology that sanctions the individual pursuit of pleasure despite its cost to others (694).

The beginning of scholarly focus on the Incandenza family came in 1999 with the publication of the previously referenced article by Katherine Hayles: "The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity: Virtual Ecologies, Entertainment, and Infinite Jest." Then in 2006, Mary Holland suggested in a footnote that "Avril's sexual preferences speak to her own . . . desire to extend herself to her sons" (226, 240). Thus Holland points toward, but does not fully develop, an analysis of the potentially sexualized relationships between Avril and her children. In 2010, the relationship between Avril and her sons

received additional attention, this time from Elizabeth Freudenthal in her work, “Anti-Interiority: Compulsiveness, Objectification, and Identity in *Infinite Jest*.” Freudenthal posits that Avril’s behavior is consistent with a diagnosis of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, as intimated in the novel (199). Then, in a footnote, Freudenthal writes that “[f]ew critics directly address the novel’s suggestion of incest . . . [multiple] episodes strongly suggest that Avril’s and Orin’s relationship was more explicitly Oedipal than most” (210). Thus both Holland and Freudenthal have identified the boundary between Avril Incandenza and her sons as a topic warranting greater exploration.

Recently, Toon Staes published a 5-page article on “The Coatlicue Complex,” a form of behavioral pathology mentioned by psychologist Dolores Rusk in the novel. Rusk does not define the complex; Wallace does not elaborate. In his research, Staes has determined that the Coatlicue Complex is a legitimate psychological phenomenon, first identified by Julia Sherman in 1975 (67). The complex manifests as misogyny, and it occurs when a child “has been encouraged by the parent(s) to behave in a deviant manner” (Sherman 188). Staes’ research gives clinical dimension to Avril’s intimated transgressions and to Orin’s later expression of narcissism.

My thesis will pick up these various threads of scholarship and weave them into analysis of abjection and empathy in the Incandenza clan. In Part I, I will chronicle the blurred boundaries of the family, looking at abjection not only in Avril’s relationships with Hal and Orin, but also in her relationship with Charles Tavis, a character variously referred to as her half-brother, step-brother, adoptive brother, and lover. Part II will address the consequences of these blurred boundaries: emotional isolation, hollow identities, and the various quests to fill the void. In Part III, I will demonstrate that Wallace positions empathy

as the converse of abjection: instead of abjection's movement *away from*, resulting in an eternal state of not-quite-separation, empathy is the movement *toward*, crossing the boundary of self in an effort to experience a moment of intimacy.

## **BOUNDARIES: TO CROSS OR NOT TO CROSS**

### **Abjection**

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva explains that abjection is a defensive response to the threat of interconnection. The desire to maintain autonomy results in a rejection of the other, who, once abjected, exists as neither subject nor object (1). The abjected survives on the periphery, “[o]n the edge of non-existence and hallucination,” a part of and yet “opposed to *I*” (2). The blurred boundaries of the phenomenon are apparent in Kristeva’s discussion of bodily abjection. Human waste, like vomit or feces, is a part of the self that gets expelled so that the self may continue to live. During the time that the boundary between the self and other is unclear, the feeling of repugnance protects the *I*. In her work on anti-interiority, Elizabeth Freudenthal characterizes *Infinite Jest* as a “narrative abounding with garbage and bodily excretions” (195). The abundance of such excretions points to their metaphorical significance: through examples of physical abjection, Wallace is priming the reader to focus on psychological abjection.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Examples include, but are not limited to, Hal’s dreams about the loss of his teeth (449, 770); the fact that one of Hal’s teeth is pulled by a dentist immediately before his mother attempts to breach – at least metaphorically – a sexual boundary (509); repeated references to Hal’s underproduction and overproduction of saliva (429, 523, 540), the scene in which Hal cuts his toenails and narrates his progress to Orin (242); Jim Incandenza’s experience of vomiting when contained in a vehicle with C.T. and Mario (1063); and the scene in which Jim Incandenza’s father vomits and then dies (501).

As Kristeva herself explains, “[i]t is . . . not lack of cleanliness of health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order” (4). The abject need not be filth, human or otherwise; instead it is that which “does not respect border, positions, rules” (4). The relationship between Avril and Charles Tavis, often called C.T., is an example of the disregard of such boundaries. The narrator relates that C.T. came to Enfield Tennis Academy as an administrator because Jim Incandenza, the founder of E.T.A., was spending a great deal of time working on various film projects. It becomes clear that C.T. is related somehow to Avril, though the nature of the relationship is poorly defined, and the community learns at some point that he has moved into the Headmaster’s House. Over the course of the narrative, Wallace reveals that Avril and C.T. have been sleeping together, and that the sexual nature of the relationship predates the death of Avril’s husband Jim. After Jim dies, C.T. assumes the position of Headmaster and moves into the bedroom next to Avril’s.<sup>3</sup> Late in the novel, on page 900, Wallace communicates that “Charles Tavis is probably not related to the Moms by actual blood”: they are related by the marriage of her biological mother and his biological father (900, 901). It is then that Wallace reveals the uncanny similarity in the physical appearance of C.T.’s mother and Avril’s second son, Mario. In a picture of the wedding that brought the families of C.T. and Avril together, the bride has all the physical features of a dwarf: “the huge square head, the relative length of the trunk compared to the legs, the sunken nasal bridge and protruding eyes, [and] the stunted phocomelic arms” (901). Mario, whose deformities mirror those of C.T.’s mother, is pretty clearly the product of an adulterous relationship between Avril and her stepbrother. According to family legend, Avril did not even know she was pregnant when she went into

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<sup>3</sup> Here, the influence of *Hamlet* on *Infinite Jest* is apparent.

labor, and she gave birth to Mario prematurely. It is significant that Avril gave birth on the stairs, the place between the first floor and the second floor, suggesting that Mario's birth is a product of disregarding limits.

Although Avril is married to Jim Incandenza, she does not observe the strictures of monogamy. Her repeated infidelities disrupt the stability of the marriage, and thus meet Kristeva's standard of what causes abjection: "what disturbs identity, system, order" (4). According to Hal, the list of Avril's lovers includes "graduate students, grammatical colleagues, Japanese fight-choreographers, the hairy-shouldered Ken N. Johnson, [and an] Islamic M.D." (957). Jim himself says that she has had sex with "not one not two but over thirty Near Eastern medical attachés" (30). In addition, there was a "bisexual bassoonist," Mr. Reehagen next door in Weston, the "swarthily foreign-looking modal internist medical resident," and, as mentioned above, her step-brother (30, 1044, 1049, 247). Wallace makes the same point metaphorically when he writes that Avril "seem[ed] somehow to have three or four cigarettes all going at once" (701). Despite these affairs, and the knowledge of them, Jim remains married to Avril until his death. Jim, as far as anyone knows, has always been faithful to Avril (957). The dynamics of abjection play out in the marriage in which Jim is openly and publically rejected, again and again. After Jim dies, Avril buries him in The Great Concavity, the land abjected by the U.S. in the Reconfiguration.

Avril, known to her children as "the Moms," extends her pattern of abjection to her sons. When Orin is a senior at E.T.A., he needs to decide which college to attend. Avril claims respect for Orin's right to make his own decision, and out of fear of "overstepping or lobbying intrusively[,] the Moms actually for six weeks would flee any room Orin entered, both hands clapped over her mouth" (285). At the same time, though, Avril has generated a

series of “lists and advantage-disadvantage charts” that she shares with Orin, each of which indicates that Boston University should be his school of choice (285). Avril wants to keep Orin in a liminal place: not at home, but not far away. As Avril sees it, “it was important for Orin to be away from home, psychologically speaking, but still to be able to come home whenever he wished” (285). Here again, Wallace uses geographical space to suggest abjection.

Wallace, though never explicit, signals repeatedly that there may have been a sexual relationship between Avril and Orin.<sup>4</sup> After Orin leaves Boston to play professional football in Phoenix, Avril has an affair with a student at E.T.A., John “No Relation” Wayne. Not only does Avril have sex with Wayne, signaling her willingness to violate the fiduciary duties associated with her position at E.T.A., she dresses Wayne in a football helmet and little else (552). Avril herself dresses up in a cheerleading costume, including pompoms, apparently reenacting a scene between Orin and his cheerleader girlfriend, Joelle Van Dyne. As Mary Holland reads the episode with John Wayne, “Avril’s sexual preferences . . . (most likely unconscious and clearly pathological)” point toward the desire for a sexual relationship with her sons (240).

Wallace illustrates the uncomfortably close relationship between mother and son through one of Orin’s dreams:

there’s the ghastly feeling of being submerged and not knowing which way to head for the surface and air, and after some interval the dream’s Orin

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<sup>4</sup> Throughout the novel, Wallace includes families in which parents violate this boundary. Matty Pemulis, brother of E.T.A. student Michael Pemulis, is sexually abused by his father. In addition, one of the AA speakers tells of her adoptive father’s sexual abuse of his biological daughter. Most significant, Joelle Van Dyne has an unnatural relationship with “her Own Personal Daddy.” When she is in college, he confesses that he has been in love with her for years (793). It does not appear that Joelle’s father violated any physical boundary, only a psychological one. Wallace draws attention to the issue of incest by repeatedly inserting it – in different iterations – in the text.

struggles up from this kind of visual suffocation to find his mother's head, Mrs. Avril M. T. Incandenza's, the Moms's disconnected head attached face-to-face to his own fine head . . . [and] no matter how frantically Orin tries to move his head or shake it side to side or twist up his face or roll his eyes he's still staring at, into, and somehow through his mother's face. (46)

Orin's dream gains meaning when the reader learns that he cut off all communication with the Moms four years ago, and that because of the conflict, Orin did not even attend his father's funeral. Hal seems to recognize the perversity of the situation when he describes that Orin has "convinced himself [the Moms] doesn't even exist, as if she never existed, but by some coincidence [Orin] has this rapacious fetish for young married mothers" (1014). Other characters are also aware of the dynamics between Avril and Orin. Joelle's friend Molly Notkin describes Avril's prodigious list of partners as "including possibly . . . [Joelle]'s craven lover, as a child" (791). The relationship between Avril and Orin, while never explicitly defined, seems to qualify under Kristeva's definition of "[t]he in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4).

