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Anti-Interiority: Compulsiveness, Objectification, and Identity in *Infinite Jest*

Elizabeth Freudenthal

In David Foster Wallace's 1996 behemoth *Infinite Jest*, everyone is an addict. More precisely, everyone is a compulsive user: of crack, Demerol, booze, elite competitive tennis, M*A*S*H, household bleach. Recovering drug addict Don Gately emerges as one of the sprawling novel's heroes, in part because of his success in recovery. Readers want to let Wallace off the hook for the clichéd contradictions of working-class identity defining Gately—his sweet naïveté and brute, bearlike strength, his wide-ranging, deep insight and lack of formal education, his ability to get the uptown girl despite his downtown background—because he's so dang likeable. Gately's struggle to "work the program," to apply the rules of Alcoholics Anonymous to his own life meaningfully and effectively, drive much of the novel's emotional power. And despite the problems one may have with AA as a vehicle for healthy living, Gately's mode of fighting addiction is the only one in the novel that actually works. In Wallace's obsessive-compulsive, entertainment-addled, apocalyptically consumption-based society, everyone would do well to act like Don Gately.

In one example of Gately's recovery process, he follows AA's dictum to pray to a "higher power," even though he has no idea who, what, where, why, or how such a power might exist. Gately "simultaneously confesses and complains" to an AA meeting that he

> takes one of AA's very rare specific suggestions and hits the knees in the A.M. and asks for Help and then hits the knees again at bedtime and says Thank You, whether he believes he's talking to Anything/-body or not, and he somehow gets through the day clean. This, after ten months of ear-smoking concentration and reflection, is still all he feels like he "understands" about the "God angle." . . . He feels about the ritualistic daily *Please* and *Thank You* prayers rather like a hitter that's on a hitting streak and doesn't change his jock or socks or pregame routine for as long as he's on the streak. W/sobriety being the hitting streak and whatnot, he explains.[1]

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Gately fights addiction by replacing his compulsive drug use with this kind of repetitive, performative, bodily ritual. He doesn't use talk therapy, he doesn't articulate how he feels, he cannot intellectualize how or why it works. In fact, when he tries to speculate what his higher power might be, he feels a "*Nothing*" so profoundly terrifying that it makes him want to puke (*IJ* 444). Though the narrative nods to childhood trauma, memories that his addictions buried and that he revisits in recovery, Gately's recovery is largely depicted as a compulsive, ritual, and physical investment in an entity outside of himself that may or may not exist. Despite his ambivalence about the nature of the powers controlling him, he creates a functional but empty signifier for them, using his own body as a similarly functional instrument of free-floating, originless well-being.

I call Gately's ritual "anti-interiority," and I find it in a number of major contemporary novels where biomedicine, individual power, and destructive social orders collide. Anti-interiority is a mode of identity founded in the material world of both objects and biological bodies and divested from an essentialist notion of inner emotional, psychological, and spiritual life. Anti-interiority is a subjectivity generated by the material world and yet works against oppressive political, economic, and social forces in that same world, not in the ideal realm of interiority, with its normative modes of agency and its metaphysical connotations. In fact, it replaces the referents associated with "interior" and "exterior" with a dynamic, generative materiality, itself composed of both object worlds and biomedical realities. In several cultural productions, of which *Infinite Jest* is a compelling example, I find anti-interiority in representations of obsessive-compulsive disorder, Tourette's syndrome, and compulsive consumption behaviors, along with other biomedically defined mental illnesses of bodily repetition and iteration, such as amnesia and dementia. This essay focuses on *Infinite Jest* to introduce more fully the concept, contexts, promises, and hazards of biomedical anti-interiority. I argue that the novel uses compulsiveness to depict not an erasure of self within an overpowering commercial culture, as some critics argue, but a continuous reestablishment of selfhood contingent on external material reality. Anti-interior selfhood exists as a paradoxically dynamic thinghood between material and subjective realms, in the space where both Gately and his Higher Power live.

Scholars of contemporary literature and theory have already begun a broad-based investigation of selfhood in relation to both interiority and the ostensibly external world of objects and objectifying sciences. For example, research into affect and emotion, burgeoning not just among cognitive scientists and psychologists, but among philosophers, cultural critics, and literary theorists, is reshaping a variety of fields in

the humanities and sciences. Similarly, research is flourishing on objects and things as crucial to establishing human experience; this approach has reinvigorated cultural studies. Further, a handful of recent works directly address compulsiveness and changing views of bodily objectification. Jennifer Fleissner's *Women, Compulsion, Modernity* argues that compulsion is endemic to modernity itself.[2] Her attention to compulsive behavior and gender in naturalist fiction reframes scholarship about the nineteenth century; her locating women as central to the naturalist movement contests perceptions of what had been considered the most masculine aesthetic in American literature. Disability studies scholar Lennard Davis has written a cultural history of obsessive-compulsive disorder.[3] And Ian Hacking is concerned with a shift, in the last twenty-five years, to a "neo-Cartesian" mode of objectifying the body through mechanistic knowledge of its parts, including the brain, as separate from the mind and "self."[4] Along with these scholars, humanists are increasingly interested in cognitive science, neurology, and genetics as ways to retool their objects of inquiry and their disciplinary methodologies. The brain/mind complex had its own currency, with universities investing in programs studying the mind from as many scholarly perspectives as possible.[5] And, of course, scientific research in biotechnology, genetics, neurology, and related sciences of human consciousness and experience is flourishing.

This scholarly attention to the multiple modes of self-knowledge and self-consciousness has paralleled a tremendous rise in pharmaceutical use.[6] Biomedical approaches to identity are steadily increasing throughout contemporary culture. Indeed, as Hacking notes, we view our body parts—including our brains—as machinelike, controllable, in a neo-Cartesian light. The increase in psychiatric medications which act upon neurochemical processes suggests a sweeping cultural movement toward the voluntary objectification of personality.[7] It also drives increasing media attention toward what one may call the medical objectification of subjectivity. *Slate* recently reignited what seemed an old, closed debate about a genetic basis for race-based IQ discrepancies in their 2007 series on the topic by William Saletan.[8] Spurred by disgraceful and career-ending comments by James Watson, this series incurred a wide swath of angry responses criticizing Saletan's scientific evidence, which itself had been discredited by all but the most fervent believers in essentialist racial difference.[9] That this spurious debate continues to thrive in mainstream newspapers indicates a persistent cultural fixation with biological explanations of complex human problems. Troy Duster's work shows that this renewal of formerly discredited science is enabled by technological developments in biomedical science that open new doors of bias-laden research that, without vigilance, can and will reify

racial categories. Even partisan political debates about social policy—at what stage does an embryo become human life, or how deeply should science and religion inflect public-school instruction about the origins of human life?—have at their heart anxiety about using science to define human experience.