Further evidence of "the composite" accrues when Orin conflates the sounds of sex with the sounds of the womb. As Mark Bresnan points out, when Orin describes the noise of the crowd at a football game as a "coital moan, one big vowel, the sound of the womb," he collapses the distinction between the activities shared with a lover and those shared with a mother (Wallace 293, Bresnan 58). Orin's desire to play football is sparked by his interest in Joelle, who is a cheerleader for the team. As communicated by the narrator, Orin is motivated to join the team by "the twin inducements of a gleaming baton and a massive developmental carrot he hadn't felt since age fourteen" (Wallace 293). The phallic nature of the inducements suggests the promise of sex, incongruous given that Orin is recalling a time before he was even in high school. The metaphorical phallus also appears during a

Thanksgiving Dinner at the Incandenzas' house. After Jim has left the table, Orin pulls out a cigar and a clipper, at which point "Avril made a show of gazing at Orin in mock-horror" (747). Then, according to Joelle, Orin puts away his cigar, suggesting that Avril still holds some control over the expression of Orin's sexuality.

The fact that the incident above occurs while Jim Incandenza is away from the table is significant from a psychoanalytic point of view. In Lacanian theory, The "Law of the Father" puts an end to the enmeshment between the mother and her child, thus allowing the child to achieve subjectivity. Kristeva studied under Lacan, and she furthered his theory by placing the mother in the role of the abject. According to Kristeva, "the symbolic light that a third party, eventually the father, can contribute helps the future subject . . . in pursuing a reluctant struggle against, what having been the mother, will turn into an abject" (13). The "light" of the third party that Kristeva references functions ironically: for a man whose name suggests light, Jim Incandenza "is ill-fitted to mediate between his children and the maternal powerhouse . . . that is Avril" (Toal 320). He directs more emotional energy to the production of his movies than to the maintenance of his family. For that reason, Jim cannot serve as a viable counterbalance; instead, he serves as "a father, existing but unsettled, loving but unsteady, merely an apparition but an apparition that remains" (Kristeva 6). In *Infinite Jest*, Jim's memory is the ghost that pervades the family, and by the end of the novel, his spirit indeed manifests as "an apparition." Jim's relative powerlessness in the Incandenza family suggests that the Law of the Father is not in effect and helps to explain Orin and Avril's sustained intimacy.

In addition, Wallace appears to point toward abjection through Orin's fear of falling. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva writes that the "wastes [of the body] drop so that I might live,

until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit – *cadere, cadaver*” (3). The French verb *cadere* means “to fall,” and it is etymologically linked to the English word “cadaver” (3). In *Infinite Jest*, Orin plays football for the Phoenix Cardinals, and as part of their pre-show performance, the team must jump out of an airplane wearing bird costumes and glide into the stadium. Though he has not shared “his morbid fear of heights and high-altitude descent” with anyone, it is clear from the stream of obscenities that he utters while falling that Orin is profoundly unhappy with the practice (66). Orin’s fear of falling manifests metaphorically when he explains that he experiences each day as something that must be “climbed, vertically,” and when it is time “to sleep again at the end of it will be like falling, again, off something tall and sheer” (46). Orin, like Hal, is plagued by a dark and expressive dream life, and he dreads his encounters with his unconscious. Wallace returns to Orin’s fall later in the novel when he explains that Orin moves from relationship to relationship because “hand after hand must descend to pull him back from the endless fall” (566). Orin’s fear of falling suggests that he continually relives the experience of being abjected by his mother.

Orin is not the only Incandenza son to experience the blurred boundaries of abjection. Hal is the object of an apparent conquest for Avril, as is made clear in a symbolic scene in the center of the novel.<sup>5</sup> While Hal waits for a meeting with C.T., Avril approaches him wearing a “smock-type dress [of] blue cotton, with a kind of scalloped white doily around the shoulders,” an outfit that suggests Avril is playing the role of a young girl

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<sup>5</sup> Note that Avril’s middle name is “Mondragon.” In her home of Quebec, where French is spoken, “mon” translates into “my,” and the word “dragon” is the same in English and French. With the name “Mondragon,” Wallace is characterizing Avril as predatory. In a similar linguistic move, Wallace notes that Jim Incandenza dies on the first of April, or – in French – Avril I.

(522).<sup>6</sup> She pulls out a cigarette – the phallic symbol appears again – but Hal “produced no lighter,” suggesting his lack of engagement (522). At this moment, Hal notices that the Moms is “almost sort of male when she and Hal were alone in a room,” so perhaps Wallace is pointing to the power associated with Avril’s sexuality (522). Then Avril goes biblical, pulling an apple out of her smock and offering it to Hal, suggesting Eve’s offer of forbidden knowledge to Adam. Hal takes the apple, and “it stimulated a torrent of saliva,” and while he eats it, Wallace reiterates that “[t]he apple generated tremendous amounts of saliva” (523, 524). The bodily fluid released during consumption of the apple suggests ejaculation. In addition, this scene between Avril and Hal is interwoven with a scene in which Avril performs “diddle-checks” with the girls of E.T.A., making sure that they know the difference between appropriate and inappropriate touching. Through this scene, Wallace communicates that Avril is pushing her son toward carnal knowledge, and that Hal refuses the opportunity.

Instead, the abjection that occurs between Avril and Hal manifests as a problem of identity.<sup>7</sup> Avril, who is a founding member of the Militant Grammarians of Massachusetts and a general devotee of the written word, delights in Hal’s eidetic memory. When Hal was a child, they would pour over the *O.E.D.* together so that he could spout the contents back to her. As Hal has grown older, Avril has found that she can still maneuver him into verbal performances. She will pretend to lose a word, “snapping her fingers silently and working her forehead,” asking Hal if he can identify the word she wants (524). Inevitably, Hal finds

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<sup>6</sup> Avril, of course, has a history of wearing costumes.

<sup>7</sup> Hal’s name may suggest a blurred boundary. Early in the novel, a group of E.T.A. students is discussing an upcoming exam in their History of Entertainment class. After Hal answers a question correctly, his classmates respond by chanting variants of his name: “The Halster,” “Halorama,” and “Halation” (97). Halation, according to Merriam Webster, is “the spreading of light beyond its proper boundaries.”

the word, but he wonders if “it [is] showing off if you hate it” (525). The inability to stop performing, according to Steven Burn, is evidence that Avril has “engulfed” Hal (175). Later in the novel, Hal begins to feel hollow, and even though the Moms “believes she knows him inside and out as a human being, and an internally worthy one at that,” Hal recognizes that the Moms is only “hear[ing] her own echoes inside him” (694). Wallace suggests that Avril and Hal are enmeshed when he repeats an image previously used to describe abjection: Avril has “got Hal’s skull lashed tight to hers” (1040). His brother Orin indicates that Hal “lives for applause from exactly two hands. He’s still performing for her, syntax- and vocabulary-wise, at seventeen, the same way he did when he was ten” (1040). As a result, according to Mary K. Holland, Hal “remains stuck in the role of mirror that his parents had assigned him” (227). In the context of his relationship with his mother, Hal occupies a liminal space because he has failed to fully separate from her and achieve his own identity.

Under Kristeva’s theory, Hal plays the role of the “deject” with respect to the relationship between Avril and Orin. As defined in *Powers of Horror*, the deject is “the one by whom the abject exists” (8). Hal exists by Orin in a metaphorical sense: they are brothers. Kristeva sees the “deject” as someone who “places (himself), *separates* (himself), situates (himself), and therefore *strays* instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging” (8). As the deject, Hal separates himself, pulling away from his family. He maintains a psychological distance by seldom allowing his family members, other than his brother Mario, into his private thoughts. His desire for isolation becomes evident most afternoons when he disappears to go smoke pot by himself.

Hal's habit of secrecy is associated with a particular place: a system of tunnels beneath E.T.A. The significance of place falls in line with Kristeva's notion that "[i]nstead of sounding himself as to his 'being,' [the deject] does so concerning his place: 'Where am I?' instead of 'Who am I?'" (8). When he is above ground, Hal acknowledges that he feels "empty" and at times just "manipulate[s]" the people around him "well enough to satisfy everyone but himself that he's in there, inside his own hull" (694). In the tunnels underground, though, Hal finds respite from satisfying the audience. There, he can be someone other than a continentally ranked junior tennis player (his identity on the courts) or a student of substantial verbal and mathematical ability (his identity in the classroom). Other scholars have argued that "[s]elf-division is ubiquitous in Wallace's novel," and that in some cases, "spatial movement reveals such splits" (Burn 71). The fact that Hal's identity changes based on the physical space he occupies supports Burn's theory as it relates to Hal. This division is consistent with Kristeva's conception that the space in which the deject lives "is never *one*, nor *homogenous*, nor *totalizable*" (8). To add to the mix, if one can consider the unconscious a place, then once a day, Hal also occupies a place of frequent terror and disorientation (Nichols 6).

Hal's interest in defining himself in terms of location resonates with the emphasis Wallace places on the game Eschaton, an elaborate game in which players divide four contiguous tennis courts into a map of the world, and then each player assumes the role of a country or regional alliance. According to Kristeva, the deject is a "deviser of territories," a moniker that fits well given Hal's role in running Eschaton (8). In the game, not only is North America represented, so are India, China, Libya, and Sierra Leone. For the deject, as Kristeva explains, all of his places are "essentially divisible, foldable, and catastrophic" (8).

One sees that Hal has divided his worlds spatially, attempting to keep authority figures from learning about his habit of smoking pot. The boundaries between Hal's worlds, though, collapse during Eschaton: Hal smokes pot above ground. Significantly, the "map" and the "territory" of Eschaton conflate at the same time. It is no longer clear whether players are lobbing balls at representatives of foreign nations, or at classmates. These boundaries all collapse on Interdependence Day, a holiday designed to celebrate that Canada, the U.S., and Mexico have elevated their union over their boundaries.<sup>8</sup> A dramatic accident during the game results in school administrators learning that Hal is using drugs, and he is no longer able to occupy separate worlds. In this scene, Wallace is pointing the reader's attention to the metaphorical significance of boundaries.