Wallace's novel is part of a wider trend of fiction that contextualizes the biomedical in relation to contemporary social, economic, and political threats. Following the general timeline above, much literary fiction after 1990 tends to register social crises in terms of biologically founded illnesses such as obsessive-compulsive disorder, autism spectrum disorder, eating disorders, substance dependency, or Tourette's syndrome. Moreover, in these novels, these illnesses are narrated as anti-interior phenomena, as existing separate from internal psychological and emotional life. Characters in books such as Jonathan Lethem's *Motherless Brooklyn* and Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*, as well as *Infinite Jest*, experience their illnesses primarily as relationships with the mundane objects and material worlds external to their bodies. In particular, the dominance of objects in these novels suggests an objectification similar to that enacted by biomedical treatments for psychological and social problems. These novels break with older trends of representing social anxieties through a generally Freudian conception of interior life, as is typical of late nineteenth- and early to mid-twentieth-century depictions of hysteria and neurasthenia, and modernist texts more generally.[10] Though Fleissner's study views nineteenth-century compulsiveness as an embodiment of modernity, and though feminist studies of hysteria and neurasthenia demonstrate historical continuity with contemporary depictions of such illnesses, the specifically biomedical register used in the late twentieth century signals an important difference in representation.

However, despite the overwhelming scholarly, popular, and literary investment in scientific and medical approaches to identity, literary theory has not significantly pushed questions about such subjectivity past limiting arguments about determinism. Rather than debating whether or not, or to what degree, biology forms us, we should be asking questions about the cultural significance of such widespread preoccupation with biological approaches to subjectivity. And *Infinite Jest*, with its welter of biologically defined illnesses, its depiction of political, corporate, and media-driven apocalypse, and its persistent popularity among scholars and critics, is a fitting source for answers. In particular, this novel portrays anti-interiority as both positive and negative, enabling both liberation from and complicity in oppressive social forces. The example of Don Gately shows the respectful, ethical potential of what I call biomedical anti-interiority in a nuclear-power-fueled, mass-media-dominated consumer society. However, as discussed below, the novel also employs

anti-interiority to characterize the worst kinds of authoritarianism. The overwhelming evidence of biomedicine as a cultural dominant suggests that anti-interiority is a particular manifestation of a powerful force in contemporary culture, a mode of subjectivity that is not necessarily tied to ethics. Descriptive rather than prescriptive, anti-interiority offers insights into the promises and dangers of defining people biomedically. Similarly, aspects of obsessive-compulsive disorder are highly assimilable to the contemporary high-speed, detail-oriented, pressure-cooker economy, while simultaneously enabling potential resistance to it; for example, a severely compulsive person cannot get out of bed, down the stairs, out the door, and to her job without a prohibitively expansive list of necessary rituals.[11] Accordingly, anti-interiority describes a mode of subjectivity intimately tied to contemporary structures of authority and power.

Compulsive Anti-Interiority in Infinite Jest

As noted above, *Infinite Jest* features mental illness, in particular obsessive-compulsive disorder, *ad nauseam* in a narrative abounding with garbage and bodily excretions. All major and most minor characters have crippling OCD, crippling compulsive substance abuse, or both. Also, the novel's near-future world is dominated at every level by a global commodity system, from the plethora of brand-name goods to energy sourced from toxic nuclear waste. Most characters' compulsive behaviors connect directly with the multinational economic and nuclear-industrial systems at the plot's center. Compulsiveness links together the novel's family, halfway house, and political-economic plots. Still, no critics have performed a sustained analysis of the relation between the novel's portrayal of multinational commodity capitalism and the corporeal subjectivities of its characters. Further, critics have not directly addressed one of the more engaging emotional draws of *Infinite Jest*: its portrayal of interior-focused, rational, self-conscious intellectuality as emotionally debilitating.[12] OCD in Wallace's novel is a way to channel the debility of interiority, and it is also an effect of multinational corporate political power. Paradoxically, by forcing an embrace of the reality of objects, even of the waste spawned by contemporary capitalism, compulsive anti-interiority can provide some mobility within this system. And this ambivalent portrayal of OCD demonstrates the futility of seeking agency via what is conventionally known as one's inner life.

The major discussions of *Infinite Jest* approach from various directions the novel's critique of subjectivity. N. Katherine Hayles frames the novel's fixation on recursive systems as exposing the "deadly illusion of autonomy";[13] she argues that Wallace constructs an alternative to the

liberal subject through two technologies of the self: elite tennis at the Enfield academy, where protagonist Hal Incandenza and his brothers have gone to school, and which his late father founded, and Alcoholics Anonymous, as represented by Don Gately's narrative. Both regimes externalize collective will, recognize that individual actions have communal consequences, and replace the logic of autonomy that will inevitably lead to environmental devastation. Many critics agree that some aspect of subjectivity in *Infinite Jest* is created by and dependent on a community. How can we reconcile the various critical interpretations of Wallace's characters' subjectivity with their often debilitating corporealities? So far, however, critics have not used embodiment to understand Wallace's depiction of selfhood, despite the novel's fixation on medical disorders, physical and mental disabilities, bodily addictions, and grotesque physicality. Critics approach this topic from various directions, but a sustained reading of the biomedical body clearly connects experientially exterior political-social structures and ostensibly interior subjective experiences. A critique of the body makes room for a more coherent study of both femininity and masculinity, as each is constructed by Wallace's absurdly rendered world of corporate media. Bodily compulsiveness ties together the novel's genders, classes, and ethnicities, its themes of pleasure, consumption, intellectualism, ritual, self-control, and waste, and its examination of the negligible differences between the "inside" and "outside" of selfhood. Compulsiveness is clinically understood as a means of grasping for personal control over anxieties about control itself. Wallace's characters use it as a tool for autocratically dominating shared and gendered spaces—both geopolitical and domestic. Certainly *Infinite Jest*'s distinctive form is compulsive: the hoarded collections of endnoted information, the sentences both excessive and obsessively precise, the drive to pack as much as possible into the syntactic and narrative spaces. As a mode of anti-interiority, as a means of rejecting the siren call of a closed-off inner life and embracing instead objects and bodies in their materiality, compulsiveness can also empower characters. That is, the biomedical is both the foundation of the novel's stuctures of oppression, and also the main way characters resist and negotiate them.

Compulsive Domination

In *Infinite Jest*, compulsiveness helps the bad guys get badder. Compulsiveness itself is what's wrong, what brings the nation to the edge of apocalypse. The novel's Johnny Gentle is the U.S. president who implements a strategy of "Reconfiguration," which turns the northeastern

United States into a nuclear waste dump for the entire fission-fueled continent. That Gentle annexes this dumping ground to Canada spurs Quebecois terrorists to seek their own lethal samizdat, a mass-media-enabled event that would eliminate the U.S. citizenry. Second-in-command Rodney Tine conceives of Subsidized Time, selling whole years to the highest corporate bidders, to finance Reconfiguration and its myriad consequences, including relocating vast numbers of people and building giant fans that purportedly contain the toxic gases of radioactive waste. Gentle and Tine are thus responsible for the most absurdist aspects of Wallace's world, his funhouse mirror reflection of our own dangerously corporate government, our potentially apocalyptic addictions to consumption, and our democracy usurped by multinational media companies. Both Gentle and Tine have obsessive-compulsive disorder, and their biomedical subjectivity is central to their desire for radical geopolitical domination.

Gentle's OCD informs every level of his presidency, from his upstart campaign to his major policies. His compulsions about hygiene and fear of contamination structure his "Clean U.S. Party." With platforms such as "Let's Shoot Our Wastes Into Space," C.U.S.P.'s compulsive nationalism simplistically equates political undesirability with garbage and promises to clean it all up (*IJ* 383). Gentle sees every aspect of domestic policy in sweeping terms of garbage and waste. The narrator sardonically describes Gentle as the president whose

> Inaugural Address heralded the advent of a Tighter, Tidier Nation. Who promised to clean up government and trim fat and sweep out waste and hose down our chemically troubled streets and to sleep darn little until he'd fashioned a way to rid the American psychosphere of the unpleasant debris of a throw-away past, to restore the majestic ambers and purple fruits of a culture he now promises to rid of the toxic effluvia choking our highways and littering our byways and grunging up our sunsets and cruddying those harbors in which televised garbage-barges lay stacked up at anchor. (*IJ* 382–83)

Gentle's compulsive fixation on contamination turns major political issues into garbage: government efficacy, urban unrest, national history, and even, through those garbage barges taking up space where freight could anchor, international trade. This nation that elects a presidential candidate with hardly any political experience wears the same trash-colored glasses. Domestic politics are entirely compulsive.

Gentle's Reconfiguration, perhaps the most profoundly inefficient way imaginable to deal with overstuffed landfills, turns compulsion into a perpetual cycle of nuclear fission and waste that structures daily life throughout all of North America. No fan of subtlety, Wallace underscores

this compulsion by making the narrative's main events happen in the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment and the Year of Glad. Both years are sponsored by products that contain waste while creating more of it. These symbols of Reconfiguration make spectacular the annular nature of Gentle's compulsive power: his fear leads to the further proliferation of what makes him so afraid. This spiral has multiple effects. Gentle's annular power structure ensures its own perpetuation by never eradicating the contamination it is set up to destroy. In addition, the proliferation of waste provides a justification for all the obsessive-compulsive fears of toxic, infectious, and cancerous trash. While clinical diagnosticians disagree about whether or not an OCDer must understand that her fears are irrational and excessive, a compulsive fear of garbage is entirely rational in *Infinite Jest*.[14] The biomedical is a structure by which one can fear contamination by radioactive garbage, contain its effects, proliferate ever more toxic waste, and renew the fears driving the system forward. This compulsive, anxious cycle has the same annular structure as the nuclear fission producing the waste that fuels this mirror U.S. And just as an obsessive-compulsive person always finds new germs to fear, Gentle's Reconfiguration will always produce skyrocketing amounts of toxic waste and leverage an extensive, expensive system to fight it.

As suggested by its role in the near-apocalyptic nuclear energy system, and as experienced by people with serious cases of the disorder, compulsiveness is bound up in threats to eliminate bodies. In *Infinite Jest*, these threats are produced by economic power. For example, Gentle's OCD is explicitly compared to that of Howard Hughes, the famous media mogul who imposed his compulsions upon legions of employees in ways that both fed his symptoms and consolidated his power. The narrator continues his florid description of Gentle:

> This is Johnny Gentle, . . . for two long-past decades known unkindly as the 'Cleanest Man in Entertainment' (the man's a world-class retentive, the late-Howard-Hughes kind, the really severe kind, the kind with the paralyzing fear of free-floating contamination, the either-wear-a-surgical-microfiltration-mask-or-make-the-people-around-you-wear-surgical-caps-and-masks-and-touch-doorknobs-only with-a-boiled-hankie-and-take-fourteen-showers-a-day-only they're-with-this-Dermalatix-brand-shower-sized-Hypospectral-Flash-Booth-that-actually like-burns-your-outermost-layer-of-skin-off-in-a-dazzling-flash-and-leaves-you-baby's-butt-new-and-sterile-once-you-wipe-off-the-coating-of-fine-epidermal-ash-with-a-boiled-hankie kind. (*IJ* 381)