The reason that the deject focuses on place, according to Kristeva, is because he is threatened by the "fluid confines" of "his universe" (8). The rules that create stability are not enforced, as made evident with Avril's infidelities. The prohibition of incest, a bright-line rule in most cultures, does not apply in the Incandenza family. Once Jim Incandenza commits suicide, the family is further destabilized. Hal's desire to manufacture stability through place is a defensive reaction. As Kristeva explains, the deject "never stops demarcating his universe" because it is defined by the presence of the abject, who is "a non-object" (8). The deject, as a result, "constantly question[s] his solidity," (8) something the reader sees in Hal. Throughout the novel, Hal questions whether or not he is hollow, reaching the conclusion that "inside . . . there's pretty much nothing at all, he knows" (694).

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<sup>8</sup> Interdependence Day is November 8, commonly represented as "11/8." When considered as shapes, the number 11 suggests figures standing side by side, and the number 8, of course, looks like the ideogram for infinity oriented vertically rather than horizontally. It appears that Wallace is using the metaphors of shape to suggest standing together, forever.

Kristeva's concept of the deject, when applied, provides insight into the spatial nature of Hal's concept of self.

In all these relationships, Avril is the common variable, yet on the surface, she appears to be a terrific mother. Her nickname, "the Moms," in Catherine Toal's analysis, "pluralizes her into omnipotence" (320). Over and over, Wallace positions her at the center of the Incandenza family. Orin, for example, labels her as "the family's light and pulse and center that held tight," and the "emotional sun" of his childhood (737, 738). At Thanksgiving dinner, everyone "inclined very subtly toward Avril, very slightly and subtly, like heliotropes" bending toward the sun (745). According to Hal, Avril "had this way of establishing herself in the *exact center* of any room she was in, so that . . . [anyone else's] pacing reduced to orbiting" (521). She appears to be the light and the heat around which her family members rotate. The positive imagery linking Avril to the sun, however, becomes negative, when Orin labels her "the Black Hole of Human Attention" (521). Black holes, of course, are thought to be stars that have collapsed, and their gravitational pull is so great that not even light can escape.

Kristeva points to a similar inconsistency in the nature of abjection, describing it as "immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles [and] a hatred that smiles" (4). Throughout *Infinite Jest*, Wallace links the desire to harm with smiley faces. On the protective case of the Entertainment, the film so seductive that its viewers can never disengage from its eternally repeating loop, is a smiley face (722). In the Ennet House narrative, the Spider – addiction – is tied to a smiley-faced man holding a gigantic shepherd's crook. The eternal seduction of alcohol waits just outside the AA meeting, symbolized as

an extraordinarily snappily dressed and authoritative figure . . . behind a mask that was simply the plain yellow smily-face (sic)<sup>9</sup> circle that accompanied invitations to have a nice day. The figure was so impressive and trustworthy and casually self-assured as to be both soothing and compelling. The authoritative figure radiated good cheer and abundant charm and limitless patience. It manipulated the big stick in the coolly purposeful way of the sort of angler who you know isn't going to throw back anything he catches. (359)

In the E.T.A. narrative, Avril is repeatedly tied to vapid cheer when her children are around. Orin's impression of her, a party trick in high school, suggests the smile's more sinister nature. In his imitation, Orin would "assume an enormous warm and loving smile and move steadily toward you until he is in so close that his face is spread up flat against your face and your breaths mingle" (1051-52). From the perspective of the person approached, which is worse: "the smothering proximity, or the unimpeachable warmth and love with which it's effected?" (1052). Under Kristeva's theory, Avril Mondragon Incandenza, Ph.D., Ed.D. is the hatred that smiles.

### **The Maternal Duty to Cross Certain Boundaries**

Application of Kristeva's theories becomes challenging in the context of a mother's duties to children who are not infants. In her theory, Kristeva posits that all children abject their mothers once they are old enough to use language and enter the symbolic order (13). The child achieves separation. Yet mothers of children old enough to speak repeatedly cross boundaries: wiping bottoms, cutting fingernails, or using saliva to clean up little smudges on someone's chin. The reason for these behaviors is that the mother has responsibility to guide her child until he is able to assume responsibility for himself. This

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<sup>9</sup> Throughout the novel, Wallace spells "smiley" without the "e." The result for this reader is a feeling that the word is not quite right – not quite what it should be – which lines up with the smiles to which Wallace refers.

duty is articulated by a character in *Infinite Jest* named Remy Marathe, a Canadian terrorist, who argues that a child must be protected from his own immature instincts. The child needs a “loving-filled father to guide, inform, teach the person how to choose” (320).

Although Marathe focuses on a father rather than a mother, his example is still instructive.

He asks his listener to imagine a

rich father who can afford the cost of candy as well as food for his children: but if he cries out ‘Freedom!’ and allows his child to choose only what is sweet, eating only candy, not pea soup and bread and eggs, so his child becomes weak and sick: is the rich man who cries ‘Freedom!’ the good father? (320)

The answer, of course, is no. In the context of the Incandenza family, Jim is dramatically under-involved in the lives of Orin and Hal,<sup>10</sup> as discussed above, resulting in an abeyance of the Law of the Father. Avril, though present, follows a policy of non-intervention ostensibly premised on respect. The result is that neither parent is actively engaged in guiding their children’s choices.

As Mary Holland sees it, “being the parent” in *Infinite Jest* means “reaching outside oneself and taking responsibility for oneself and others” (238). Holland’s language reflects a spatial dimension of meaning, significant in this discussion of the boundaries crossed in abjection and empathy. While violating a boundary is negative in the context of abjection, it is necessary – and even positive – in the context of parenting. Early in the novel, Wallace addresses the paradox of boundaries through the character of Gerhardt Schtitt, the Head Coach and Athletic Director of E.T.A., who espouses a philosophy of tennis designed to teach discipline. The narrator, relating Schtitt’s thoughts, moves from a discussion of the confrontation between two players to the confrontation within one: “[y]ou compete with

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<sup>10</sup> Jim Incandenza spends a great deal of time with his second son, Mario, due to their shared interest in film.

your own limits to transcend the self in imagination and execution . . . You seek to vanquish and transcend the limited self whose limits make the game possible in the first place” (84). In this passage, Wallace pits the need for boundaries against the need to transcend them.

Avril’s disregard for certain boundaries, discussed above, is counterbalanced by a feigned respect for others. One of her children, Mario, suffers from severe disabilities. When he was born, the boundary between them was manufactured; in fact, Mario “had to be more or less scraped out . . . like the meat of an oyster” because he was “spiderishly clinging, tiny and unobtrusive, attached by cords of sinew at both feet and a hand” (313). Avril then committed to the work of separating from Mario: although he was incontinent for over ten years, Avril “just couldn’t handle diapers,” so other people did (768). Full-grown, Mario cannot walk without assistance, and the nature of his mental handicap is severe enough that he has never learned to read. And yet, Avril claims to “tr[y] so terribly hard to leave Mario alone, not to hover or wring; to treat him so less specially than she wants: it is for him” (317). During a scene in Avril’s office, Mario has difficulty negotiating the shag carpet while wearing the elaborate brace that holds him upright. He moves in a “lurchy half-stumble,” but Avril offers no assistance (313). As Emily Russell makes clear in her article about the politics of disability in *Infinite Jest*, Mario needs additional accommodations and support. Yet Avril does not reach outside herself to help him.

One of Avril’s most spectacular moments of failing to reach outside herself and parent her child occurred when Hal was four years old. He ate mold, and then he took the remaining clump to show her. Avril was puttering in her garden, circumscribed by a careful perimeter of string, when Hal stretched out his hand to show her the mold. Instead of cleaning out his mouth and calling the pediatrician, Avril ran in circles “just inside the

string border” of her garden yelling, “Help! My son ate this!” (1043). As Orin remembers the event, Hal trailed after her, crying, while Avril ran in such a way that “her flight-lines were plumb, her footprints Native-American straight, her turns, inside the ideogram of string, crisp and martial” (11). Wallace points to the fact that here Avril privileges order over parenting. Instead of reaching out to pick up her crying child, Avril remains within the tidy space defined by right angles and parallel lines. In a spatial analysis, Avril is turned inward in this moment, focusing not on what her child needs - which would require reaching out - but instead on her own emotional reaction.<sup>11</sup>

As children grow older, a parent’s duties evolve. A parent, according Remy Marathe, voice of intermittent morality, needs to guide a child’s decision-making by providing what he calls “freedom-to,” defined as the moral guidance necessary for a young person to make good decisions. Instead, what Avril provides is only “freedom-from” her intervention. As Marathe puts it, “freedom-from” means the absence of “constraint and forced duress” (320). Ostensibly, Avril espouses a parenting philosophy based on respect for her children, justifying her lack of involvement. When Mario wants to take a walk late at night through a dangerous neighborhood, Avril does not discourage him, even though he is severely disabled and an easy target. According to Avril, her intervention would be inappropriate because she does not want “in any way to inhibit Mario’s sense of autonomy and freedom” (1044). Similarly, in her relationship with Hal, Avril also takes the path of least resistance

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<sup>11</sup> In contrast, though, Avril demonstrated active devotion to S. Johnson, her dog. During the workday, Avril would “call on the phone and let it ring next to S. Johnson because she said how S. Johnson knew her unique personal ring on the phone and would hear the ring, and know that he was thought about and cared about from afar” (771). Similarly, Avril expresses a substantial commitment to her houseplants, which are bountiful and lush, and she calls them her “Green Babies” (189). Perhaps Wallace is pointing to Avril’s light, as suggested by the name “Incandenza,” as sufficient for nurturing her plants.

under the label of respect. She believes that he is drinking alcohol, but remains quiet on the subject because “Hal has made it pretty clear that he’s able to handle whatever modest amounts she’s pretty sure he consumes” (50). Neither does Avril address pot with Hal when he is summoned by the Headmaster of E.T.A., Charles Tavis, whose office and bedroom are across from Avril’s, a proximity which would suggest that she has knowledge of Hal’s conduct. Allegedly, Avril’s non-intervention is designed so that “Hal might enjoy the security of feeling that he can be up-front with her about issues like drinking and not feel he has to hide anything from her under any circumstances” (51). Instead, there is something large and unspoken between them.