Gentle's compulsions impose hygiene regimes onto his employees, enabling both financial and physical control over them. Further, he uses brand-name lighting technology to burn off the outer layers of his

skin several times a day. Reminiscent of the nuclear technology fueling the nation, the "Dermalatix-brand" light shower obliterates cutaneous borders in the name of cleanliness. This violent biomedical technology echoes the myriad other ways military and political technologies threaten to obliterate bodies in *Infinite Jest*, the ways that money depends on and facilitates this constant low-level destruction, and the ways that compulsiveness is the cause and effect of bodily destruction.[15] Further, Gentle and his Clean U.S. Party's compulsiveness is specifically gendered, an "annular agnation"—a cyclical, exclusively male lineage—of political power (*IJ* 382). Tine's OCD manifests as a compulsion to measure his penis every day and record that day's measurement. Tine and Gentle turn boyish potty humor into political power: their first campaign catchphrase is "Let's Shoot Our Wastes Into Space" (*IJ* 382). C.U.S.P. inscribes the rules of domestic privacy—flush away your excrement and take out the trash—onto the public sphere of electorate, nation, and globe. This is a domestic drama inscribed in patriarchal terms of manifest destiny. Political, technological, and social power unite in Gentle and company's public psychodrama.

Gentle's outlandish, destructive compulsiveness is a mode of anti-interiority. A Dermalatix "flash" shower burns the outer borders of one's body, creating a new exterior without affecting internal body parts. C.U.S.P. envisions domestic recovery as "an essentially aesthetic affair," changing the way America looks instead of changing its underlying systems and structures (*IJ* 383). Gentle's disorder has nothing to do with his inner psychic life. (For contrast, see Martin Scorsese's Freudian spectacle *The Aviator*, which interprets Howard Hughes as plagued by Oedipal neurosis.[16]) Gentle's power lets him manipulate the material conditions of his own, his employees', and his constituents' worlds, and his OCD ensures that he will. His deep emotional investment in the objects around him—the doorknobs, the Kleenex boxes, the face masks—defines him, his presidency, and the daily lives of everyone living under Subsidized Time, a defining of time itself as a commercial product. And OCD—as a phenomenon of gender and class—is a social disorder as much as a medical one.

While Gentle and Tine turn the whole continent into their own bathroom, Avril Incandenza and Joelle van Dyne each use OCD to turn her private domestic space into an autocracy. Their compulsions subvert traditional wife and mother roles and allow them to achieve some amount of control within the densely pervasive power structure of Reconfiguration and Subsidized Time. Van Dyne's compulsiveness primarily manifests as smoking crack and cleaning her house while imagining and anticipating "an aura of steely independence" from her

boyfriend, the oldest Incandenza son (*IJ* 736). Avril Incandenza uses her maternal anxiety, in concert with her OCD, to control the physical, temporal, and emotional experiences of her family. Van Dyne's compulsiveness thus enables an autonomy and sexuality outside normative heterosexuality, while Incandenza's creates the appearance of perfect maternal nurturing that conceals a self-interested abandonment of the patriarchal woman's role. By operating within, while also subverting, their female roles, their compulsiveness establishes a corporeal relationship to the exterior object world that allows them to manage the absurd world of annular fusion, Reconfiguration, and Subsidized Time. Intimately tied to gendered power structures, anti-interiority enables subversion of them alongside C.U.S.P.-like reinforcement of them. Though van Dyne's and Incandenza's political clout goes no farther than their domestic spheres, Incandenza's home includes an elite tennis academy, where she is a fearsome headmistress. Her ironic gender subversion may alienate even her own sons, her oldest in particular, but her compulsiveness facilitates more control over the sights, smells, objects, and people of her domestic space than she'd ever get by directly embodying either traditional motherhood or its opposite.[17] Anti-interiority may not offer access to full power, but its emphasis on materiality may be the only way to negotiate this caricatured world.

The Debility of Radical Interiority: Addiction, Consumption, and Hal's Crisis

If anti-interiority rules these characters, what does interiority itself look like? In short, it looks like the dramatic episode opening the novel, where Hal is trapped in a pseudoautistic state, where his thoughts and feelings have no way out of his head. He can't even smile. Hal's experience of addiction, and Gately's of Alcoholics Anonymous, suggest that human intellect and rational thought are debilitating and threatening. Self-awareness, reflexivity, and meta-consciousness pervade the text at every level, from narrative to characterization. However, the political consequences of so much rationalization are dire. As Marshall Boswell notes, "Enlightened self-interest in Wallace's novel generally takes the form of cynical self-reflexivity, a form of meta-self-awareness that corresponds in many ways to the self-conscious metafictional strategies of Barth's literature of exhaustion. In both cases, the end result is a form of entropic death."[18] However, the portrayal of Alcoholics Anonymous in *Infinite Jest* connects the "exhausted" aesthetics of self-consciousness to the original postmodern critique of rationality.[19] Rational self-awareness,

in this view, makes addiction worse. The passages about AA don't simply replace free will with twelve steps, as many critics correctly argue, but critique intellectualism itself, repeatedly emphasizing that the process of rational thought makes one vulnerable to addiction's usurpation of self-control. For example, "It's the newcomers with some education that are the worst, according to Gene M. They identify their whole selves with their head, and the Disease makes its command headquarters in the head" (*IJ* 272). But the novel doesn't condemn educated and intelligent people and romanticize the unwashed masses; rather, it isolates a particular compulsive, reflexive mode of interiority, "thinking about thinking," associated with addiction as either its cause or effect.[20] According to the omniscient narrator, one learns that this reflective interiority is especially pernicious when an addict practices it: one learns by spending time in Boston AA

> that most Substance-addicted people are also addicted to thinking, meaning that they have a compulsive and unhealthy relationship with their own thinking. That the cute Boston AA term for addictive-type thinking is: *Analysis-Paralysis*. . . . That 99% of compulsive thinkers' thinking is about themselves; that 99% of this self-directed thinking consists of imagining and then getting ready for things that are going to happen to them; and then, weirdly, that if they stop to think about it, that 100% of the things they spend 99% of their time and energy imagining and trying to prepare for all the contingencies and consequences of are *never good*. Then that this connects interestingly with the early sobriety urge to pray for the literal loss of one's mind. In short that 99% of the head's thinking activity consists of trying to scare the everliving shit out of itself. (*IJ* 203–4)

In Hayles' analysis of *Infinite Jest*, recursivity refers to a utopian embrace of social responsibility as a way to escape the destructive solipsism of illusory autonomy. However, this passage articulates a darker side of recursivity. This kind of addiction thinking is a destructive mode of self-conscious, reflexive interiority, of self-consciousness feeding into a system of self that is experienced as closed. As Mary K. Holland notes, "Even as Wallace struggles to create for his characters a way out of the cultural quagmire in which his novel places them, *Infinite Jest* depicts what happens when recursivity, through the society of consumption and mediation, becomes pathological—trapping one within the self rather than freeing one from it."[21] Wallace uses AA to locate this kind of pathological thinking in the addict community (most stunningly in the depiction of Ken Erdedy's final marijuana binge), but he has also set up an environment in which everyone is addicted to something (*IJ* 17–26). Everyone here is vulnerable to "analysis paralysis," so everyone is also vulnerable to a generalized dynamic of compulsiveness and its

accompanying interrogation of the boundaries between interiority and exteriority. In fact, AA objectifies compulsive drug use, referring to the disease as an external entity, such as "The Spider" (*IJ* 357), or *tecato gusano*, an immortal, insatiable worm (*IJ* 200). Paradoxically, AA also insists on an internalized personal responsibility to the exclusion of external causes, which "can slide, in the addictive mind, so insidiously into *Excuse* that any causal attribution is in Boston AA feared, shunned, punished by empathetic distress" (*IJ* 374). One's addiction is one's own fault, but it's also caused by a parasitic Spider or worm. Either AA philosophy is preposterous, or, more generously, The Spider, *tecato gusano*, and "personal responsibility" are entities for which "interior" and "extrerior" have no relevant meaning. Analysis paralysis seems an inevitable consequence of an imperative to look only within for the origins of The Spider or the worm. The rational self cannot be a closed system, as an intellectualized, recursive self-consciousness falsely assumes.

Now, destructive, reflexive ratiocination is not just for addicts. In fact, on nearly every page of *Infinite Jest* one finds compulsiveness linked to processes of introspection and extroversion, self-conscious rationalization and ratiocination, and paralyzing reflexivity. For example, Charles Tavis's compulsiveness is characterized by "the [pathological] way he thinks out loud about thinking out loud" (*IJ* 519). Kate Gompert's psychiatrist describes clinically depressed patients as sharing a common tendency towards paralyzing introversion (*IJ* 72). In cases like Kate's, destructively radical interiority crosses into the medical register, itself a blurry category in the novel. (See for example the unstable categorization of addiction as a physical, psychological, medical, or spiritual problem [*IJ* 203]). What I call "interiority"—itself a relative term here—emerges as a state of compulsiveness turned inward, recursive compulsive cogitation that renders people functionally static.

This exploration of the relationship between compulsiveness and interiority sheds new light on the stupefying effects of mass media, and in particular on two crucial, yet underexamined, aspects of the novel: the zombifying effect of the *Infinite Jest* cartridge on its viewers, and Hal Incandenza's startling episode of pseudoautism. Undercover agent Hugh Steeply hypothesizes that the victims of James Incandenza's film are not, as many believe, comatose. Their expressions seem "[m]ore as if . . . *stuck* in some way. . . . Stuck. Fixed. Held. Trapped. As in trapped in some sort of middle. Between two things. Pulled apart in different directions. . . . As if he were stuck wondering. As if there was something he'd forgotten" (*IJ* 647). Steeply links these victims to his father, who died of TV addiction, and hypothesizes that the film traps its viewers in a radical interiority that finally kills them. Steeply's and his partner Marathe's minor argument is telling here: Steeply insists, in describing

the look in his father's and the cartridge victims' eyes, that they appear to have misplaced something. Marathe insists that they have lost something (*IJ* 647–48). This "something" refers clearly, in the context of the novel's larger interrogation of subjectivity, to selfhood; Steeply's insistence that selfhood is not lost, but rather misplaced, disproves the nihilist interpretation of the novel as portraying a complete loss of self in the face of mass-mediated corporate-political culture. Selves in *Infinite Jest* are not absent or eradicated; they are dislocated, but present, somewhere outside of immediate apprehension.

This notion of radical interiority clarifies the well-known episode opening the novel, which critics have yet to explain convincingly. In this scene, Hal believes he is speaking clearly to the University of Arizona admissions committee, but they perceive only Hal's grotesque, silent grimacing. Steeply's theory about the existentially misplaced *Infinite Jest* viewers suggests that Hal is paralyzed by a radical interiority, likely catalyzed by his ingestion of the designer drug DMZ. But whether or not this symbol of consumer culture causes Hal's state—and in fact, similar episodes toward the novel's end suggest otherwise—the episode depicts in stark relief the pain of a tendency towards isolated introspection, ratiocination, and introversion. Hal's traits are aggravated by his marijuana addiction, according to the novel's marijuana-focused Narcotics Anonymous group. They agree on these effects of the drug: "Social isolation, anxious lassitude, and the hyperself-consciousness that then reinforced the withdrawal and anxiety—the increasing emotional abstraction, poverty of affect, and then total emotional catalepsy—the obsessive analyzing, finally the paralytic stasis that results from the obsessive analysis of all possible implications of both getting up from the couch and not getting up from the couch" (*IJ* 503). While this account does not—cannot—describe what it is like to die from watching *Infinite Jest*, it links the novel's portrayal of ratiocinating interiority to its various states of paralysis, including general drug addiction, comas and pseudocomas, the catatonics and the veterans with Alzheimer's in the state-funded homes neighboring Ennet House, as well as the victims of the *Infinite Jest* cartridge.