In her work on *Infinite Jest*, Catherine Toal argues that Wallace demonstrates that the “processes of formation can only be rigidly disciplinary, prescriptively ‘corrective’” (317). To discipline her children, Avril would need to reach outside of herself, which she fails to do. First, when Orin was a teenager, he was tasked with looking after Mario and Hal while his parents were out, and left the boys at home alone because he wanted to go smoke pot with his friends. When Avril later asked Orin why she had not been able to get in touch with him, Orin lied and said that he had tied up the phone lines. Avril then indicated that the phone had not rung; it had been busy. Orin replied, “I have no response to that” (1049). Then, Avril “treated an exploded lie as an insoluble cosmic mystery” and never punished Orin (1049). It seemed to Marlon Bain, Orin’s friend and fellow pot-smoker, that Avril “refused to act as if she believed lying was even a possibility as far as her children were concerned” (1049). Orin, as a result, does not learn that it is dangerous to leave young children alone or that lying is morally problematic.

Soon thereafter, Avril repeats this failure to cross the boundary of self and discipline her child. In another incident, Orin and Marlon ingested “some sort of recreational substance” and drove Avril’s Volvo to the liquor store (1049). Avril’s dog, S. Johnson, was leashed to the back of the Volvo and did not survive the journey. Orin, based on the success of prior experience, lied to his mother, claiming that a hit-and-run driver had killed S. Johnson. Avril fell on her knees, “weeping and pressing her hand to her collarbone but nodding in confirmation at every syllable of Orin spinning this pathetic lie” (1050). Avril did not confront Orin about his lying or accuse him of killing her dog, so Orin escaped without punishment. As such, Orin has “freedom-from” maternal discipline, but not “freedom-to” develop an honorable code of behavior. Under Toal’s analysis, Avril fails to reach outside herself and teach Orin that the shared reality of a family must be co-created.

Ironically, it is Jim Incandenza, the largely absent paterfamilias,<sup>12</sup> who provides the best example of “freedom-to” parenting. Orin and Hal refer to their father as “Himself,” as if to acknowledge that he “is so inward-bent that any nominative referring to him must include an intensifier of selfhood” (Hayles 689). Yet, in one scene, Jim reaches beyond the boundaries of self to try to guide his oldest son. When Orin was a teenager at E.T.A., he and some friends wanted to watch a pornographic film. Jim, who was Headmaster of E.T.A. at the time, said that he would not forbid Orin from watching the film,

but Himself said that if Orin wanted his personal, fatherly as opposed to headmasterly, take on it, then he . . . would rather Orin didn’t watch a hard-porn film yet . . . that he’d wait until he’d experienced for himself what a profound and really quite moving thing sex could be, before he watched a

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<sup>12</sup> For the most part, Jim’s commitment to film supersedes his interest in parenting. It is certain that with respect to his parenting duties, Jim would have benefited from some coaching from Gerhardt Schtitt about “sacrific[ing] the hot narrow imperatives of the Self – the needs, the desires, the fears . . . – to the larger imperatives of the Team” (82). The instance described above is an outlier.

film where sex was presented as nothing more than organs going in and out of other organs, emotionless, terribly lonely. (955-956)

Jim makes an attempt to provide Orin with a moral framework for making choices.<sup>13</sup> He calls his son into his office, and the two converse behind a closed door, giving them privacy. When Hal learns of the conversation, he thinks that “[i]t was the most open I’d ever heard of Himself being with anybody” (956). Jim’s moment of openness is the best example of reaching beyond the boundaries of self in order to parent a child.

Unlike her husband, Avril is not able to cross this particular boundary. Although she “creates the appearance of perfect maternal nurturing,” according to Elizabeth Freudenthal, Avril does so in order to “conceal[] a self-interested abandonment of the patriarchal woman’s role” (200). Instead of performing the difficult work of mothering – changing diapers, policing behavior, implementing punishment – Avril performs a veneer of mothering. She performs “respect” for her children when she determines to “never traffic in third-party hearsay when the lines of communication with my children are as open<sup>14</sup> and judgment free as I’m fortunate they are” (763). Avril performs “strictness” when she “puts on a sort of mock-stern expression and says ‘Do not, under any circumstances, have fun’” (193). Either performance, without crossing the boundary of self in order to guide conduct, means little.

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<sup>13</sup> Given Orin’s lonely experience of sexuality, it seems as if Orin was not able to follow his father’s advice (or to limit his mother’s influence).

<sup>14</sup> She makes this statement without apparent appreciation of the irony that at the time – at least according to Hal – she and her son Orin have not spoken for four years.

## SOLIPSISM: THE RESULT OF ABJECTION

Avril, as demonstrated above, crosses the boundaries she should not and refuses to cross those she should. To represent these failures, Wallace uses spatial metaphors, pointing to Avril's "threshold-problems" (1040). It is commonly understood at E.T.A. that one of Avril's many "stressful things involves issues of enclosure," and as result, the first floor of the Headmaster's House "has no interior doors between rooms, and not even much in the way of walls, and the living and dining rooms are separated only by a vast multileveled tangle of houseplants" (189). In the administration building, Avril's office has no door; a change in the depth of the shag carpet marks the entry to her office (510). As Hal understands it, Avril "has little sense of spatial privacy or boundary, having been so much alone so much as a child" (511).<sup>15</sup> Wallace uses the absence of physical confines to represent the Avril's lack of emotional boundaries.

To reflect Avril's converse problem with boundaries, Wallace suggests that Avril suffers from agoraphobia, a tendency noted by her sons (42). An agoraphobe is someone with a fear of being in spaces where it is difficult to escape, like crowds or large open areas; in other words, an agoraphobe needs to have access to a boundary, so she can cross it if necessary.<sup>16</sup> To compensate for her phobia, Avril travels from her study in the Headmaster's House "down to a tributary-tunnel leading to the main tunnel to Comm-Ad, so [she] can commute over to E.T.A. below ground" (191). A tunnel, of course, is long and

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<sup>15</sup> In this sentence, Wallace places the phrase "so much" on either side of "alone," so that the word "alone" is grammatically bound on either side, pointing again to Avril's solipsism.

<sup>16</sup> Agoraphobes are thought to suffer from an excessive need for control, as are those who suffer from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, another pathology associated with Avril. In her work on compulsivity in *Infinite Jest*, Elizabeth Freudenthal writes that "[c]ompulsiveness is clinically understood as a means of grasping for personal control over anxieties about control itself" (196). Avril exhibits a number of compulsions, but only the relevant compulsions are included here.

narrow and very much about enclosure, one of Avril's previously identified stressors. Avril, it seems, both detests and craves boundaries.

Avril's most crippling boundary is the boundary of self. According to Mary Holland, Avril's self-involvement suggests secondary narcissism, a disorder identified by Sigmund Freud that occurs when "adults who remain dedicated to the satisfaction of the self create an 'ideal ego' out of all they value in themselves and extend their libidinal energy to that ideal" (224). In Avril's case, her parenting philosophy as described above provides evidence of her devotion to self.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, narcissists "love others for reflecting what they perceive as best about themselves" (Holland 224). By characterizing her as a narcissist, Wallace points to the relevance of metaphorical boundaries for Avril: she is bounded, contained, imprisoned by the self.

The paradoxical nature of Avril's relationship with boundaries echoes Kristeva's view on the relationship between narcissism and abjection:

Two seemingly contradictory causes bring about the narcissistic crisis that provides, along with its truth, a view of the abject. *Too much strictness on the part of the Other*, confused with the One and the Law. The *lapse of the Other*, which shows through the breakdown of objects of desire. In both instances, the abject appears in order to uphold "I" within the Other. (15)

Avril demonstrates "[t]oo much strictness" through her adherence to the unforgiving boundaries of narcissism and agoraphobia. Wallace further ties Avril to strictness through her participation in the Militant Grammarians on Massachusetts, a "syntactic-integrity PAC" devoted to rooting out the violation of linguistic rules (1021). At the same time, of course, one sees a frequent "*lapse of the Other*" in Avril's approach to sexual partners: her

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<sup>17</sup> Marlon Bain compares Avril to the 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).

promiscuity reflects an absence of respect for the proscriptions associated with monogamy. The result of this narcissistic abjection is a character both trapped and loose, a paradox Avril passes on to her sons.

## **Orin**

The experience of abjection – perhaps counter-intuitively – leads to emotional isolation. The fact that Avril violated an emotional boundary makes it more difficult for her sons to transcend the self and achieve intimacy with someone else. In Orin's life, the influence of his mother manifests in "internal addictive-sexuality issues" (289). As an adult, Orin entertains himself by seducing married women with young children. He refers to them as "Subjects" and deploys a number of highly refined strategies to bed them. For example, "Speedy Seduction Strategy Number 7" involves wearing a wedding ring and presenting himself as a happily married man until meeting a Subject so attractive that he is not able to resist her charms. Based on his experience, Strategy Seven is "[v]enue-adjustable" and a "never-miss" (1008). There are many other strategies in Orin's playbook, including Strategy Four, which while it has a "narrower demographic psychological range of potential Subjects," still produces a "gynecopia" (1009). Orin tracks his strategy deployment and success rate in a chart (634). For Hal, the most sadistic part of Orin's exercise is that it is no longer sufficient to only have sex with Subjects; Orin's goal now is "getting them to fall so terribly in love with him they'd never be able to want anyone else" (634). Orin, of course, is just repeating the particular brand of self-absorption that he was taught (Holland 227).