Importantly, radical interiority remains an experience tied to a physical body, as Hal shows in his futile insistence on his own subjectivity in that admissions interview, when he describes communicating as shouting into "the darkness of the red cave that opens out before closed eyes" (*IJ* 11). Made significant as the novel's only instance of first-person narration, Hal experiences communication as part of a sensuous consciousness. In fact, most depictions of depression in the novel foreground illness, like The Spider of addiction, as an objectified, bodily experience. For example, Geoffrey Day and Kate Gompert experience depression as a

"thing" that, though indescribable, has a material shape and presence (*IJ* 649). The clear debility of interiority here, the destructive potential of fixated, rationalist introversion, shows the powers of commodity society to penetrate what may be our most intimate spaces. The failures of interiority demonstrate as well the importance of relying on bodily practices and knowledge making to withstand the threats of ratiocinative thought. But more completely than materialist philosophy, *Infinite Jest* depicts a world in which people are most able to cope with their world when they view themselves as dynamic objects in relationships to other people and objects.

Ideal Compulsive Anti-Interiority: Objects and Don Gately

In fact, as the novel's narratives begin to converge and climax, objects begin to dominate the Enfield Tennis Academy (*IJ* 632). They start moving, apparently under their own powers, in August (*IJ* 671). By November they are dominating Enfield Academy life, as the novel's other plots accelerate: Quebecois terrorists begin to converge upon the academy to find the original copy of *Infinite Jest*; Hal and his friends head towards both their championship tournament and their possible ingestion of DMZ; Don Gately attempts to recover from his wounds; and James Incandenza's ghost begins haunting Gately's hospital room. While the objects seem to be moving themselves, the narrative strongly suggests that the ghost of patriarch Jim Incandenza is moving the objects at the tennis academy to warn its residents that ruthless Quebecois terrorists are after the master *Infinite Jest* tape. However, that possibility leads to several questions without convincing answers. If the wraith can move objects, why not grasp a pen to write more useful and specific verbal warnings? Why choose only some of Enfield's players and not those who may believe him, such as his unfazeable son Mario? Why focus on objects with no logical relationship to the Quebecois threat or to those who may head it off? That Incandenza chooses objects instead of words ascribes to those objects some kind of power greater than that of language. If he is moving them, he trusts these objects to speak for themselves and for him. If not, they are the entities at Enfield demanding attention. Either way, materiality insists on itself.

Enfield tennis star Ortho Stice, in particular, is aware of this primacy of objects and attributes to them his sudden tennis success. Earlier in the narrative, weight-room guru Lyle gives Stice some advice about the fact that his bed ends up on the other side of the bedroom in the mornings. "Do not underestimate objects! Lyle says he finds it impossible to overstress this: do *not* underestimate objects. . . . The world, after all, which

is radically old, is made up mostly of objects" (*IJ* 394–95). Indeed, later in the novel, Stice becomes convinced of the autonomy of crucial objects in his life (*IJ* 637). His fixation contextualizes the oft-quoted passage about Stice's brain as a soulless machine: "If you could open Stice's head you'd see a wheel inside another wheel, gears and cogs being widgeted into place" (*IJ* 635). Many critics use this passage to argue that Stice has succeeded at abandoning his selfhood to a machinelike athleticism, a neo-Cartesian project that E.T.A.'s coaches preach exhaustively within the novel. However, these critics never quote the sentence immediately following the mental wheels, cogs, and gears: "Stice has a secret suspicion about a secret that has more to do with the actual table than with the people at the table" (*IJ* 635). Stice is not simply a robotic symbol of the ways media culture reifies our brightest youth. Indeed, one of the charms of Wallace's tennis academy scenes is his humanizing embodiment of boys—their toenails, their smells, their anxieties, the shells of thickly sprayed Pledge they use as sunscreen. Stice's awareness of the table's secret powers reveals a self-objectification that is more complex than that of a simple Descartes-ification of himself as a machine. Stice has deep fears. He uses clothes to assert his personality, like any teen. He has a ridiculous nickname conveying outsized machismo. And he has decided to let the autokinetic objects in his life—not just his bed, but the tennis balls crucial to his success—rule him. Is he the book's role model? Of course not. He's another of the book's teen athletes, handling his confusion by choosing to be a robot instead of choosing Hal's more empathetic, though more tortured, embodiment of Hamlet. But Stice's insight into the primacy of objects furthers the novel's anti-interior agenda. Anti-interiority recasts Stice's supposed hollow machine-ness as, instead, a generative embrace of the material world of objects. There is no soul or mind separate from and superior to his cog-and-gear-filled head; in fact, the anti-interiority throughout the novel locates "mind" precisely in the cogs, gears, and wheels of the brain. Stice is winning at tennis because he embraces materiality, not because he negates his ideally humanistic selfhood.

A better example of the positive potential of anti-interiority is Don Gately, the widely acknowledged hero of Wallace's novel and, along with the less prominent Joelle van Dyne and Mario Incandenza, one of its most genuinely sympathetic characters.[22] Gately is a hero, at least in part, because of how seriously he takes AA's prescriptions of ritual anti-interiority. While Hayles notes that AA replaces illusory free will and autonomous selfhood, I would like to push this further and argue that in AA, subjectivity itself, an addict's very life, is a generative embrace of materiality. As in the passage quoted at the beginning of this essay, Gately models recovery by practicing a compulsive performativity without

any inner essence. The most stunning example of Gately's anti-interior survival method occurs in the hospital, where he lies almost fatally wounded, as a result of trying to protect Ennet House residents from local thugs. Despite his extensive knife and bullet wounds, he refuses to receive narcotic painkillers. Gately's narrative peaks in this episode, which also represents the climax of his accumulated wisdom about the AA program. His realization—at this crucial narrative moment when the other plots are converging—shows the extent to which *Infinite Jest*'s portrayal of subjectivity subverts the Cartesian tradition. Rather than retreat into his head to cope with his shattering physical pain, Gately conceives of his head as the pain's source. To withstand his pain without narcotics, Gately leverages the AA mantra to "abide in the present." He experiences AA's highly abstract notion of a timeless infinity of present moments as a bodily, anti-intellectual endeavor because he believes that the human mind's capacities of empirical observation and rationalization intensify pain, not lessen it: "What's unendurable is what his own head could make of it all. What his head could report to him, looking over and ahead and reporting" (*IJ* 860). At first glance this may be read as an inverted neo-Cartesianism, a rejection of the "head" in favor of the essentially different and separate body. However, in this episode, dualism itself is the problem. Gately's pain comes from a dualistic conception of the head as the location of abstract thinking detached from physical experience, the head as "looking over and ahead and reporting" on physical experience. Though each present moment of sensuous experience is almost unendurably painful, abstract rationalization of that moment, intellect detached from the physical, is that pain's source. Gately "abides" without narcotics by keeping his mental life thoroughly physical. His mind is an additional sensory experience of "clueless noise," a part of physicality without intellectual, empirical authority. Whether or not Gately survives, his example of embracing his exterior, material environment may be as good a solution as any to dealing with the corporation-dominated, consumption-obsessed, mass-mediated United States. Anti-interiority, if we can truly perform it, may offer the best shot at negotiating our own stifling worlds.

Biomedical Anti-Interiority: Subjects Outside of Themselves

Wallace's representation of biomedical subjectivity, in the context of his investment in charting new paths for fiction after postmodernism, suggests that the biomedical may provide an important new model for contemporary identity. Biological aspects of embodiment challenge the

general poststructuralist model of the subject as incoherent, marginal, and composed of an infinite number of parts and forces. Though the materiality of the body is always understood through a social lens, impairments such as amputated legs, muscular dystrophy, and blindness will always provide physical limitations to those who experience them. Elizabeth Grosz's metaphor of identity as a Möbius strip, with an "outside" and "inside" that are inseparable and irreducible yet unstable and dynamic, helps reconcile the overly oppositional notions of socially constructed and biologically determined identity. A Möbius strip shows that there can be a relationship between mind and body or abstraction and tangibility "which presumes neither their identity nor their radical disjunction, a model which shows that while there are disparate 'things' being related, they have the capacity to twist into the other."[23] Such a model allows for the biological and social to be intertwined, mutually defining, and twisting into each other. Biomedical identity can be part of the social without either inflexible division or mutual assimilation. As one among several intertwined aspects of personhood, the biomedical offers the same kinds of socially defined and material limitations as class and gender status, sexual orientation, or skin color. All of these factors, fluid but all significantly outside of one's direct control, help create a person's identity.

The biomedical is different from other identity categories, however, because medical science is founded upon the promise of beneficial change through the scientific objectification of the body's component parts and processes. If we conceive of ourselves biomedically, as objects of a positivist science, then we can improve ourselves, or at least optimistically pitch our efforts toward that horizon of surefire therapeutic success. But this promise is deceptive for so many reasons, not only because that horizon may forever recede. More to my point here, the utopian positivism of objectifying the biological body requires separating the objectification process from the infinity of its material and immaterial contexts. However, the biomedical body confounds such a process of objectification. It is permeable in a number of ways. Scientific medical research, even in its most objectifying forms, is of course profoundly social. Moreover, medical science requires a standardizing of biological models of selfhood into categories: individual bodies are always understood in the context of statistical norms, research results, and medical hypotheses. Such knowledge requires a grouping of typed bodies into a collection of research objects. The process of producing medical knowledge is in many ways one of externality, one that approaches research subjects according to a welter of social, economic, and institutional factors. Even a poststructuralist theory of subjectivity like Grosz's, which enables a more fluid objectification of the body, is confounded by the biomedi-

cal, which is always both inside and outside. Those terms have lost their traditional clarity, having little referent other than the relational and relative. People with OCD certainly have emotional experiences, but in general, their meaningful symptoms depend on their material worlds. (The most effective psychological treatment for OCD, cognitive behavioral therapy, can be described as generally working "from the outside in"—changing one's physicality in order to change one's thoughts and then, third in the process, one's feelings.) Biomedical anti-interiority is a way of investing materiality with meaning, regardless of its location on the "inside" or "outside" of one's dermis.

As Hacking argues, contemporary biomedical practices objectify bodies such that they are other to self. His observations about contemporary medical practices such as genetic analysis and organ donorship certainly fit a neo-Cartesian framework. However, compulsive anti-interiority as I've described above can counteract the pernicious effects of neo-Cartesianism by generating a body that is both object and subject, both other to and part of selfhood. This mode of subjectivity locates identity in objects, in materiality, and in the body as part of the material world. *Infinite Jest* and other representations of the biomedical show that new attachments to the body as a dynamic, uncontrollable, generative object, as part of a world of objects with lived relations to each other, improve our ability to negotiate our chaotic contemporary world. In these novels, inseparable social, economic, and biological forces define us. Anti-interiority opens this hybrid material reality to view by embracing and exploiting such a mode of self-definition. Self-objectification in these novels is generative, not reductive; the happiest characters invest in themselves as a literal, tangible part of the material world without any Cartesian transcendence. Avril and Hal Incandenza, Ortho Stice, even Don Gately may be imperfect role models for new, empowering subjectivities, but they have made themselves into dynamic objects that generate and proliferate power. One may interpret the dominance of the biomedical as precisely this: the promise of a generative objectification of our reality, the wastes of commodity culture turned into a new kind of selfhood that's invested in immanent materiality. That's a pill I could swallow.

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NOTES

1 David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (Boston: Back Bay, 1996), 443 (hereafter cited as *IJ*).

2 Jennifer Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2004).

3 Lennard Davis, *Obsession: A History* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2008).

4 Ian Hacking, "Our Neo-Cartesian Bodies in Parts," *Critical Inquiry* 34, no.1 (2007): 78–105.

5 As just one recent example, Columbia University has committed twenty million dollars to expand its neuroscience programs into interdisciplinary approaches to mind and brain. Motoko Rich, "Oliver Sacks Joins Columbia Faculty as 'Artist,'" *New York Times,* Sept. 1, 2007.

6 We took an average of seven prescription medications per person in 1993, and by 2004, the national average rose to twelve. People in the United States have spent 77% more on drugs for childhood and adolescent behavioral disorders between 2000 and 2003. Greg Critser, *Generation Rx: How Prescription Drugs Are Altering American Lives, Minds, and Bodies* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 2. Psychiatric medications were prescribed by general practitioners to 13.8% of their patients from 1995–96 and to 27.8% in 2002–2003. National Center for Health Statistics, "Ambulatory Health Care Data," in *Health, United States, 2005, with Chartbook on Trends in the Health of Americans* (Hyattsvile, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005), http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/about/major/ahcd/ahcd1.htm#Micro-data, (accessed 11 July 2007): 334. Those numbers, of course, would be far greater in a survey of psychiatric specialists.