Orin performs his relationships. In his pursuit of Subjects, he appears open and sincere, and even vulnerable at times. Orin understands that it is this appearance of sincerity that gives him access to opportunities unavailable to a man obviously hunting for sex (1048). In an example of perverse insight, Orin knows what women see as the typical failings of men in heterosexual relationships, and in correcting for these failings, he becomes what the Subjects want to see. He feigns empathy. After a successful conquest, Orin takes pride in “giv[ing] the impression of care and intimacy” during the period when other lovers might “become uneasy, contemptuous, or distant” (597). Like his mother, Orin perfects the veneer.<sup>18</sup> At the core, though, Orin is empty. In his analysis of the novel, Marshall Boswell points out that Orin is often referred to as “O.,” a spatial representation of “a hole, a lack” (152). Orin is only a surface.

There are hints that Orin is still in touch with Avril. Such contact would be consistent with Kristeva’s theory, which posits that “while releasing a hold, [abjection] does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it – on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger” (9). Although Hal is under the impression that Orin and Avril have not spoken for several years, Avril calls Arizona immediately after Helen Steeply visits E.T.A. to conduct background research on Orin. Orin lives in Phoenix.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> That Orin repeats the sins of his mother is essential to Wallace’s pervasive pattern of recursivity in the novel, a pattern identified both by Katherine Hayles and Mary Holland. Both Jim and Avril have psychological issues associated with their mothers. In his childhood, Jim Incandenza was “apparently . . . extremely close to his own mother” – how close the reader does not know – but we do know that later Jim makes a movie in which death incarnate is a mother (789). In Avril’s case, her mother died when she was eight, and at least one person “suspect[s] she was badly abused as a child” (900, 1052). Then there are the sons, each of whom, “fractal-like presents another iteration of his parents’ solipsism and obsessiveness” (Benzon 102). Wallace traces generations of Incandenzas, with each generation manifesting its version of pathology a little differently.

<sup>19</sup> Orin lives in Phoenix because he plays football for the city’s professional team (43). His job is to punt the football so that the offense must cover as much distance as possible to reach the goal line.

Also, the first cartridge of the Entertainment is mailed from Arizona, and it is sent to one of Avril's former lovers, perhaps from a jealous son. Lastly, M. Fortier, a cell leader for one of the Canadian terrorist organizations, is under the impression that one of Jim Incandenza's relatives – an athlete – provided a copy of the Entertainment to M. DuPlessis, another Canadian terrorist (723). Orin, it seems, may be participating in the Canadian separatist movement. Wallace hints that Avril, herself a Canadian citizen, may have played a part in this political movement, leading to her son's involvement. This uncertainty about whether Orin and Avril are still in contact, and whether they are participating in the intercontinental conflict, is consistent with Kristeva's notion that abjection "is above all ambiguity" (9).

What appears certain, though, is that Orin suffers from the Coatlicue Complex, the diagnosis that psychologist Dolores Rusk assigns to Hal. Men who suffer the Coatlicue Complex, according to psychologist Julia Sherman, exhibit "fear, contempt, and dependence" when it comes to women, feelings driven by a "profound fear of separation from the mother or her symbolic representation" (191). The Coatlicue Complex occurs in instances when a child "has been encouraged by the parent(s) to behave in a deviant manner" (188). These parents may appear to be above reproach, but they suffer from "superego lacunae, i.e., holes in the superego" (188). Such deviant behavior may include the non-punishment of sexual behavior with a sibling, an awareness that a parent has committed incest, or the experience of incest itself. In Orin's case, his contempt is clear: he feigns emotional engagement until a woman is madly in love, and then he leaves. His

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Orin's job as a punter is essentially a defensive position. The notion of a "defensive position" appears in Kristeva's theory of the abject as well. She writes that the "unconscious contents" of abjection are excluded from conscious thought, but "not radically enough to allow for a secure differentiation . . . yet clearly enough for a defensive *position* to be established" (9). It seems that Orin plays a defensive position not just professionally, but also in the context of his family.

dependence is apparent too. Tragically for Orin, “the Subject’s pleasure in him has become his food” because he “can only give, not receive, pleasure” (596). In other words, Orin seduces a woman not for the sex, but because he is hungry for a woman’s approval, for her to say that “he is a wonderful lover, almost a dream-type lover” (596). Because these women are usually young mothers, Toon Staes argues that Orin’s Subjects “function precisely as symbolic mother figures” (69). The “mother figure,” in Aztec mythology is the goddess Coatlicue: she represents “the power of life and death that each mother holds over her infant” (Sherman 191). This idea, of course, animates Jim Incandenza’s *Entertainment*, which shares its title with the novel. It appears that through reference to the Coatlicue Complex,<sup>20</sup> Wallace repeats the motif of the mother-death cosmology.

By seducing young mothers, disrupting their families, and then rejecting them, Orin recreates the cycle of abjection that he experienced with his mother. The cycle itself becomes the substitute for his relationship with Avril. As Kristeva explains, “[a]bjection takes the place of the other, to the extent of affording him *jouissance*, [and] transforms the abject into the site of the Other” (54). Orin assumes Avril’s role, and he casts his “Subjects”

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<sup>20</sup> In the novel, Wallace footnotes Rusk’s diagnosis, signaling its potential significance. The footnote, however, reads “No clue” (1036 n. 216). In his analysis, Staes argues that Wallace’s management of information forces the reader to “fight through” the narrator’s voice (71). Staes’ analysis benefits by linking the metatextual meaning of *jouissance* to its meaning in the context of Kristeva’s theory of abjection. *Jouissance*, for critical theorists, is the term associated with finding pleasure in language that is “indeterminate, mobile, blank” (*Columbia Dictionary* 163). The sexual nature of that pleasure is evident in Suzanne Keen’s definition of the term: “a nearly orgasmic pleasure to be experienced through reading, combining bodily pleasure with intellectual joy in finding meaning” (178). By including a footnote on the Coatlicue Complex but providing no information, Wallace sends the reader on a quest, the success of which provides the reader with *jouissance*. To consider another layer of meaning, Kristeva uses the term in her description of abjection, explaining that “*jouissance* alone causes the abject to exist as such” (9). Although the abjected person “does not know it, [and] does not desire it,” he nonetheless “joys in it [*on en jouit*]. Violently and painfully. A passion” (9). As made apparent in the description of the Coatlicue Complex, Orin does not love the women he beds, and he cannot feel any sexual pleasure, but having sex with these substitute mother figures is the only way that he can subsist. Wallace’s manipulation of the concept of *jouissance* is another example of recursivity, and in this instance, the reader gets to play a role.

into the role of “Abjects.” Though his performances in the bedroom appear profoundly sensitive, Orin actually hates each Subject: “because he needs her he fears her and so hates her a little” (567). Like his mother, Orin manipulates boundaries. When he wears a wedding ring in an effort to seduce, he lives out Kristeva’s description of perversity: he “neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them” (15). This ambiguous emotional frontier is where Orin lives. In Marshall Boswell’s reading of the novel, Orin suffers from what is called the “indestructibility of unconscious desire” in Lacanian thought (153). Because his unconscious desire for his mother cannot be met, he seduces a substitute, over and over. Ironically, while Orin frequently experiences physical intimacy, he is very much alone.

This isolation, the result of his abjection, proves to be Orin’s downfall. Early in the novel, Wallace relates that Orin’s apartment is subject to frequent invasions of roaches coming up through the pipes from the sewer. Orin is disgusted by the roaches, but he does not kill them immediately. Reluctant to squish them with a shoe, Orin traps them underneath tumblers, suffocating them: killing them by isolating them from what they need. Orin’s method appears symbolic when considered in the context of Kristeva’s theory. The roaches are the filth that seep in at the boundaries of the apartment, and Orin traps them. They are visually present beneath clear glass, existing in the liminal space of abjection. They die from being closed off from air, from being trapped, from being alone. At the end of the novel, Wallace reveals that Orin meets a similar end. Luria Perc, previously known to Orin as a Subject, traps Orin beneath a “cage or small jail cell, but it was still recognizably a bathroom-type tumbler” (971). While trapped, Orin is shouting for

help, but it does not appear that anyone can hear him. His is isolated. Because there is no air going in or out, every time that Orin takes a breath, his cage becomes more like a vacuum.<sup>21</sup> Wallace represents Orin's emotional isolation with the metaphor of the tumbler,<sup>22</sup> thus adding to the symbolic use of space in *Infinite Jest*.

## Hal

The result of abjection for Hal is solipsism as well, but in a different manifestation. Unlike his brother Orin, Hal avoids sexual activity. He is junior in high school, and "maybe the one male E.T.A. for whom lifetime virginity is a conscious goal" (636). It appears that Hal has experienced "knowledge of castration," a phenomenon Kristeva describes as occurring when a person has "turn[ed] away from perverse dodges" (5). Because he has this knowledge, Hal's body and ego "are no longer seen in their own right but forfeited, abject" because they have somehow been appropriated by his mother (5). Hal has withdrawn into himself, refusing to even try to achieve intimacy, sexual or emotional. He is, as Kierkegaard would say, "hidden" (Boswell 140).

Hal, like his brother Orin, performs relationship. This is made evident in his interactions with the grief therapist he sees after his father's death. Unable to talk about any psychic pain, Hal goes to the grief section at the Copley Square library and "chew[s] through" the relevant books, researching the anger, denial, and depression that often

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<sup>21</sup> A similar vacuum appears in *The Divided Self* by R.D. Laing, a work with which Wallace was familiar. According to Stephen Burn, Wallace marked the passage that describes a type of patient: a "shut-up self, [which] being isolated, is unable to be enriched by outer experience, and so the whole inner world comes to be more and more impoverished, until the individual may come to feel he is merely a vacuum" (qtd. in Burn 74). Although Burn limits his analysis to Laing's influence on the character of Hal, the method by which Orin apparently dies suggests that Wallace applied the ideas of Laing to the character of Orin, too.

<sup>22</sup> To tumble, of course, means to fall, calling to mind Kristeva's emphasis on the French verb *cadere*.

follow death (253). Hal enacts these emotions in therapy, but to no avail. Somehow, his performance is inadequate, and Hal must find another way “to deliver the emotional goods to this guy” (254). So Hal returns to the library, to find out what the therapist “was professionally required to want,” and when he gives the performance of those emotions, he graduates from therapy (255). For Hal, what is important is not what he actually feels, but what the other person in the relationship thinks he *should* feel. By focusing on the needs of the audience, Hal has satisfied what he perceives as an obligation, all while “maintain[ing] the inviolate integrity of his actual feelings” (Boswell 150). Like Avril and Orin, Hal has mastered the art of surfaces.