7 Joseph Dumit has described this as "objective-self fashioning," the complex process by which mentally ill patients craft a narrative of self based on the evidence of themselves as objects of biomedical research and testing. "Is It Me or My Brain? Depression and Neuroscientific Facts," *Journal of Medical Humanities* 24, no. 1/2 (2003): 35–47.

8 This four-part series was called "Created Equal," and the most controversial entry is the first, "Liberal Creationism," originally posted November 18, 2007, at http://www.slate.com/id/2178122/entry/2178123.

9 Response to this series, as one might expect from the blogosphere, was rapid, overwhelming in both quantity and emotion, and difficult to catalogue. The *New York Times* ran a comprehensive review of the incident, "IQ Debate Adds a Chapter Online," December 1, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/01/books/01race.html?_r=2&pagewanted=all. And *Slate* itself ran a scathing response to Saletan, "Dissecting the IQ Debate: A Response to William Saletan's Series on Race and IQ," Stephen Metcalf, December 3, 2007, http://slate.msn.com/id/2179073/fr/rss.

10 In fact, a simple historicist framework would attribute the shift in representation from Freudian to biomedical frameworks to a similar shift in clinical psychiatry after World War Two. See Nikolas Rose, *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2007) for a generally Foucauldian interpretation of the "biomedical" turn in psychiatry; Jonathan Michel Metzl counters this dominant assumption by finding psychoanalytic principles at work within the biomedical turn in *Prozac on the Couch: Prescribing Gender in the Era of Wonder Drugs* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2005).

11 And compulsiveness is not just appropriate to late-capitalist modes of labor. Fleissner's analysis puts compulsiveness in the context of industrialization, arguing that it is an ambivalent embodiment of modernity itself.

12 I believe this feature of *Infinite Jest* is also connected to Wallace's larger project of creating dialogue with and stylistic development of "high" postmodernism, whose aesthetics of self-consciousness many argue have exhausted themselves. A handful of critics suggest this link in more directed comparisons of Wallace to postmodern authors; I quote Boswell below making such a connection. My focus here on anti-interiority as a key part of biomedical subjectivity prevents a more elaborate discussion of the novel as part of postwar intellectual history.

13 N. Katherine Hayles, "The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity: Virtual Ecologies, Entertainment, and *Infinite Jest*," *New Literary History* 30, no. 3 (1999): 692.

14 An OCDer's level of insight into the rationality of his or her obsessive fears is central in current clinical controversies about diagnosing, treating, and understanding the disorder. For interpretation of the role of insight in diagnosis, please see Fugen Neziroglu, "The Role of Overvalued Ideas and Biological Markers in the Diagnosis of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder" and Ahmed Okasha, "Diagnosis of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder: A Review" in *Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder*, 2nd ed., ed. Mario Maj, Norman Sartorius, Ahmed Okasha, and Joseph Zohar (West Sussex, UK: Wiley, 2002), 37–39 and 1–19. For psychological research on the role of insight, see P. M. Salkovskis, "Understanding and Treating Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder," *Behavior Research and Therapy* 37, suppl. 1 (1999): S29-52; A. L. Wroe and P. M. Salkovskis, "Causing Harm and Allowing Harm: A Study of Beliefs in Obsessional Problems," *Behavior Research and Therapy* 38, no. 12 (2000): 1141–1162; P. Van Oppen and P. M. G. Emmelkamp, "Issues in Cognitive Treatment of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder," in *Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder: Contemporary Issues in Treatment*, ed. E. K. Goodman, M.V. Rudorfer, and J. D. Maser (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2000), 117–32.

15 While Gentle's practice of abjection lurks throughout the novel, it does not entirely explain or equate with the process of compulsive anti-interiority. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1982). C.U.S.P. is an example of the difference: a masculinist legacy of fringe political groups built on equating preservation and destruction. For example, C.U.S.P. wants to save the whale, ozone, and rainforest while reserving the right to hunt with automatic weapons (*IJ* 382). Put simply, preservation through destruction is not the same as abjection's preservation through ejecting the other.

16 *The Aviator*, directed by Martin Scorsese (New York: Miramax Films, 2004).

17 Few critics directly address the novel's suggestions of incest: Orin exclusively dates young mothers and passionately hates Avril; Avril is caught in her office wearing a cheerleader's uniform while student John Wayne wears nothing but Orin's football shirt, recreating Orin's relationship with Joelle. These episodes strongly suggest that Avril's and Orin's relationship was more explicitly Oedipal than most. While this essay is not about sexuality, I can say at minimum that Avril Incandenza reminds us that female power in a patriarchy is always ambiguous.

18 Marshal Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 2003), 136.

19 Wallace has frequently articulated his own relationship to the politics and aesthetics of postmodernism, most famously and clearly in "E Unibam Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," from his essay collection *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (Boston: Back Bay, 1998), 21–82.

20 Of course, a critique of the ways the novel is ambiguously classist would be important not only on its own merits. Much discourse about the inheritors of postmodernism fixates on a false dichotomy of populism versus elitism. Wallace writes an extremely smarty-pants, 1000-page-plus novel starring a sweetly naïve, muscular, working-class hero with barely a high-school diploma, which for all its flaws should surely complicate a debate about class and aesthetics.

21 Mary K. Holland, "'The Heart's Purpose': Braving the Narcissistic Loop of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*," *CRITIQUE: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 47, no. 3 (2006): 225.

22 However, just as Mario's physical deformities stereotypically coincide with his genuinely, naively open heart and honest care for humanity, Gately's heroic qualities are buttressed, if not caused by, his being a high-school dropout, a victim of alcoholic domestic violence and neglect, by his silent and muscular stoicism, and by his persistent modesty in denying his own insight and clarity about the best and worst aspects of human nature. That two

of the most admirable characters are such stereotypes—one a stereotype of disability and the other of class, and that the third admirable character has a possible physical disability as well—is one of the unfortunate low points of this otherwise breathtaking novel.

23 Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1994), 209–10.