Hal’s reluctance to communicate may be related to his fear that he is empty. According to Hal, he “hasn’t had a bona fide intensity-of-interior-life-type emotion since he was tiny,” and when he conceives of himself, he “feel[s] a hole. It’s going to be a huge hole, in a month. A way more than Hal-sized hole” (694, 785). This hollowness calls to mind Lacan’s notion that a child feels a “lack” after separating from the mother, which occurs when a child learns language. That “lack” could ever be associated with Hal’s language is ironic: Wallace represents Hal as preternaturally verbal. In his analysis, Marshall Boswell sees that Hal’s “sense of self is compromised in all cases by the tyranny of language” (151). Hal makes brilliant use of words, but he cannot communicate. Wallace points to this paradox through the episode in which Jim Incandenza poses as a professional conversationalist in order to find a way to connect with Hal. When Hal realizes what is going on, he asks whether his father is still hallucinating that Hal never speaks (29). Then Jim Incandenza then begins to speak on top of Hal, and there is no interchange between them. Finally, Hal breaks in, “I can’t just sit here watching you think I’m mute. . . . Are you

hearing me talking, Dad? It speaks" (31). The narrator then cuts to Jim, pleading, "[p]raying for just one conversation, amateur or no, that does not end in terror . . . [with] you staring, me swallowing" (31). That Hal refers to himself as "It" and that his father cannot hear him signals Hal's profound alienation.

By the end of the novel, the reader learns that it was Jim Incandenza's desire to bring Hal "out of himself" that spawned the Entertainment (839). Jim felt compelled to make "something the boy would love enough to induce him to open his mouth and come *out*" (839). The repeated use of the preposition "out" suggests movement beyond a boundary, another example of the Wallace's spatial representation of relationships. Jim Incandenza refers to the threat of emotional isolation as "a young self's fall into the womb of solipsism," a phrase that evokes multiple aspects of abjection (839). The "fall" conjures Kristeva's emphasis on the French verb *cadere*, and the womb evokes thoughts of Avril and the isolation she induces in both Hal and Orin. Jim suggests that the "womb could be used both ways," including as a conceit for a film in which Jim is able to say "I AM SO VERY, VERY SORRY and have it *heard*" (839). It seems that the Entertainment, though its content is not fully revealed to the reader, allows a viewer to regain the sense of completeness an infant feels before the acquisition of language and separation from the mother, and in that way suggests a return to the womb.

Hal, though, cannot escape of the "womb of solipsism." He, at the beginning of the novel and the end of the story, is unable to communicate, as represented by the "subanimalistic" noises he makes during his interview at the University of Arizona (14). As a result, he is lonely. The narrator theorizes that it is not that Hal longs for a relationship with another person, but "what it is he's really lonely for [is] this hideous internal self,

incontinent of sentiment and need" (695). This internal self, as Hal conceives of it, is "sentimental and naïve and goo-prone and generally pathetic," and in disgust, the exterior of Hal detaches from it (694). Hal dons the "hip empty mask" instead, even though some part of him recognizes that the mask is a function of his fear of "being really human" (695). In this formulation, the boundary that Hal needs to cross is interior: rather than reaching outward to achieve intimacy with another person, Hal needs to reach inward to achieve subjective coherence.

## **EMPATHY: THE TEMPORARY SUSPENSION OF BOUNDARIES**

### **The AA Model**

Wallace juxtaposes the solipsism that results from abjection against the community that derives from empathy. The isolation he portrays in Orin, Hal, and Avril finds a contrast in the relationships among the addicts at Ennet House. To live at Ennet House, a person must agree to certain terms, one of which is that he or she will attend an AA meeting every night. In other words, the individual must participate as part of a community every day. At AA meetings, members stand up and share their experiences of addiction. Everyone at the meeting is encouraged to "Identify" with the speaker, which, as discussed in the introduction, "means empathize" (345). To empathize, the narrator says, "isn't very hard to do" because "all the speakers' stories of decline and fall and surrender are basically alike, and like your own" (345). Everybody in AA comes to the organization out of desperation, and there they learn that one of the essential tasks of recovery is to listen to the stories of other addicts.

As a result, every member at a meeting “is aiming for total empathy with the speaker; that way they’ll be able to receive the AA message he’s here to carry” (345). There are a few guidelines for achieving empathy. To begin, you must make the speaker the sole focus of your attention. To listen – really listen – takes energy and focus. Don Gately, one of the central characters in the Ennet House plotline, “sit[s] right up where he could see dentition and pores, with zero obstructions or heads between him and the podium, so the speaker fills his whole vision, which makes it easier to really hear” (369). The second guideline is that you must not “Compare.” Gately explains that when he first attended AA, he could not internalize the message of the speakers because he would “just sit there and Compare, I’d go to myself, like, ‘I never rolled a car,’ ‘I never lost a wife,’ ‘I never bled from the rectum’” (365). As a result, he started to resent AA and to think that he was better off than others: maybe he could still be “Out There” (365). After two months, though, Gately realizes that the point is not how his experience is different from another’s; the point is what they have in common. As Petrus van Ewijk explains, “[c]omparison only leads back to the self that tries to encompass the Otherness in its own needs” (140). To achieve empathy, one must understand that the identity of the Other is not just a narcissistic reflection of self (LaCapra 76).

The third guideline is to listen without judgment. As part of its philosophy, AA asks its members to recognize that they are no longer in control of their lives, and to give that control over to some Higher Power. Once the individual is no longer the locus of control, he is no longer in a position to judge. As Gately considers another member’s attendance record, he catches himself, asking “who’s Gately to judge what worked for who. He just knows what seems like it works for him today” (278). For that reason, the response to a

speaker is never “Good job,” but “Good to hear you” (362). What is important is not the quality of the performance but the transmission of information from one person to another.

Assuming someone else’s point of view – achieving empathy – can result in vulnerability. In his work on empathy, Dominick LaCapra has found that the “affective aspect of understanding” central to empathy “exposes the self to involvement or implication in the past, its actors, and victims” (135). Gately’s experience suggests the truth of LaCapra’s observation, as he recounts that some of the most painful AA meetings are those in which the audience gets embarrassed for a speaker. The audience “punish[es] somebody by getting embarrassed for him, killing him by empathically dying right there with him, for him, up there at the podium” (368). This pain occurs, according to LaCapra, because empathy “is enabled by internal alterity (of the unconscious) and based on one’s being open to the other, who is constitutive of the formation of oneself” (77). The gap between the self and unconscious echoes the gap between the speaker and listener, with empathy functioning as the bridge.

Kathleen Fitzpatrick, in her work on *Infinite Jest*, explains that this kind of identification allows for a shared conception of reality: “the mode of identification here being promoted is not merely aimed at understanding one’s own situation, or simply relating to the situation another is in, but is instead part of a necessary, and necessarily painful, process of opening oneself to the utterly unimaginable situation of another” (199). This process produces a broader conception of subjectivity, one based on the community, rather than the individual (Hayles 693; Freudenthal 196). Instead of focusing on the self, the act of identification with another functions as a “recognition of solidarity” (van Ewijk 140). Acknowledging a common weakness leads to a feeling of membership in a group, and

the result is an “externaliz[ation] of collective will” (Freudenthal 196). With Gerhardt Schtitt’s advice in mind, each member of AA who is able to transcend the self is able to draw strength from the will expressed by the group.

The community of AA is loosely defined. Membership is optional, and once you are in, the “truly great thing about AA [is] *they can’t kick you out*” (352). As a result, the aspect of subjectivity that is derived from community exists outside the control of the individual, something that would be difficult for a character like Avril. The shared subjectivity of AA, at least in *Infinite Jest*, derives in part from travel. As the narrator explains, every Boston AA meeting is a pairing of two separate groups. One group will host, and the other will travel in order to speak. Travelling to another AA group’s meeting in order to speak is called a “Commitment” (343). Here it seems that Wallace’s word choice suggests a metaphor. The word “commit” comes from the Latin roots for “with” and “send.” To participate in a Commitment, a member of AA must “send” – presumably across some boundary – and she must be “with” another.

The members’ ability to Identify depends in part on the way the message is communicated, so the speaker has guidelines too. To begin with, the speaker must tell the truth. As Gately says, “[i]t can’t be a calculated crowd-pleaser, and it has to be the truth unslanted, unfortified” (369). Speakers should not sound rehearsed, and those “who are accustomed to finding out what an audience wants to hear and then supplying it” do not supply the fodder necessary for Identification (368). Hal’s approach to therapy – driven by research and performance – would not satisfy an AA audience.

The next guideline for speakers is to avoid irony. As the narrator explains, “[a]n ironist in a Boston AA meeting is a witch in church” (369). The distance implicit in irony

holds the audience at arm's length. Considered spatially, the fact that there is a gap between what an ironist says and what he means makes it difficult for a member of the audience to locate his point of view. In other words, the audience cannot identify with an ironic speaker. That AA attempts to govern the style of communication may seem oppressive, but as van Ewijk explains, it is

[o]nly by resolutely prohibiting the ironic attitude at the level of both the speaker and the listener [that] AA able to realize earnest communication between the addicts. The need for strict rules is thus apparent. AA's language game has to put down certain linguistic boundaries in order to break the boundaries of the self-consumed 'I.' (142)

Van Ewijk is one of many scholars who have addressed the role of irony in *Infinite Jest*. Both Allard Den Dulk and Iannis Goerlandt posit that the dynamics of irony echo throughout the novel in plotlines about freedom and captivity (Dulk 335; Goerlandt 314). In his work on irony in *Infinite Jest*, Timothy Aubry characterizes irony as a "fortification" that serves as "a mask on the self, a winking sheen on one's language disavowing the truth it would otherwise declare" (108). While irony may at first feel liberating, it ultimately traps the individual by excluding him from a feeling of connection.<sup>23</sup>

The relationship between irony and empathy is a topic Wallace explored at some length in his essay "E Unibus Pluram" and in his interview with Larry McCaffery. Irony, according to Wallace, is incapable of creating anything other than the desire to be in on the joke and to feel superior to those who are not. The pervasiveness of irony has trained media consumers to judge people for naiveté and sentimentality. In this cultural context, "betraying passé expressions of value, emotion, or vulnerability" leaves an individual "open

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<sup>23</sup> As Dulk explains Kierkegaard's philosophy, "the aesthetic life-view is characterized by an endless 'total negative irony' through which the individual avoids all commitment, all responsibility, and retains his negative freedom at all cost" (331).

to others' ridicule" (McCaffery 63). The result is that irony leaves each of us wary of judgment, reluctant to express ourselves sincerely or thoughtfully. Irony, as reflected in the title of Wallace's essay, renders each of us alone.

To counter the influence of irony, Wallace recommends that American authors "[back] away from ironic watching" and treat "plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction" (81). Through this commitment to "single-entendre principles," Wallace envisions a different sort of relationship between fiction writers and readers. The purpose of serious fiction, as he sees it, is to "give the reader, who like all of us is sort of marooned in her own skull . . . imaginative access to other selves," thus rendering the reader "less alone inside" (McCaffery Interview 50). Furthermore, a reader's feeling of connection *to* a character finds an echo in the empathic connections *between* characters (Fitzpatrick 199, Holland 219). This approach is similar to what Suzanne Keen found in her research for her work *Empathy in the Novel*: authors who are interested in the topic "call up empathy as a representational goal by mirroring it within their texts" (121). In *Infinite Jest*, the Ennet House plotline serves as model of a community that values empathy.

### **Empathy in Practice**

At Enfield Tennis Academy, empathy – feeling with someone else – is harder to achieve. It is a world full of boundaries and lines, as represented metaphorically in Hal's recurring dream in which he stands at the baseline of a gargantuan tennis court:

The lines that bound and define play are on the court as complex and convolved as a sculpture of string. There are lines going every which way, and they run oblique or meet and form relationships and boxes and rivers

and tributaries and systems inside systems: lines, corners, alleys, and angles deliquesce into a blur at the horizon at the distant net. (67)

Furthermore, E.T.A. is not the kind of place that encourages students to look to each other for support. The system is highly competitive, based on a pecking order in which one person can advance because another lost a game. As Hal explains to the students he mentors, "We're all on each other's food chain. All of us. It's an individual sport. Welcome to the meaning of *individual*" (112). Hal's friend Ingersoll responds with "*E Unibus Pluram*," calling to mind Wallace's essay on modern alienation.

The absence of empathy is apparent in the Incandenza household, particularly in the phenomenon of "Politeness Roulette," one of Avril's signature routines. According to Hal and Orin, "to report a problem is to mug her," so the boys are reluctant to "tell[] her the truth about any kind of problem because of what the consequences will be for her" (523). This behavior qualifies as narcissistic listening as described by Suzanne Keen, a phenomenon in which the speaker's message is evaluated only in terms of its relevance to the listener's life (80). The same Avril who purports to have open lines of communication punishes her sons through the intensity of her reaction if what they communicate requires her intervention. As Orin explains, it is as if Avril "went around with her feelings out in front of her with an arm around the feelings' windpipe and a Glock 9 mm. to the feelings' temple like a terrorist with a hostage, daring you to shoot" (523). The result, logically, is a lack of information moving from sons to mother. In her refusal to imagine what her sons have felt, Avril chooses autonomy over interdependence.

Avril also fails to empathize with Mario, as is made evident during a late-night scene in her office. He has come to find his mother after nine o'clock at night, something he almost never does, to talk to her about sadness. When Mario comes in, Avril is making a

phone call, and although she puts the phone down, she does not end the call. Mario, who comes in with a video camera, makes a point of telling his mother twice that he has turned off the camera. Mario can “tell she’s making herself not look at her watch” throughout their rather extensive conversation (767). When he asks “How can you tell if somebody’s sad?,” Avril responds by identifying his usage error: he should have used the word “whether” instead of the word “if” (763). This is the kind of judgment that an empathetic listener avoids. Then, to answer Mario’s question, Avril explains that a sad person might “cry, sob, weep, or, in certain cultures, wail, keen, or rend his or her garments,” or perhaps demonstrate “laziness, lethargy, fatigue, sluggishness, a certain passive reluctance to engage you” (764). Then Avril starts to use words like “disassociation,” “existential,” and “obliteration,” clearly focused on her analysis of the phenomenon of sadness rather than on Mario’s comprehension thereof (764). Ironically, she begins to discuss people who are afraid of their feelings, not seeing that she herself may fall into that category. In her work on empathy, Suzanne Keen labels these people as “[e]motionally ‘tone-deaf’” in that they are not able to recognize their own or others’ feelings (9). Whether because of a lack of will or because of a lack of ability, Avril is not working to receive the message that Mario is carrying; she is not trying to “feel with” him. Instead, she privileges the blinking light on her telephone.<sup>24</sup>

In addition, Avril’s failure to discipline Orin deprives him of the opportunity to practice empathy. Because Avril does not require an honest conversation about the manner of her dog’s death, Orin does not confront his responsibility for Avril’s pain. As Dominick LaCapra has said, empathy is “an affect crucial for a possible ethical relation to

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<sup>24</sup> Wallace’s use of the verb “interface,” addressed above, suggests the kind of superficiality evident in this scene.

the other and hence for one's responsibility or answerability" (77). Orin does not exist in "ethical relation" to his mother. Because Avril ostensibly accepts his lie, Orin learns that "the truth [i]s *constructed* instead of *reported*" (1048). In a family, as in AA, the experience of subjectivity is based in part on community, but Orin learns a subjectivity defined by isolation and defensiveness. Avril keeps him in a state of abjection by ensuring that Orin does not forget what he did to S. Johnson: she keeps a dog bowl under the dining room table long after the dog's death (744). Perversely, by focusing on her own self-image as the martyred mother, Avril traps Orin within himself. He is not required to ask for forgiveness; he is not asked to transcend the self. Instead, he is stuck with the secret of what he did, subject to "guilt and antiguilt operations" without hope for exit through empathy and atonement (252). Because of the "freedom-from" discipline, Orin becomes an "independent subject who is free to engage in the pursuit of happiness . . . without regard for the cost of that pursuit to others" (Hayles 692-93). Orin's later pattern of sexual conquests is an expression of the same ideology.

These failures of empathy find a counterbalance in the gifts of the two most talented listeners at E.T.A.: Lyle, the oiled guru of the locker room, and Mario, the brother born between Orin and Hal. Lyle is known to sit in the yogic position above the towel dispenser in the boys' weight room, and when students need to talk, they go to him. The narrator describes Lyle's listening as "a way of attending that it at once intense and assuasive: the supplicant feels both nakedly revealed and sheltered somehow, from all possible judgment" (388). There is safety in this interchange: no fear of dismissal or eye-rolling. Lyle "doesn't laugh at them, or even shake his head sagely on its big brown neck"; he remains neutral and receptive (128). Because of the way that he attends to the speaker, "[y]ou both of you,

briefly, feel unalone” (388). For example, LaMont Chu, a desperately driven tennis player at E.T.A., comes to Lyle to discuss his hunger for fame. Lyle listens, asks questions, and then gives advice, much of it driven by Zen philosophy. Although “Lyle never whispers . . . it’s just about the same,” suggesting that an interchange with Lyle is both intimate and intense (199). Even if Lyle makes a “general Remark and decline[s] to say much else,” the students return: “it’s the way he listens, somehow, that keeps the saunas full” (387). Lyle provides empathy for the students at E.T.A.

The most salient characteristic of Lyle is that he lives off the sweat of others. He licks other people’s skin, finding sustenance in their “fluids and salts and fatty acids” (128). Players will go to the weight room and “work up a good hot shellac of sweat; then, if you let him lick your arms and forehead, he’ll pass on to you some little nugget of fitness-guru wisdom” (128). On a physical level, Lyle receives what the students abject: the sweat excreted from their skin. On a metaphorical level, Lyle receives the students’ problems and concerns: what the students would like to send away, never to return. When Hal cannot satisfy the demands of the grief therapist, he “work[s] up a gourmet sweat” and shares his anxiety with Lyle (254). Hal reveals himself to Lyle in a way that he does not with the grief therapist. Because of his position, Lyle lives in a state of profound interdependence: Jim Incandenza’s sweat, part salt and part Wild Turkey, has a history of making Lyle quite tipsy (379).

Lyle, by ingesting waste and providing empathy, represents the opposite of abjection. He sits in the weight room, “leaning forward to accept what is offered,” a phrase that brings to mind communion (387). Wallace suggests the spiritual nature of the interchange in a late night scene in which students “go in one by one, in towels. Proffer

beaded flesh. Confront the sorts of issues reserved for nighttime's gurutical tête-à-tête, [in] whispers made echoless" (387). Not only does the phrase "tête-à-tête" connote communication, it also suggests physical intimacy: in French, the phrase means "head to head," an apt description given that Lyle is licking the supplicants. Through Lyle, Wallace presents the metaphorical spatiality of empathy.

It should be noted that Lyle only engages in such intense listening for a finite periods of time. Unlike abjection, in which the dynamic perpetuates itself, the blurred boundaries of empathy occur only for a moment. Then, the two identities separate again, the better for having known intimacy. When Lyle is unable to keep up with demand, he refers students to the other empathetic presence on campus: Mario.<sup>25</sup>

Early in the novel, Wallace identifies Mario as "born listener" (80). Because Mario is "visibly damaged," people do not feel intimidated by him, and the "bullshit often tends to drop away . . . deep beliefs [are] revealed" (80). Listeners are encouraged by Mario's own openness. He wants to talk candidly about God, a topic commonly considered off-limits (40). He likes to listen to Madame Psychosis on the radio because she is sincere. Similarly, Mario enjoys going down to Ennet 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" (591). In fact, Mario does not understand why "stuff that's really real" makes people uncomfortable, and he wonders if "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). Because of his openness, Mario makes space for people to talk without fear of judgment.

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<sup>25</sup> The narrator relates that "Mario gets a fair number of aesthetic-self-consciousness referrals from Lyle. No type or rank of guru is above delegating. It's like a law" (390).

In her reading of the novel, Emily Russell posits that Mario operates as symbol of the need for interdependence. His physical disabilities require the use of certain accommodations, like the thoracic police lock that hooks into his vest in order to hold him upright. Mario and his accommodations are physically – spatially – interdependent. When a person is not visibly disabled, Russell argues, the accommodations are present, but they are just less obvious, like “lights for the sighted and chairs for the ambulatory” (156). At E.T.A., Mario participates in the system in his role as a listener. As mentioned above, Mario hears “really ticklish matters of injury and incapacity and character and rallying-what remains” because they are “referred to him by Lyle” (316). Also, he uses his listening skills in his role as the chronicler of all things E.T.A., conducting interviews and recording matches.

Mario is Hal’s roommate, and in this role, he helps to “assemble” – to use Emily Russell’s spatial word – the disparate identities of Hal. At the beginning of the novel, it seems unlikely that Hal will honestly engage with Mario: during a conversation about the existence of God, Hal shuts down any potential for intimacy by telling his brother, “We countenance each other from either side of some unbridgeable difference” (41). But Mario persists in trying to understand his brother. Over time, he has developed an ability to read Hal in a way that most people cannot; Mario’s intuition, according to Hal, is “slow and silent” (317). It was Mario – not Avril – who first located a copy of the *O.E.D.* for Hal, and it is Mario who perceives, as the WhataBurger Invitational approaches, that Hal is “sad.” In a late-night conversation, Hal finally reveals to Mario the reason for his sadness: he has been smoking pot and he is afraid that a positive drug test will devastate the Moms. Through his openness and his listening, Mario helps in “bringing together these seemingly independent

elements, allowing for new and productive realities of mutual reliance” (Russell 158).

When Hal is able to tell his secret to Mario, Hal’s various identities can begin to converge.<sup>26</sup>

In a highly symbolic scene outside the Park Street T-Station, Mario extends empathy to the abjected Barry Loach, who later joins the E.T.A community. Barry had accepted his brother’s challenge to determine whether “the basic human character” is “unempathetic and necrotic” by standing, unwashed and unshaven, outside a subway station and begging passersby, “Touch me, just touch me, *please*” (969). People walking down the street tended to think that Loach was actually asking for money, and many made donations, albeit with “spastic delicacy” or “bullwhip-motions,” working hard to avoid physical contact (970). Loach was living in abjection, physically a part of Boston, but not accepted; apparent filth that sought a reunion with human contact. After nine months, Barry’s performance of homelessness had become his psychic reality, and he had grown accustomed to folks “interpret[ing] his appeal for contact as a request for cash and substitute[ing] loose change for genuine fleshly contact” (970). Then one day Mario exited the T, on an errand for his father, and heard Barry’s request (971). If Mario had been accompanied by someone “worldly or adult,” cynicism or a fear of the unclean might have intervened (971). But Mario was by himself, and in his child-like openness, he had “extended his clawlike hand and touched and heartily shaken Loach’s own fuliginous hand” (971). Mario’s expression of empathy, like Lyle’s, marries compassion and physical touch, and as such, Wallace gives empathy a spatial dimension.

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<sup>26</sup> Despite Mario’s limitations, Hal “fears his opinion more than probably anybody except their Mom’s” (316). That Hal feels this way suggests that the relationship between the two brothers is more mutual than is perhaps revealed in the text. Otherwise, it would be tempting to conceive of Mario more like a confessor, the passive recipient of other people’s words.

Both Mario and Lyle operate as symbols of the potential for empathy and compassion. The fact that neither character is realistic signals to the reader that Wallace is drawing our attention to an idea. They represent the idealized possibility for human connection that comes through careful listening and the absence of judgment. Also, they represent the outer limits of empathy in that they accept what has otherwise been abjected. Lyle receives sweat – an excretion from the body – as sustenance, very literally taking in what has been cast out. In Mario’s case, he makes physical contact with a person whose touch was rejected, over and over again, for nine months. This capacity to feel with others exposes both Lyle and Mario to potential danger. As Catherine Nichols argues, “[e]motional vulnerability, like the porous body . . . leaves its bearer open to the risks inherent in growth and renewal” (8). Lyle confronts this risk when he injects remnants of Wild Turkey, as does Mario when he reaches out to homeless man begging for human touch. Both characters cross boundaries – physical and psychological – in their expression of empathy and compassion.

The most extreme example of empathy as a spatial phenomenon occurs when the wraith, presumably the ghost of Jim Incandenza, infiltrates the psyche of Don Gately. Healing from a gunshot wound and reluctant to take pain medications because of his history of addiction, Gately lies intubated and voiceless in a hospital room.<sup>27</sup> While there, he becomes aware of the presence of a wraith. Gately and the wraith begin communicating, even though Gately is not able to speak. The wraith has crossed through the boundary of Gately’s body, and has moved inside his mind, and there he can perceive Gately’s subjective

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<sup>27</sup> A number of friends come to visit, many of whom speak at great length, taking advantage of Gately’s position as a captive audience. Gately is not exercising empathy here. Instead, as he sees it, he is like a “sympathetic ear, or not even a sympathetic *real* ear, more like a wooden carving or statue of an ear” (831).

experience. In this way, Wallace represents empathy – or “feeling into” – as a spatial phenomenon. At the moment that Gately’s shoulder “sends up a flare of pain,” the “wraith gasps and almost falls off the monitor as if he can totally empathize with the dextral flare” (839). In that moment, “[t]he wraith could empathize totally” because he could perceive all of Gately’s thoughts and respond to them (831). The wraith indicates that “he can more than Identify with an animate man’s feelings of communicative impotence and mute strangulation” (834). The wraith assumes a yogic position like Lyle, sitting on a heart monitor rather than a towel dispenser (832).

The extent of the wraith’s empathy, however, is intrusive. Gately, at one point, remembers something from his childhood, and the wraith starts to argue with him. Apparently, the wraith “can’t tell the difference between Gately just thinking to himself and Gately using his brain-voice to sort of think *at* the wraith” (839). There is no boundary between them; Gately cannot retreat. To add to that, at one point the wraith’s face “is upside-down only cm. from Gately face – the wraith’s face is only about half the size of Gately’s face, and has no odor” (839). The discomfort of this physical intimacy calls to mind the disturbingly close smiley faces that occur throughout the book. Not sure whether he is dreaming, Gately “tried the test of pretending to lose consciousness so the wraith would go away” (830). Not to be ignored, the wraith starts to interject all sorts of words into Gately’s mind, words that Gately has never heard before like “MENISCUS and CHRONAXY and POOR YORICK and LUCULUS DOLLY” (832). For Gately, who finds these words foreign, the experience is “not only creepy but somehow violating, a sort of lexical rape” (832). By equating the wraith’s intrusion with rape, Wallace suggests that the wraith has violated

Gately. This experience can no longer be considered empathy because the wraith fails to show “respect for the otherness of the other” (LaCapra 135).

The nature of the relationship between Gately and the wraith begins with empathy and folds back into abjection. The wraith’s presence in Gately’s mind calls to mind Kristeva’s description of the causes of abjection: “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect border, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva 4). The wraith becomes a part of Gately, and yet it is still separate: there could be no space more liminal. In this way, Wallace gives spatial dimension to a psychological phenomenon. In addition, Gately desires the wraith’s presence as well as its absence, demonstrating the emotional complexities of abjection. Initially, unable to communicate with anyone else, “he’d kind of liked it. The dialogue. The give-and take. The way the wraith could seem to get inside him” (923). But the wraith allows Gately no privacy. He disputes Gately’s qualitative assessment regarding Gately’s mother’s ex-boyfriend, a matter surely beyond the wraith’s concern. When Gately turns over in his bed, he sees the wraith “leaning forward with its chin on its hands on the railing in what Gately’s coming to regard as the classic tell-your-troubles-to-the-trauma-patient-that-can’t-interrupt-or-get-away position” (835). The temporary intimacy of empathy has long been outlived by the wraith’s persistent presence. Through the relationship between Gately and the wraith, Wallace overtly juxtaposes empathy and abjection. Both psychological phenomena derive from a relationship between two people, but empathy depends on pulling toward and abjection depends on pushing away.

## CONCLUSION

*Infinite Jest* in many ways is a novel about boundaries. Wallace begins with the psychological isolation produced by competitive sport and by drug addiction, describing the emotional confines of solipsism. Such boundaries, for Hal and Orin Incandenza, are further hardened because of their experiences with abjection. Although the blurred boundaries of abjection may suggest intimacy, one finds instead feelings of renunciation and the perpetually unsatisfied desire to separate, as suggested by the Latin roots of the word. As a counterbalance to this emotional isolation, *Infinite Jest* “features the portrayal of a contrasting life view: one that emphasizes the importance of sincerity (openness, vulnerability), commitment to reality, and community” (Dulk 340). Community, for Wallace, is premised on a respect for individual boundaries. These boundaries blur in moments of empathy, when a person shares another person’s subjective experience. Empathy, as the word suggests, is a brief “feeling” “into” another person, and it is the only route to intimacy. In *Infinite Jest*, empathy finds expression in the serene – almost otherworldly – characters of Mario and Lyle.

Through the characters of *Infinite Jest*, Wallace offers his readers the opportunity to experience their own feelings of empathy. The notion that art can facilitate this kind of relationship is a quality valued by the character of Jim Incandenza: he articulates an artistic philosophy premised on empathy, and in this way, seems to represent the voice of David Foster Wallace. As represented in the novel, the goal of Jim’s later films is to allow his viewers a feeling of identification, to provide “[f]reedom from one’s own head, one’s inescapable P.O.V.” (742). Wallace, similarly, wants his readers “to sort of escape self by

achieving some sort of identification with another human psyche” (McCaffery Interview 32). That identification leads to freedom is an irony Wallace probably enjoys.

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